

# SEE, IT'S A MATTER OF CHOICE

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. (Devarim 11:26)*

In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the Jewish people, I place before you a choice. Everything is about choice. We were created by G-d and placed in this world to make choices. However, choice is not the goal of creation, just the means. For, if choice was the goal of creation, it would last forever, and we know it doesn't (Succah 52a). The goal of creation is to get to the World-to-Come, that does last forever.

The Torah gives us a choice. It says, "Choose life that you may live," and we scratch our heads and wonder if the Torah thinks it is talking to a bunch of suicidal maniacs. However, after listening to Moshe Rabbeinu for a while, we begin to catch on that suicide has different forms, some physical, most of them spiritual, some quick, others lasting a lifetime.

Thus, the Torah has presented us with a choice, and it has been building up to it since Sefer Devarim began. Moshe Rabbeinu has been framing that choice by trying to create a picture and an awareness of what counts most in life, what goes wrong when we fumble that perspective, and what we can do to keep our eye on the philosophical ball.

The amazing thing is that we do not make a lot of free-will choices in life, at least not major ones. This does not mean that we are not constantly making decisions in life; we are. However, most of our decisions are matters of personal preferences, choices that stem from an earlier choice we have made in life.

Indeed, most of our lives often come down to a single choice, if that at all. Ideally, every adult should look at life squarely in the eyes, evaluate it, and then, free of emotions, choose a path in life that is the most meaningful. Having made that choice, all other decisions become a function of that original one.

Children can't distinguish between intellect and emotions, and are usually a bundle of desires. Their lives are ALL about preferences, and it usually remains that way well into adolescence, if not into the teenage years. Indeed, this way of life can keep going all the way through adulthood as well.

In fact, it is not too unusual for children to be fed a way of life, and then simply transition from stage to stage, never really questioning what has been an assumption until that point. It all depends upon

what that way of life is, and how easy or difficult it may be to sustain, but for the most part, it is unlikely that a child/adolescent/adult will question, and then choose for himself, the society in which he was raised.

What difference does it make as long as the path is a good, clean one? The answer to that is one of life's most important experiences, namely, that life is rarely smooth for long periods of time, and things always happen to test our set of beliefs. Thus, the better one knows the value of his path in life and its foundation, the more prepared he is to ride life's bumpy road and survive philosophically intact.

To this end, Sefer Devarim talks straight to the mind and the heart of the Jew, trying to arouse within him or her a sense of need to be clear about the truth of Torah and its prescribed way of life. How else would the Jewish people survive over 3000 years of history and leave behind at least a remnant to greet Moshiach, and turn the lights out on history as we know it?

Given that, we have been around for thousands of years, and only millions of us survive today, with that number seemingly getting smaller, it seems as if we haven't done too well with that fateful choice that Moshe worked so hard to lay out before us.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*The blessing: that you listen to the commandments of G-d, that I command you today. (Devarim 11:27)*

A free-will decision is exhilarating. When you have to make a decision that carries risk with it, and the outcome is clearly going to be the result of what you decide, then there is a sense of empowerment, a grand sense of being. All of a sudden, life becomes so real, so uplifting, and so refreshing.

Jobs in life that force one to constantly make decisions with serious impacts are always exciting. They force a person to use his intellect, to battle his emotions, and to feel his G-dliness. A person can tire in such a position in life, but he also grows constantly.

That is all the Torah is trying to do for us: wake us up out of our automated slumber, and empower us. When a human employer demands something of his worker, it is merely a commandment that is usually, at best, only good for the worker in an indirect way.

However, when G-d commands us to do something, is good for the commanded in the most direct way possible. It is G-d saying to man, and specifically to a Jew, "Look, this is what is truly important in life. This is what results when doing it, and this is what results from not doing it. Know that it is YOUR decision that will determine this outcome - YOURS and not Mine."

This is why Moshe Rabbeinu begins this week's parshah with the words, "See." He is trying to help us to understand that we are not slaves, or robots that jump when someone else snaps his fingers. Yes, we will have to answer for our sins on the Day of Judgment, but not as disobedient slaves, but as disloyal partners in creation.

