

A CHOICE D'VAR TORAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

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

Free-choice is one of those things in life that we take for granted yet it is so complicated to really understand. In about four weeks from now, b"H, we will go to shuls around the world and pray for our lives between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is the time during which we are especially judged for the way we used free-choice in the previous year.

Yet, if you truly understand free-will, you will see that only a tiny fraction of the world's population actually utilizes this G-d-given ability that is unique to man. Worse yet, most of us that take advantage of this vehicle to the World-to-Come only use a tiny fraction of it each day. For, not every decision we make is a free-will decision, though it ought to be, and that is why so many of us can end up choosing the curse rather than the blessing.

Therefore, it is as good a time as any to review some of the basic tenets of life in this world, as the Torah teaches them.

- 1.** The first and most important point to know is that G-d exists, and that He is good - completely good. There is nothing evil about G-d, for that would imply imperfection, and G-d is perfect beyond any definition of perfection man can fathom.
- 2.** Being good is G-d's nature, so-to-speak, to give good. Giving good necessitates that something must exist to receive that good; hence, man was created. Being perfectly good necessitated that G-d give man the greatest good man can receive. Obviously, G-d's good is infinite, but man, being human, cannot receive an infinite amount of good.
- 3.** But if G-d is the greatest good that can ever exist, then the greatest good He can give to man is Himself. There are people who want to believe that they are G-d's greatest gift to mankind, and therefore are arrogant for thinking this way. However, in G-d's case it happens to be true, and therefore it is a statement of fact, not one of pride, which of course could never apply to the Master of the Universe.
- 4.** How does G-d give of Himself to man? Primarily G-d will do this in the World-to-Come, as the Talmud relates (Brochos 17a). As Rashi explained at the end of Parashas VaEschanan: This world is for doing the mitzvos, and the next world is the one for receiving the reward for having performed

them. This is really what life in this world is all about: we are here to provide the means for G-d to give of Himself to us.

For example, let's say someone came to you and said that he would like to spend more time with you. He might be a nice person, but you happen to know that his goals are very different from yours, as are his hours: he is a night-person and you are a day-person. In fact, there are so many differences between you and him that you can't even imagine why he should make such a suggestion in the first place.

However, being the nice, humble person that you are, you don't want to be rude. So you tell him, "Look, if we are going to spend more time together, you are going to have to go to the same places that I go to, and share my goals and objectives. If you do not become more like me, then spending more time together can only result in tension for both of us."

Thus, from G-d's point of view, He waits to give us His greatest good: Himself. However, from our point of view, we are supposed to long for it, and therefore we are supposed to devote our lives to becoming worthy of it. Life, therefore, is for the sake of becoming like G-d, and free-will is our most basic tool for doing this.

Hence, on Rosh Hashanah we are actually being judged on how much we have become like G-d:

Therefore, each year (in Heaven) they judge a person by appraising where he stands regarding the World-to-Come, and based upon this they judge him regarding the upcoming year in this world. (Hakdamos v'Sha'arim, p. 61)

In other words, Heaven asks the question: If this person were to die today, would he merit the World-to-Come and if so, how great a portion? However, based upon what we have said until now, the question is really: If the person were to die today, this Rosh Hashanah, how much would he actually be like G-d? For, this is what determines whether or not he goes to the World-to-Come, and how much of G-d he will have merited to receive.

SHABBOS DAY:

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

Later, this will be phrased as follows:

See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil . . . choose life that you will live . . . (Devarim 30:15, 19)

Strange, isn't it? Would anyone in their right mind choose death? Life can be tough and overly stressful, and the average person contemplates THE IDEA of suicide from time-to-time, but rarely ever comes close to actualizing it. So, to whom is the Torah talking? The Torah is talking to everyone.

The clue to this is in the wording of the posuk. It didn't say, I have placed before you life and death: choose life that you may live. Rather, it referred to "the life and the good," and "the death and the evil," equating life with good and death with evil, teaching us that life is only called life when it is for the pursuit of good, and a physically alive person can be considered dead if he fancies evil.

Therefore, the Torah is telling us: choose good and be considered among the living, as opposed to choosing evil and being considered among the dead. Choose to be like G-d and acquire eternal life, as opposed to choosing eternal death by not being like G-d. And THAT is far more complicated than it seems on the surface.

