

MAKING A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Choose life, so that you and your offspring will live . . . (Devarim 30:19) This will be the last Shabbos of the year, b"H. As they say, it is an opportunity to fix up what went wrong on any of the previous Shabbosos of the entire previous year. I like to add to this that it is also an opportunity to accentuate all that went wrong as well, if we don't make a conscious effort to improve the spiritual quality of our Shabbos experience. Take Kiddush, for example. There are basically two ways to make Kiddush. You can race through it, viewing it only as a means to an end, that being the delicious Shabbos meal you are anticipating. Or you can take your time on every word (especially since the people you are including in your Kiddush must have intention for each word), viewing it as a means to show your extreme gratitude to God for another week of life and any success you may have enjoyed on any level. Shabbos Kiddush is a very holy and climactic moment of every week. It is almost as if all the energy of the previous week returns and surges towards the moment that Kiddush elevates our consciousness from the mundane to the sublime. Unfortunately, many people do not realize that Kiddush, especially on Friday night, is a "gatekeeper" that both monitors and facilitates our relationship with God, affecting the "blessings" or "curses" we may experience in life. One thing I can tell you personally is that the more you know about how God made Creation and runs it, the more powerful Kiddush is as a portal to spiritual growth. As one deepens such areas of knowledge I have found, the more inspiring Kiddush becomes, to the point that a person will derive great pleasure from saying each word of Kiddush slowly and with intention. This is just one example of how to enhance the Shabbos experience. There are many others, depending upon the dynamics of one's Shabbos table. Shabbos involves a lot of materialistic experiences, such as dining on good food and taking naps, but they only become holy when they are done to honor Shabbos. Too many people use Shabbos to "honor" their eating and sleeping, etc. Isn't it amazing, though, how people can sit down to a Shabbos meal week after week with nary a change, as if it is a brand new experience? I once tried to change my cholent recipe and got flack for doing so. My family wanted the same cholent that they had been enjoying every Shabbos for years. As they say, "If it aint broke, don't fix it." Not only this, you will often find, at least in Eretz Yisroel, families that have lived in the same homes for decades with barely a change. True, many can't afford to renovate, most of their money going for just basic necessities and for marrying off children. But it doesn't bother them that they don't have the money for changing their environment. *"It's got walls to keep out the cold and a roof to keep out the rain. What else do you need?"* Going to the home of a Gadol HaDor in Eretz Yisroel is always an experience. Not only do you feel as if you are in the presence of greatness, you also feel as if you're in the presence of contentment. Looking around the room it looks as if nothing has changed for

decades, except for the seforim which becoming increasingly more tattered with each use. You feel the reality of this mishnah:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

At the last Siyum HaShas that Rav Noson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, the famed Mir Jerusalem Rosh Yeshivah attended, he said something both profoundly insightful and beautiful. Of course that was no surprise, being that it was Rav Noson Tzvi Finkel who was speaking. What he said, however, where he said it, and how he said made the insight all the more profound and beautiful. "Hadran Alach . . ." the venerable Rosh Yeshivah said in a soft voice, as he tried to control his Parkinson Disease-affected shaking body, "are the most beautiful words a Jew can say." The Rosh Yeshivah repeated himself a few times, each time with more love and reverence. Rabbi Finkel had been referring to the declaration made by those who complete a significant body of Torah learning, especially the entire Talmud, which translated is the following: We will return to you (insert section of learning completed), and you

will return to us. Our thoughts are with you (insertion), and your thoughts are with us. We will not forget you (insertion), and you will not forget us, not in this world, and not in the World-to-Come.

Why are these the most beautiful words that a Jew can say? Because they show how dear God's Torah is to the person. When it comes to so many other forms of education usually a student can't wait to finish what he is learning and move on to the next item. The idea of starting what he just finished all over again often seems wasteful and boring. Not though if it is a book that he really loves. Then he can't wait to read it again, and perhaps even another time after that. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how many times he can read the same book over and over again before he puts it on the shelf to collect dust. Perhaps he will even forget about it over time. This is not the case with respect to Torah, for a very good reason. The Torah came directly from the mouth of God, so it is incredibly holy and amazingly infinite. There may be only four levels on which it can be learned, but those four levels span four levels of reality and consciousness. For this reason each time a person learns an area of Torah it is, by definition, a stepping stone to a deeper and more profound level of understanding. This is true not just of the material, but of life itself. It is another step closer to God, and what could be more fulfilling than that?

There is a rule of life: The more a person changes on the inside the less he feels the need to change on the outside. The more he needs to change the world around him to feel content, the less he usually has grown on the inside. This is the implied meaning of the following from this week's parshah: *This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses [that I have warned] you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring will live; To love the Lord your God, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him. For*

that is your life and the length of your days, to dwell on the land which God swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'akov to give to them.(Devarim 30:19-20)

On one hand this sounds like a no-brainer. What healthy person chooses death and curse over life and blessing? On the other hand the Talmud tells us that:

The righteous, even in death, are called "living" . . . The evil, even while alive, are called "dead."
(Brochos 18a)

How can that be? When a person's heart stops beating he is officially dead. If it is still functioning he is called alive even if he lacks quality of life. Is the Talmud being serious or is this merely a parable? Both, actually. The parable is self-explanatory. The serious part requires a little explanation, which Rashi provides at the beginning of Parashas Noach:

These are the generations of Noach. Noach was a righteous man he was perfect in his generations. Noach walked with God. (Bereishis 6:9)

Another explanation [for why the names of the children are not mentioned immediately following "These are the generations of Noach"] is to teach you that the main generations [progeny] of the righteous are good deeds. (Tanchuma Noach 2). (Rashi) As Koheles emphasizes, you can work hard for money and amass it, but that will not be your legacy. You can build ornamental palaces and leave them for your children, but that too will not be your legacy. In fact, he says, anything you toil for "under the sun," meaning for the sake of material benefit in this physical world, can never be your legacy, because it is at best temporary. What is a person's legacy, asks Koheles. He answers: *The end of the matter, everything having been heard, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man. For every deed God will bring to judgment, for every hidden thing whether good or bad.* (Koheles 12:13-14) Sometimes it's a simple matter of choosing between good and evil. Other times it is a more difficult task of choosing between good and great, because choosing a lesser good is an "evil" as well. This is why a Jew is supposed to constantly return to mitzvos he has already done, to do them better the next time. You did an okay job the first time, do a better job this time. Did you do a better job this time, do a great job next time. It's not just a question of "practice makes perfect." It is also a case of repetition means a closer position to God and His Truth. After all, even when we repeat what we did five minutes earlier, it is a very different experience. This is because, in those five minutes, we changed. The action we repeat may be exactly the same, but the person doing it has changed, and that makes a world of difference. This is also an important part of the message at the end of Parashas Naso, where each tribe brings the exact same inauguration offering for the Mishkan. The only thing is that the Torah seems to treat tribe's offering as if it is totally unique and different from those before and after it. It is, if only because the person offering it is unique and different from those before and after him. What he brings is "constant," but he himself is the "variable" in the equation that results in a different "solution." Thus, as we stand before the King of Kings this Rosh Hashanah, once again, it will be both the same experience from the past and entirely different. How

different will depend upon how much we spiritually developed ourselves over the previous year. Our entire judgment will be completely about this, about how much new spiritual growth we can bring to an old experience. Shannah Tovah and may we all be written in the Book of Life for blessing.

Text

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org