

# THE SIMPLE TRUTH

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

"Behold! I place before you today a blessing and a curse!" Is it really that simple? Are our choices in life so clear and distinct? What about all the shadings of gray that are the subtleties of nuance, circumstance, individual personality, and need? Isn't life far more complex? Can all of life's complexities be reduced to choosing between right and wrong, good and bad, blessing and curse, life and death?

As Moshe bid his children farewell his instructions were reduced to their simplest and most honest essence. Life's greatest challenge is simple. Will we do what G-d asks of us or will we do as we please? Adam and Chava were confronted by this challenge and every person since that time has been equally challenged.

In last week's Parsha Moshe asked his famous rhetorical question. "What does G-d want from you?" His answer, the most over simplified yet true answer ever in the annals of philosophy and theology was, "To be in awe of G-d, to serve Him, and to follow His ways." It is as if Moshe had reached that stage of wisdom where everything could be reduced to its simplest yet most profound truth.

Shlomo Hamelech says in Koheles 5:2, "And the voice of the fool is with many words." In Mishlei 17:28 he states, "Even a fool will be considered wise if he is silent." True wisdom does not require many words. More often than not, wisdom ignores the circumstantial complexities of life and situation and re focuses us on our priorities. It is a simplification of life's complexities. It is a silencing of all the seemingly important issues that merely distract us from seeing what we must do.

The Talmud says, "Who is a wise person? One who can see the future consequences." No matter how wise a person may be, he is not prophetic. He (or she) cannot "see" the details of the future - but they can see the general direction and outcome.

The true "Chacham - wise person" understands trends and cycles. The true Chacham perceives standards of human behavior and psychology. The true Chacham understands that we are all motivated by similar needs, fears, and desires. The true Chacham is a reductionist, distilling all problems to their basic elements.

At the end of last week's Parsha Moshe gave us the second portion of the Shema. The first paragraph was recorded in V'eschanan 6:4 and is a basic declaration of fealty to G-d and His Mitzvos. The second paragraph is a presentation of consequences. If the nation follows the Torah the laws of

nature will benefit them. If they do not follow the Torah the laws of nature will punish them.

The ordering of the two portions can be compared to the declaration made by the Jews immediately preceding the giving of the Torah. "Naaseh V'Nishmah - we will do and then we will attempt to understand." Just as the Jews accepted all of G-d's commandments before understanding the reasons for the Mitzvos, so too the Shema begins with an unquestioning acceptance of G-d's law and only afterwards are we taught the consequences of that acceptance.

The laws of nature, like the truth of G-d's law, are simple. Most of us do not care why natural disasters occur; we only care how we are personally affected. Will we survive the earthquake? Will I lose my home to the floods? Will my crops be wiped out by the drought? Therefore, Moshe made it very clear and very simple. The laws of the Torah and the natural laws of Eretz Yisroel are one and the same. If we keep G-d's laws we will prosper in the Promised Land. If we do not keep G-d's law the land will reject our claim. There will be disease, hunger, and failure. Eventually we will be forced out of the land. The choice is ours.

Starting after Shlishi (11:30), Moshe forewarned the Bnai Yisroel against the false prophet, the family member who attempts to influence others to deny G-d, and the Ir Hanidachas - an entire city corrupted to serve idols. Moshe's general warning against the presence of foreign worship and the dangers of assimilation preceded this.

Negative influences and assimilation have the power to change us because they cloud our clarity and confuse our focus. Charisma, family, and society were Moshe's concerns. The charismatic false prophet (messiah) challenges the clarity of our vision with stories of personal greatness and fulfillment. He dangles before us the glory of both physical and spiritual redemption. The power of his words and personality infuse us with idealism and false hopes. He would make us believe that what we want is what G-d wants. He would have us believe in redemption without devotion, spirituality without responsibility.

Family is equally as powerful. Family can lay claim to our genetic souls. "We are the same! What is good for me is good for you! We come from the same background. I understand you!" The desire to be accepted by family can have consequences, sometimes uplifting, sometimes devastating. Every value can be rewritten by our desire and need to belong to family.

The power of society is the most powerful of all. It combines the charisma of the false prophet with the embrace of family. Like the sirens of old, it draws us onto the shattering reef of its embracing rhyme and reason. Society's values seem to be good and correct because it is a society. The espoused values really do work! Can so many people be wrong?