For example, is there a difference between giving tzeddakah and giving charity? Obviously, the terms are close enough in definition that they can even be considered translations of one another. Yet, in essence, they can be considered two different kinds of acts, depending upon the person performing each act and his understanding of what he is doing.

For instance, many people, when giving charity, consider the money they are giving to be their own. Charity means that I give my earned money to someone else who did not earn it, a merciful thing to do, and certainly a G-dly act if I am doing it for the well-being of the recipient and not to aggrandize my reputation in the eyes of others. Thus, I must be moved first to feel a sense of mercy before I am inspired to reach into my pocket and give, and even more so to give generously.

For a Jew, there are different levels of giving. First, there is ma'aser, the tenth of one's net earnings to be given away to the needy. I earned the money, except that it is not mine. It belongs to G-d. In fact, even the other ninety percent does not belong to me; it belongs to G-d, except that He lets me keep it, though I must spend it responsibly. However, the ten percent that I am obligated to give has nothing to do with whether or not I am moved to feel mercy for the recipient. Indeed, even if the recipient has not approached me for a donation, I must set it aside for when the opportunity does present itself in order to be the benefactor of some needy cause.

Tzedakah, on the other hand, is coming from "my" ninety percent. The rabbis have placed upper limits on how much one can actually give away, for fear that some righteous individuals will give away too much and make themselves dependent upon the community. This actually happened a few times in history, and there are some stories of this that are recorded in the Talmud.

Nevertheless, though mercy for another may inspire my desire to give tzedakah, ultimately what compels a Jew to give is the mitzvah itself to help another in need. In fact, very often in places where beggars are plentiful, mercy is one of the last emotions people feel upon being confronted by an outstretched arm every fifteen feet or so. On the contrary, I have watched people, especially those who are not used to it, become offended, as if they were accosted by the beggar and made to feel undignified.

I know the feeling, but I also know the mitzvah, and rather than remain tight-fisted I force myself to reach into my pocket and give the person something. Indeed, many make a point of making sure

they have enough loose change in their pocket or purse before entering the area in order to be able to give at least something to every open hand they will see along their way. Sometimes it gets to the point where it hurts to have no available change and to have to shrug one's shoulders before a needy individual as if to say, "I'm sorry. I don't have anything to give you at this moment."

I've even been with people who reached this point, only to go out of their way to enter a store and get more change to give some tzedakah. It is burdensome. It is tiring. It consumes valuable time. It almost seems ludicrous. But, at the very same time it feels noble, and like a triumph of the spirit. It feels like a battle that was well-fought and won. It feels G-dly, and it is, and as such it makes a person more like G-d, and is a sensation that is not reserved only for the World-to-Come, but for this world as well - a confirmation that one has just made a free-will choice and moved up a notch in the Eternal World.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

And the curse: if you do not listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, and stray from the path that I command you this day . . . (Devarim 11:28)

Back in the times of the Romans, the choice was easier. As advanced as Roman society had become, it was still quite uncivilized. For a Jew to knowingly abandon the path of his ancestors and assimilate into Roman society, he had to choose to become more barbaric in nature, not an easy thing for MOST Jews to do.

Today, it is a different story altogether. Western society has come a long way, not only technologically advanced like the previous Roman society, but far more civilized. Certainly many of the bad habits and tendencies embedded in Western society still persist, but they are not all-pervasive, and one can live the life of a civilized secular Jew.

Indeed, many secular Jews believe they serve G-d better by not living according to Torah as they understand it. They see Torah as being detrimental to society because they believe that religions, in general, are the cause of most of the strife in the world and cause the greatest amount of persecution of people in the world today. They argue that, even if Judaism does not advocate converting other nations by force, at the very least it demands that Jews remain separate from the rest of the world, which can't help but result in some form of resentment towards the Jewish people somewhere at some time. And, resentment can eventually lead to war.

Western society, on the other hand, is designed to be a melting pot of sorts. Western law is based upon rules that are meant to guarantee the rights and liberties of all of mankind. It is the religion of the masses, and anyone can join as long as they are willing to respect those rights and liberties of others. How can world peace not result from such an approach to mankind and society?

