

# CHOOSE LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Tell the Children of Israel that if a woman conceives and gives birth to a male . . . (Devarim 12:2)*

This Shabbos is Parashas HaChodesh since next week is already Rosh Chodesh Nissan. Pesach is just around the corner, b"H.

A year ago, saying such words would have meant little to me other than, "Make sure the matzos are ordered and Pesach cleaning is started." This year it means a whole lot more because I just received news that a friend of mine, Pesach, who lived around the corner, passed away last night. *Boruch Dayan HaEmes.*

He wasn't young, but he wasn't that old by today's standards either. He had not been well for some time, but for the longest time he didn't show it. In fact while he worked on my back after I suffered a herniated disk, a most painful experience, I had no idea that he was sicker than I was.

He was a doctor by profession, and after spending most of his years in the States he moved to Israel, and to my community, where he settled. He was drawn here by a woman whom I had known for sometime, a lovely individual who he married and with whom spent the rest of his life. They were an interesting couple.

He was somewhat of a renegade as far as physical therapy was concerned, and he worked on my back in ways that more conventional therapists might have shunned. All I can tell you is that he was a great shaliach for me, thank God, because after suffering tremendously for weeks on end, even with strong pain killers. He brought relief to my back and eventually helped me to return to my pre-pain days which I had thought would never be possible again.

The amazing thing is, that even though he saw me just about everyday for 40 minutes over a three week period, he would not take a shekel from me. He considered it to be his mitzvah, a contribution to Torah, because he wanted to see me teaching again as soon as possible, and back at my computer spreading Torah.

While in his office, often lying on my stomach receiving some electronic treatment, I got to hear him talk to other patients while on the phone. I was impressed by the care and concern he showed the people he spoke with. He often reminded me of those old-fashioned doctors who used to make house calls because they truly cared about their patients.

On a few occasions I saw him breaking up chocolate bars into a glass bowl, which I thought was

either to satisfy a chocolate craving he had, or for his patients that came to his home office for treatment. It turned out that it was for neither, but for the children in shul on Erev Shabbos. He really enjoyed making the children happy. He was a character. He will be missed by a lot of people.

Among the many things I learned from Pesach, perhaps the most important is the value of a good name. He came to Orthodox Judaism late in life so he did not have the opportunity to learn Torah like someone else his age who would have begun much earlier. But judging from his love of learning, had he had the opportunity he would have used it well and gone far in Torah.

Yet he was eulogized by people who are known for their learning, talmidei chachamim. He obviously had their respect and their concern, and if, as the Talmud says, you can tell if a person is going to the World-to-Come by what is said at his eulogy, then Dr. Goodley is clearly on his way there. He had a great name among those who knew him, which was a lot of people, and it has served him well in death as it did in life.

It may seem ironic to begin talking about death in a parshah that celebrates life. This week's parshah begins with the mitzvah of Bris Milah for a baby boy on the eighth day from his birth. The special Maftir for this time of year speaks about Rosh Chodesh, the new Jewish month, which celebrates the entire concept of renewal and freshness. Both are life affirming.

On the other hand the parshah continues on with a different mitzvah, that of the Metzora, the person who became afflicted with tzara'as. Tzara'as looked like leprosy, but it was usually in response to the sin of speaking loshon hara, and therefore, Heaven-sent.

The Talmud says that there are four people who even while alive are as if they are dead, one of whom is the metzora. Because of his condition he is forced to live apart from society and bereft of the opportunity to give to others. It is our ability to give to others that allows to truly live. So even the parshah itself goes from life to death.

There is a very important message in this. A person who comes into this world has the opportunity of life, but whether he "lives" or not is not only dependent upon the proper working of all his vital organs, but also a function of his will and how he uses his life. Hence the Talmud says that righteous people even after they are dead are considered to be living, whereas evil people even while alive are considered dead.

Thus the opportunity of life is what you get at birth. Whether you use it or not is what you decide after already being born, as the Torah says:

*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)*

In other words, a person has to choose to live; it is not an automatic reality. It is a choice that you have to make all the time, even from moment to moment because even the lightest decision can

have dramatic long term effects on life. Life can easily become death, if not physically then certainly spiritually by incorrect making of a decisions.

The moon indicates this as well. Unlike the sun which does not change in size from day-to-day, at least as far as we can tell, the moon constantly "dies" and is "reborn" every month, starting small, becoming completely round, and then becoming small again. It is similar to the human cycle of life itself, which sees a person begin small, become large, and then "smaller" again just before death.

In fact, a day of life works this way as well. We start the day like children who are just born and during the course of the day we reach maximum functionality before "wilting" again at night just before going to bed. Every day is also a matter of the life-death cycle, so-much-so that we wash our hands in the morning in a special way to remove aspects of death from our hands.

The week also works this way when you keep Shabbos. We emerge from Shabbos "reborn," even called a "new creation" by many commentators and build our momentum towards the middle of the week before gearing down once again as Shabbos approaches. On Shabbos we spiritually "gestate" as we integrate the lessons and growth of the previous week in order to be "born" anew Motzei Shabbos.

Every rebirth requires re-decision. A person every day has to choose life all over again for that day, so that as decision after decision approaches him or her, from the light to the serious, he or she will make a decision in a life-provoking way. When this happens day-after-day, week-after-week, month-after-month, then it happens year-after-year as well.

When the person turns his or her soul in at the end of 120 years, it will have a tough time leaving a body that had allowed it to live such a meaningful and spiritually-successful life. As with respect to Moshe Rabbeinu, the Angel of Death will have a tough time separating the two, and when they are brought back together again in Techiyas HaMeisim—the Resurrection of the Dead—they will be like long lost friends.

It is important to know that it is not just about taking life seriously. It is not just about being immersed in holy texts and doing as many good deeds as possible. All of that has to take place against a backdrop of what we called "Simchas HaChaim," or joy of life. A person has to have joy from taking life seriously, from being immersed in holy texts, and from performing as many good deeds as possible. That is REALLY choosing life, which is the deeper meaning of the verse, "*Serve God with joy!*" (Tehillim 100:2).

Anyone can get a lift from entertainment. Anyone can have fun doing some kind of fun activity. But how many people have simchas hachaim, joy from just being alive, and from being able to do meaningful things? Given the dependency on so many kinds of stimuli to achieve happiness these days, probably not too many. Most people don't choose life. They just hope that life will choose them.

That was not my friend, Pesach. Clearly he was someone who chose life, and kept choosing it day-after-day-after-day. You could see it in the way he carried himself even as it became increasingly more difficult to carry himself. You could see it in the way he interacted with people, especially when he smiled at you as he passed by.

You could also see it when he took offense to something that was truly offensive, responding often in ways that most of us should but often don't. I, for one, could not be bothered, but he could be. I want results for my efforts, and if I don't think I will get some then I don't bother trying. Why should I waste my time and effort, and I often wondered why Pesach did.

After hearing what people thought of him, and after going over in my own mind what I knew of him, I finally understood the answer. Because that is what it means to choose life. As the Talmud says, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven" (Brochos 34b), which I always understood to mean that the results of any effort we make is in God's hands, not our own.

Then what can we control? We can control our level of care about what matters most to God, about truth and the upholding of it. Choosing life is not about winning. It is about making a meaningful effort to do meaningful things regardless of the chances of achieving meaningful results. That itself is the meaningful result, and my friend Pesach seemed to understand that intuitively.

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](http://www.thirtysix.org)