

# DECISIONS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

It is always amazing how decisions can come back later to build you up or bring you down. I'm not talking about the decisions that we know from the start are risky and potentially explosive. I refer to those life decisions which at the time we make them do not seem to have potential side effects only to later dramatically prove otherwise.

For example there is the case of Lot, Avraham's nephew. After returning back from Egypt with Avraham in last week's parshah, his shepherds quarreled with Avraham's shepherds, forcing a split between the two camps. As a result, Lot chose to leave the spiritual safety of his uncle's camp and instead headed for the base society of Sdom.

It proved to be a problematic decision. In last week's parshah he was captured together with his fellow Sodomites in the war of the four kings against the five kings. It took a counterattack by Avraham and his camp to free Lot who once again returned to Sdom thinking that it was the place to be.

Unbeknownst to him, Sdom's days were numbered. It should not have been difficult to figure out, given his background with Avraham Avinu and the world of Sdom he was living in. It's amazing what you can get used to if you stick with it long enough. Then came judgment day. The next thing Lot knew was that he was fleeing for his life with his wife and two of his daughters. They became a party of three once Lot's wife made the fateful mistake of looking back at the destruction of Sdom after she was warned not to. She turned into a pillar of salt.

His troubles didn't end there. Thinking that they were the only survivors of the destruction Lot's daughters tricked him into having children with them, disgracing him for the rest of his life. Even Avraham was forced to distance himself from Lot because of what happened and we don't hear anything more about him in the rest of the Torah.

On the other hand Mamre became a loyal ally of Avraham. As a result, Avraham consulted with Mamre about how performing Bris would change his status in the eyes of his friends. Mamre told him, "If God commanded it, then you don't have to worry about it."

Not that Avraham had second thoughts about following through with the mitzvah. He just wanted to have as many people on side with him after he performed it so that he could continue his holy work of bringing the world to the side of God. Mamre assured Avraham of his loyalty, and for showing such support the parshah opens with:

God appeared to him in the plains of Mamre . . . (Bereishis 18:1)

Lot, as a result of his decisions had been marginalized. Mamre, as a result of his, had been elevated and eternalized in the Torah.

The thing about decisions is that so often at the time that we make them we have little or no inkling of what they will eventually lead to. Sometimes in life what seems to be a major decision we later find out wasn't so major at all. Down the road we find out that we got all worked upon over nothing.

That is a lot better, however, than not getting worked up enough when we ought to have. Life becomes more dangerous when we take decisions more lightly than we should, because such decisions have a way of coming back to haunt us in the future. They can, perhaps, even result in something as permanent as death itself.

I remember reading a story after 9/11 about a man who had been booked to fly on one of the planes that crashed into the side of one of the World Trade Center towers. He said, after 9/11, that he had been sitting in the boarding area of his plane where he noticed some Arabs waiting for the same flight talking rather intensely to each other.

That in and of itself did not strike him as unusual. What did catch his attention was the way when it came time to board the plane they acted as if they did not know each other. Each sat apart from another. That made him suspicious, suspicious enough to bring it to the attention of the stewardesses as he boarded the plane.

For some reason, according to the man, the stewardess decided to downplay his concern. Rather than speak to someone higher up about the situation, the stewardess instead assured the man that there was nothing unusual about his Islamic fellow passengers behavior. Instead, she told him to settle down in his seat as soon as possible for take-off.

The man, however, decided otherwise. He told the stewardess that if she was not going to follow up on his concern and check out the passengers in question, he was not flying on that plane. He promptly deplaned and allowed his flight to leave without him—and lived to tell the story another day.

If true, and it seems to be, the man made an amazing lifesaving decision. And if true, the decision of the stewardess was just the opposite. Without question she was trained to deal with such situations and had the ability to either let a flight take-off unimpeded or to prevent its departure in emergency situations. We can probably assume that she weighed the man's words and his warning and, based upon her training and experience, felt safe allowing the flight to leave on time.

On the other hand, airlines are extremely competitive. Being an early morning flight it was probably filled with business people who had to be somewhere on time. Too often flights are blamed for people getting to meetings late, and the worst thing that can happen to an airline is to develop a reputation for not getting passengers to their destination on time. This puts extreme pressure on

company management which puts extreme pressure on their employees.