See means to open your eyes and open your mind. It means to grasp reality in the fullest sense. It also means don't simply follow this way of life because it is all you know, or because it is convenient. Do it because you have come to see the vision, this version of reality, and because you buy into it. See it for yourself, see the decisions you have to make and what they truly mean, and then make them.

Or rather, make IT.

In Hebrew, one of the main words for choice is breirah. (Thus, in Israeli society, when one finds himself in a situation with only one path to go, he will often say, "Ain breirah" - there is no choice). This is because l'varehr means to clarify something, to distinguish it, to separate it from something else. For, as we know from Shabbos halachah, birrur is the process of separating the good from the bad.

Thus, the decision-making process is just the outward manifestation of a very profound and primordial process, as the following indicates:

For the sake of making creation, The Holy One, Blessed is He, revealed His holy light, and drew out His light of Chesed, and emanated it downward. It elevated and SEPARATED out from the Sparks and Broken Pieces all that was necessary for the making of creation. These are the original roots, as was mentioned. They were scented through the Chassadim, and creation was made from them. However, the rest of the Sparks and the Broken Pieces necessary for the rest of history were not elevated or separated out at that stage. They were left to be rectified and SEPARATED out through the actions of Adam HaRishon. (Sha'arei Leshem, page 167)

Obviously, there is some background information missing here to make sense of what is being discussed. And, the truth is, the background information itself requires some background information to allow it to make sense, so we'll just by-pass all of that for now and focus on what is clear: creation was a function of birrur - separation.

Just like life itself, creation, or rather pre-creation, was a mixture of good and bad. The Torah joins the creation process already in progress, and each day's addition is just the physical construction of "good" spiritual elements that G-d's light of Kindness drew out and purified. Unlike human beings, G-d always chooses good (no matter how it appears to us), and each day's creation was the representation of G-d's choices, so-to-speak.

Man, apparently, had been created to pick up the process where G-d had left off. His decisions, evident from his actions, would have removed the remaining Sparks and Broken Pieces, rectified them, and voila! - finished off the creation process. Everything would have been perfect . . . but . . .

However, through the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, not only did he not bring rectification, but he destroyed much! (Ibid.)

In other words, the sin of Adam HaRishon not only impeded the process of creation's completion

and perfection, it even reversed it, sending Sparks and Broken Pieces back to the spiritual impurity from which they had previously been drawn. And here we are, thousands of years later, trying to undo Adam's mistake, and finish the job once and for all.

The blessing to which Moshe Rabbeinu referred to above, is the result of moving forward with this process, making a better world for us now while we're here, and earning us reward for the World-to-Come once we're there. We'll know when we're done with the process once Moshiach arrives, may it happen quickly and in our time.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*And the curse: if you do not listen to the commandments of G-d, your G-d, and you stray from the path that I command you today, to follow gods of others, that you did not know. (Devarim 11:28)*

It is easy to see this as a simple game of do the right thing and get rewarded, or do the wrong thing and get whacked. That's the way children see it, and thus they are easily conditioned to do the right thing, not because it is the moral thing to do, but because it brings comfortable results.

How unsophisticated. However, we can't seem to help it, having been born with an aversion to pain and a lust for pleasure. A cruel joke? Not really. Indeed, we ourselves are part of the very process itself, for human beings themselves are combinations of good and evil, and like a person who picks roses from amidst the thorns, we are expected to accentuate our redeeming qualities and to downplay the not-so-nice ones.

Is this not what G-d told Kayin that fateful day way-back-when?

G-d said to Kayin, "Why are you angry, and why are you dejected? If you did the right thing would I not accept it? But by not doing the right thing, sin crouches at the doorstep. He desires you, but you can rule over him." (Bereishis 4:6-7)

G-d always seems to ruin all the fun, doesn't He? There was Kayin, doing his own thing as only Kayin could do it, feeling jealous and rationalizing his desire to kill his brother, Hevel. Sure he had mixed feelings, but they were completely his own. Morality didn't come into the picture for him at that point, just whether or not he could get away with knocking off Hevel.