However, Moshe exhorts us, "You are G-d's children 'you are a holy nation' you were chosen from all the other nations to be special...! (14:1-3) Do not be confused! Do not be taken in by the appearance of truth. Truth is simple. Truth sets you apart. The manner of your eating (14:3-21) reminds you of your profound but simple essence. The methods of your farming, economy, and social services

(14:28-15:23) remind you of the clarity of your national mission. The scheduling of your time constantly focuses you on the Creator Who dwells in your midst!"(15:1 - 16:17)

Yes! The challenges are great but the truth is simple. There is good and bad, blessing and curse. Remember who you are and what you are and beware of the forces that confuse. Wisdom is simple, wisdom is clear.

### Ellul Reflection & Return

As we greet the month of Ellul this Shabbos, it is important to appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of this month of preparation.

The Jews received the 10 Commandments on the 6th of Sivan, 2448. Moshe ascended Sinai to learn the Torah and remained for 40 days and nights. In his absence, due to a mistaken calculation, the Jews assumed that Moshe was not returning and made the Golden Calf. Descending from Sinai on the 17th of Tamuz, Moshe broke the 1st Luchos, destroyed the Golden Calf, punished the sinners, and began a second 40-day period of prayer and supplication begging for Hashem's forgiveness.

On the 1st day of Ellul, (August 20) Hashem commanded Moshe to reascend Sinai to receive the 2nd Luchos. During the 2nd stay of 40 days and nights the people immersed themselves in prayer and Teshuva hoping for Hashem's reacceptance of them as the Chosen People. In order to avoid making the same miscalculation as before, the people sounded the Shofar at the end of each day that Moshe was on the mountain. Moshe returned after 40 days on Yom Kippur, 2449, bearing the 2nd Luchos and Hashem's full acceptance of their Teshuva. From then on, the 40 days, starting with Rosh Chodesh Ellul (August 19 - 20) and culminating with Yom Kippur, have been designated as the period for soul searching, and Teshuva.

Starting with Maariv on Sunday, August 19, we add Psalm 27 at the end of Shacharis and Maariv. Monday morning (August 20) after Shacharis, we will begin sounding the Shofar everyday. The saying of L'David continues through Succoth. We do this because of the references to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Succoth made in that Psalm.

This period and the Yomim Naraim - High Holy Days are resplendent with symbols and customs. Beginning with the month of Ellul, we introduce into our daily activities the focus of this special period: Tefilah (prayer), Teshuva (repentance), and Tzedaka (charity). The sounding of the Shofar reminds us of the origins of this period, culminating with Yom Kippur. However, the intent is far more than a historical commemoration. As explained, the Jews in the desert sounded the Shofar at the end of the day to indicate the end of each of the 40 days Moshe was on the mountain and avoid a repeat miscalculation. Why then do we sound the Shofar every morning after Shacharis?

This period is intended to focus us on our ability to rebuild and do Teshuva. Therefore, we sound the Shofar in the morning to capture the imagery of Moshe ascending the mountain on the morning of the 1st day of those last 40 days to accept the 2nd Luchos and Hashem's forgiveness. Knowing that

we have sinned is important; knowing that Hashem forgives, is far more important. How often have we been motivated to seek forgiveness from a friend only to be rebuffed by their lack of desire to forgive? How quickly that desire to apologize dissipates! Knowing that Hashem will forgive generates the desire to seek forgiveness.

The custom of adding Psalm 27 to the daily davening is another technique for focusing us on the nature of this special month. Starting with the 1st day of Ellul we enter into a period highlighted by the severity of being judged on Rosh Hashanah, the certainty of being forgiven on Yom Kippur, and the celebration of renewed intimacy with Hashem, manifested during Succoth. It is an amazing sequence of introspection, change, and renewal that is captured within the verses of the 27th Psalm.

The first verse refers to Hashem as our "light and salvation". Light refers to the harsh, but honest, perspective of judgment that forces us to confront the truth of our actions and rationalizations.

Salvation refers to the benevolence of Hashem's forgiveness on Yom Kippur that embraces us in renewed intimacy and trust. The later mention of being "sheltered by Hashem's Succah" is the comfort and security generated by our intimacy with G-d and the trust we have in Him. We are so confident in our renewed relationship that we celebrate with seven days of joy, culminating in Simchas Torah.

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