

# WHAT A DIFFERENCE A CHOICE CAN MAKE

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**Yisro, the priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moshe and Israel His people, and that God had brought Israel out of Egypt. (Shemos 14:10)**

We make so many choices every day, some conscious, some not so conscious. But, each one has a consequence, some big, some small, some very noticeable, some not so noticeable.

But, the amazing thing is how certain choices can take years to play themselves out, and by the time they do, we may have forgotten that they were even the reason for what happened much later on in our lives. And that is a shame, because the most important lesson in life is the cause-and-effect relationship of the choices we make throughout the course of our lives.

Yisro had come a long way. The choice to send his daughters back in search of the Egyptian who had tended to their flocks, and to bring him home to offer him some Midianite hospitality, had paid off well. When he found Moshe Rabbeinu at that time, the latter was a fugitive from Egyptian law, on the run to avoid being caught and killed. But, Yisro gave him his daughter Tziporah as a wife just the same, and as a result, he was now, de facto, the father-in-law of the king of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth at that time.

However, as the Midrash explains, the story did not begin there for Yisro. There had been a previous choice, one that had involved even greater self-sacrifice, and it was the one that put Yisro in the position to become Moshe Rabbeinu's father-in-law in the first place:

That is what Rebi Chiya bar Abba said in Rebi Simai's name: Three were involved in that scheme: Bilaam, Iyov, and Yisro. Bilaam, who advised it, was slain; Iyov, who was silent, was punished through suffering; Yisro, who fled-his descendants were privileged to sit in the Hall of Hewn Stones. (Sanhedrin 106a)

The scheme being referred to, of course, was the drowning of the Jewish male children by the Egyptians. Apparently, Pharaoh, unsure of how to proceed with his oppression of the Jewish people in order to thwart any effort at redemption, had consulted three famous personalities of his time: Bilaam, Iyov, and Yisro. Bilaam supported the plan, Yisro opposed it, while Iyov took the Fifth.

The rest is history, as they say. Bilaam got his just desserts later on in Parashas Mattos, while Iyov has an entire book written about his suffering, measure-for-measure. But, what about Yisro in the end? How did he fare in all of this?

Well, to begin with, he has an entire section written about him, next to the one in which the Torah is actually given. Not bad. But, even better than that, as the Talmud points out above, his descendants were part of the Sanhedrin. Even better. And, best of all, he was the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu in this world, and will be a king himself in the next one forever, whereas Bilaam and Iyov did not fare as well.

Free choice is a powerful tool, and it is amazing how just one choice can save a person's life.

For example, on the morning of the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, an astute businessman had noticed how in the boarding area, a bunch of Arabs had been talking, even arguing amongst one another, and how, after they boarded the plane, they sat in different rows and pretended not to know each other. He pointed out his observation to the stewardess, who promptly dismissed the possibility of foul play, and asked the man to take his seat.

However, the man, apparently, was not satisfied with the plane attendants laissez faire attitude, and instead of taking his seat, he turned around and left the plane. "Well, I'm not flying if you're not going to do anything about it," he told the stewardess as he deplaned. A couple of hours later, he watched in horror as the plane he had chosen not to take became a weapon in the hands of Arab terrorists.

Perhaps that is really the reason why the giving of Torah is in a parshah associated with Yisro. After all, the entire Torah can be summed up with one phrase:

I call Heaven and earth today to witness that I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so that you and your seed shall live. (Devarim 30:19)

We can assume that the Torah is not talking about avoiding physical suicide, for there are other verses that deal with that issue, and most people do not need a warning not to do that anyhow. Rather, the Torah is talking about spiritual suicide, something that is far more difficult to avoid because most people don't even know that they are in the process of carrying it out. As far as they are concerned, they are just "living life to the fullest."

When I was young, my mother insisted that I learn how to play piano. However, I insisted that I play road hockey with my friends. She paid for the lessons while I skipped them and played road hockey instead, until my piano teacher called to say, "Mrs. Winston, I just can't take your money anymore because your son never shows up!" And that was that.

Now, some 40 years later, I am pained by the fact that I cannot play piano, or any other musical instrument for that matter. I am compelled, at times, to pick up a guitar or to bang at someone's piano keys, convinced that the music welling up inside of me will somehow find expression through my effort, but to no avail. I don't have a lot of regrets in life, but that is certainly one of them.