Even fully responsible people can have a difficult time making fully responsible decisions when doing so can cost their company its reputation, and more than likely, their jobs. On the other hand, air flight is dangerous, and terrorism is a real threat, especially out of the Middle- East. The tragedy of 9/11 may have been the first of its kind, but there had been enough predecessors and "chatter" at the time to warrant an extra degree of caution.

Just imagine, though, purely for the sake of this discussion, the stewardess had decided otherwise. How would events have played out differently had she heeded the passenger's warning? Perhaps the man could even have made a bigger scene, and at least have delayed the flight long enough to unnerve the terrorists aboard it.

Certainly 9/11 would not have happened, or at least as severely. More than likely the terrorists on that flight would have been caught or at least taken into security. Perhaps a warning would have gone out to other airlines about the potential threat of terrorism, and the other planes also would not have been hijacked. The saboteurs would have been stopped and both the man and the stewardess would have become heroes.

This is certainly not a discussion about blame, which could easily be placed on other people who had been far away from the flights those day. It is only a discussion about how a man made a decision that fateful day that could have just as easily left him at the airport and behind schedule as the flight he deplaned safely left on time without him for its rightful destination. The Arabs could have had a different reason for their peculiar behavior that day.

How many times have stewardesses been told by "concerned" passengers that security should be called because of what they deemed weird behavior by a fellow passenger? Once, many years back on an overseas flight, I remained anxious for hours as I kept my eye on someone whose behavior struck me as odd, until I found out that he was the sky marshall on the flight.

It wasn't the first or last time that some passenger gave me reason for concern, though I do not consider myself to be a paranoid traveller. I have seen paranoid travelers and how they can make the flight a nightmare for even the most seasoned airline crew. They have to constantly filter through what they see and hear to keep on guard without alarming the passengers. It is not an easy job, at least to do "right."

Then of course there is the main element of Hashgochah Pratis, of Divine Providence. If God wants something to happen then it is going to happen no matter what we decide. If life teaches us anything it is that you cannot second guess Heaven. If you go "left" when Heaven wants you to go "right" the result will eventually be the same and vice versa.

If so, then what difference do our decisions make in the end? As it says,

*Many are the thoughts in the heart of man, but it is the will of God that prevails. (Mishlei 19:21)*

It makes all the difference in the world, not to the world, but to the individual. The world may go through what it must, but who gets credit for building it up and who gets blamed for tearing it down depends upon the person. Someone who takes their decisions seriously and fulfills the following:

*Who is a wise person? Some who sees what is being born. (Tamid 32a)*

is someone whom God will use for good, and not for bad. He or she will end up making "good" decisions because they make a point of it, so Heaven will ensure it. There is a famous story of Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, who after being asked a halachic question decided a particular way. After the person who asked the "shailah" left Rav Moshe's home he realized that he had forgotten to mention an important detail that, he assumed, would surely alter the rabbi's decision. As soon as he got home, he called Rav Moshe and added the missing missing piece of information to his query.

"That's funny," Rav Moshe told the man, "the answer I gave you is the one that is relevant given the detail you have just added, not if it is missing." Apparently Rav Moshe's decision had been correct for the reality in spite of the fact that he had been denied crucial information to make sure that it was.

This is called *siyita d'Shemaya*, or Heavenly help. Rav Moshe didn't just make a "good mistake," he made the right decision—supernaturally. Since he was a loyal servant of God, a lover of Torah, and self-sacrificing for his people, God made sure, as He does for all such people, that he was the vehicle for good, decisions that "built" and did not destroy. The stories about his decisions and their positive impact on the lives of people and the nation as a whole are legendary.

A decision may feel as if it is easy to make, but it is like a loose thread hanging from a sleeve. If you pull hard enough and long enough, eventually it will unravel the entire garment. It's not the thread itself, but what it is attached to that makes all the difference.

The same is true when it comes to everyday decisions, even ones that seem simple and disconnected from any serious consequence. That may end up being true, but it is not always easy to see that from the beginning. To make good decisions usually requires more *siyita d'Shemaya* than we may know. We get that Heavenly help when Heaven sees that we appreciate our gift of free will, and use it responsibly. It is this that determines what kind of "lot" we have in life.

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

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)