And then G-d showed up. And, after showing up, He went ahead and made an issue of Kayin's thoughts, pointing out his good qualities while separating out his bad ones by ascribing them to a foreign entity, the yetzer hara. In other words, just as G-d breathed a soul into man and made him a living being, He breathed morality into Kayin's thought process and made his decision a living, free-choice decision.

In other words, G-d was telling Kayin, "You are a mixture of good and evil, like the tree itself. Choose to walk the right path, and you extract out the good and leave behind the evil. That's called personal rectification, and it has the potential to spread beyond your own personal life! Instead of showing

jealousy and anger, show brotherly love and understanding, and reap the blessings of doing so!"

It must have been a tough choice, because Kayin failed. He failed to separate his good from his bad, and suffered the consequences for not doing so. The rest of history, to a large degree, is about the bad part of Kayin undergoing rectification, through one gilgul or another. Indeed, the Arizal revealed:

Kayin was a mixture of good and evil. The evil went to the Egyptian that Moshe, who was Hevel, killed over the incident of Shlomis bas Divri. It was measure-for-measure since he killed Hevel over the extra twin sister. The good of Kayin went to Yisro, and thus he gave his daughter to Moshe, to rectify the matter of the twin. When Moshe killed the Egyptian, he became rectified and his soul went out and joined with the Nefesh of Yisro, and he (Yisro) converted. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 36)

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*These are the statutes and the judgments that you shall observe to perform in the Land that G-d, the G-d of your forefathers, has given you, to possess it, all the days that you live on the Land. (Devarim 12:1)*

While we're on the topic of Eretz Yisroel, we might as well discuss how living in Eretz Yisroel is a part of the birrur process as well - a very important part.

The Talmud states:

Three wonderful gifts were given by The Holy One, Blessed is He, to the Jewish people, and all of them were given through hardship. They are Torah, Eretz Yisroel, and The World-to-Come. (Brochos 5a)

There are two important parts of this idea that must be pointed out. The most obvious of the two is that Eretz Yisroel is acquired through suffering, which our aversion to pain knows and avoids.

However, it is one thing to suffer, but is something altogether different to suffer for nothing, to extend oneself only to fail at the goal in the end. Thus, the Talmud explains: Eretz Yisroel is acquirable, through some suffering, perhaps, but in the end, the goal of acquiring it WILL be achieved.

If so, then what is the point of the suffering? You guessed it: birrur.

Why do you think the Jewish people died twice at Mt. Sinai, after each of the first two commandments G-d personally spoke to them? To scare them? To test their resilience? No, again - for the sake of birrur. For each time they died and were brought back to life again, they returned on a higher, far more purer spiritual level.

That is the whole point of dying and decomposing, and eventual resurrection. It is to remove the negative and impure elements from our physical being, to leave behind only the good, because only the good can get into the World-to-Come.

When a person lives in Chutz L'Aretz, he absorbs the spiritual impurities of being there. He can't simply just move into Eretz Yisroel in his existing state anymore than a Jew could just enter the Temple at will. There were conditions that had to be fulfilled, and levels of purity that had to be obeyed. It is no different with respect to Eretz Yisroel, which is why it possesses the ability to "spit out" the inhabitants who do not fulfill these requirements.

However, as Moshe Rabbeinu has been pointing out, fulfilling these requires is what creation is all about, and the reason for which G-d bent history in order to free the Jewish people from Egypt. It is the very reason why He accompanies us into exile each time, to protect us and to keep us going. He doesn't need us to finish off the process He began almost 6000 years ago, but He certainly WANTS us to.

And that is the essence of Moshe Rabbeinu's farewell speech that began with Parashas Devarim, and will end with his death at the end of this book. And, it is our personal lives that keep the story alive, and the story that gives us life.

Have a great Shabbos,  
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