Not only this, but science and technology make life so awesome that religion pales next to it. I have to be honest: I am still very excited about the miniature hard drive I purchased two weeks ago. It is

the size of a sleek lighter and hangs with dignity from my key chain. Yet, it is 512 megs of digital space and allows me to carry my office with me everywhere I go, revealing its contents the moment it is plugged into a USB port.

Inches away from that hard drive is one that is just a little bit bigger physically, but 60 gigs of space in total. It was designed by Porsche. It doesn't drive or sound like a Porsche, but it is a beautiful and handy sleek silver box that is just nice to look at even when it is not being used. Indeed, the security person who thoroughly checked me and my briefcase at LaGuardia Airport couldn't help but handle it, turning it from side to side in admiration. I told him that it was the closest I'd ever get to owning a Porsche on my salary. He laughed, and then passed me through security. And all of this for a fraction of what it would have cost only a year ago. My mind swirls when I consider what technology is coming at us next.

That's just when I look down. When I look up, I see the heavens in ways that my ancestors could never have fathomed. I see satellite and space ships racing to the edges of the solar system that is only a dot on a dot in the vast universe we have now been able to peek at. If National Geographic was featuring the average Bais Medrash today, it would be hard to find one talmid who found his Gemora more interesting.

Indeed, science and technology has put Torah Judaism more on the defensive than it ever has been before. Yes, there is a lot of evil out there and it is to be avoided at all costs. But look at all the good that exists out there, and look at all the good that is also being done out there. It's an (overwhelmingly) awesome world out there today, and our kids are being sucked right into it like loose dust into a vacuum cleaner.

Yet, for a Jew to pursue such a lifestyle at the cost of Torah and its commandments is outright evil. It is no different, in essence, than a Jew who chooses to be a gladiator over being Torah-observant. It may appear less barbaric, and maybe it is, but it is evil nevertheless, and it is to choose the curse over the blessing, to choose this world over the next one.

MELAVE MALKAH:

You shall be careful to perform all the decrees and the ordinances that I present before you today.
(Devarim 11:32)

One might have thought that the Torah means that one must be scrupulous in his performance of mitzvos, doing them according to the letter of the law. That is always true. However, in this context, the Torah is also warning us that we must be careful to never lose sight of what a mitzvah is, and why it is important.

For what good is the power of choice if it comes down to simply choosing between what is obviously good and what is obviously evil? That's child's play, and not too G-dly if we're talking about adults. For, the choices that impress Heaven the most, the ones that make us the most like G-

d are the ones that we have to think deeply about, the ones that we can be mistaken about if we are not careful.

It is a whole different ball game when good can appear like evil, and evil like good. It is a whole different test of man's G-dliness when the eyes can fool a person into mis-perceiving truth as falsehood, and the brain can lie to a person about the reality in which he is living and confronting. It can make friends out of enemies and enemies out of friends, and drive those mad who see the actual truth. We have so much of this around us today, and it is definitely maddening.

Indeed, the Talmud warned:

Rebi Yitzchak said: The Son of David won't come until all the kingdoms turn to heresy. (Sanhedrin 97a)

It warns about how evasive truth will be in those days. Of course, eyes do not deceive and brains do not lie on their own. Rather, they are fooled by what they perceive; it is reality that can be so deceiving. It is life itself, the world G-d made and put man into from the very beginning that can be so confusing, and result in sin and evil. Indeed, the Talmud concludes that every day the yetzer hara tries to kill a person, and that one could not survive if G-d did not help. (Kiddushin 30b)

But, as the posuk warns, this is just to challenge us, not fool us. The starting point is to know that the only true good in the world is Torah and mitzvos, and the ONLY way to get to the World-to-Come is to become like G-d. Whatever else the world has to offer is the icing on the cake, but not the cake itself. If it brings a person closer to G-d, if it is an efficient way to reveal G-d to man and inspire righteousness, then it falls into the category of good and life. If it does not, no matter how beautiful, no matter how awesome, no matter how thrilling it is, it falls into the category of evil and death.

It will not make you more like G-d but make you less like Him. It will not increase your usage of free-will, but lessen it. And, as the parshah's name hints, this is not something that someone can convince you of, but it is something that you have to come to SEE for yourself.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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