There are people who have walked away from potential spouses only to regret it deeply later, or those who should have but did not, only to get divorced, or to yearn for one for years to come. And,

how many times do overweight people look at themselves in the mirror and ask themselves, "Whatever it was that I ate to make me look this way, could it really have been that worth it? It is long gone, but its memory is almost impossible to erase!"

And, then there are the decisions that we almost didn't make, and had we not, we would have missed out on something very important. "Boy, it's a good think I decided to so-and-so. Had I not, I would have missed so-andso!" Some people just happen to catch their flight because, uncharacteristically, they went to the airport early. Apparently, the airlines were unable to reach them to tell them that their flight had moved up, and they just happened to make it in time.

Just good luck? No, Hashgochah Pratis. Though it is true, reward and punishment is basically reserved for the next world, Divine Providence often makes life work out for the good, or the bad, based upon our decisions. A good decision is a moral decision, regardless of the success it brings one in life. But, sometimes Heaven likes to "reward" a good decision with a good result, in order to encourage us to make more of them.

The true reward for good decisions, of course, is in the World-to-Come, just as the true punishment for bad decisions is later on, in Gihenom (if we don't do teshuvah for them now). But, good decisions can have a rewarding effect in this world just as bad decisions can have a punishing effect in this world, sometimes in our lifetime, sometimes in the lifetime of generations to come.

Indeed, how many people make a decision with their future children and grandchildren in mind? A couple might choose a place to live that works for them but not their children, giving them an entirely negative experience that makes them reject that which their parents cherish. "If only we had done this, or that differently, our child might not have done X or Y."

Well, yes and no. When Yosef was told by his brothers that their father had instructed them to tell him not to take revenge after Ya'akov Avinu died, he knew they were lying. He knew that their fear of reprisal had compelled them to fabricate such an untruth since he knew that his father, Ya'akov, would never have suspected him of even thinking of revenge, not while he was still alive and not after he died either.

So, he told his brothers:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in place of God? You decided to do evil to me, but God decided it should be for the good, in order to achieve what has occurred, to keep a large contingent alive."  
(Bereishis 50:19-20)

In other words, our decisions cannot harm anyone who is not meant to be harmed, just as they can't spare someone who is not meant to be spared. All they can do, which is really everything, is prevent us from being the perpetrator of bad to other people. Mr. A. may have had it coming to him, but not necessarily from me, unless my decision made me the perfect candidate to carry it out.

So, therefore, a person could argue, why should we be held accountable for the damage we do to others? "Because," God explains, "when you do something good or bad, I look at it as if had you not, then the good or bad would not have occurred to the recipient. I reward you as if you caused it to happen, and likewise, punish you as if it would not have occurred had you not acted as you did."

This is how we take control of our own lives. This is how we play a role in shaping our future, including the people we affect and how they affect us. A person has to ask, "If I am not conscious of my decisions, then what kind of decisions do I really make? If they are flawed, will God not arrange my life so that the flaws will show up, and create crises? But, if I make an effort to make good, moral decisions, will God not arrange it that good, moral things happen for me?"

The answer is yes, and the earlier you start, the more likely it will be true. The cleverer you are about the decisions you make in life, the "cleverer" you Hashgochah Pratis will be, like in the case of the man who left Hamburg, Germany for America in 1938, leaving behind his financial empire at a moment's notice, all because he saw the direction Nazi Germany was going at the time. He survived the war with his wife and children, but the friends and family he left behind did not.

Ultimately, that is what Torah is all about. Torah forces the issue, and makes a person decide who they are and where they are going in life. The same is true about Eretz Yisroel, which forces a Jew to have to decide how much they are prepared to sacrifice to be closer to God, and how much they are not prepared to sacrifice to be in the place of the Shechinah.

To each choice, a person may say, "No thank you, it is not for me." It's only eight words. However, it is eight words that can make all the difference for eternity, to us, and to all the generations that follow us. Bilaam was destroyed. Iyov suffered greatly. But for Yisro, who made a great decision, the sky was the limit. What about us?

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