

# CHOOSING LIFE - NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The Torah presents us with a seemingly simple and uncomplicated choice in this week's reading - the choice between life and death. And the Torah deems it necessary to instruct us to choose life. It certainly seems at first glance to be a very superfluous instruction, for the instinct to preserve our lives for as long as possible is one of the basic drives of human beings. An equal part of our nature is that we are shortsighted and give in today foolishly against our own interests and our own life force itself.

There is no other explanation for why alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs should exist in our society, allowing for hundreds of thousands of lives every year to be summarily wasted. Choosing life has many nuances attached to it. People who are determined to enjoy pleasures of the flesh, to satisfy wanton desires, and to pursue temporary pleasures regardless of the long-term costs and consequences also think that they are somehow choosing life and its pleasures. One of the great catchphrases that exist in our current society is quality of life. Like all catchphrases and currently socially acceptable mantras and mottos there is no way to define this term. No one can measure accurately what life means to any individual person and quality of life is certainly not given to measurement by any objective standards.

The whole tragedy of eugenics and biological selection that was so common in the 20th century is based upon the fact that somehow someone with superior intelligence can measure what quality of life means to a given individual. And, if those given individuals do not measure up to those elitist standards, then this becomes preferable to life. The twentieth century is littered with millions of corpses who were victims of such false and murderous thoughts and policies.

To put it bluntly, the Torah is very much pro-life. It is pro-life before we are born, while we are alive, and after the physical body has returned to the dust from which it was created. That is why the Torah emphasizes that we should choose life and not give in to the specious theories and quality-of-life fictions and conveniences. Our mere existence as human beings presents us with difficult choices at every stage of our lives. It is never quite as easy as the verse in the Torah may indicate at first glance.

Because life is not always convenient or even pleasant, it requires sacrifice, postponement of pleasure and a long view of the consequences of our actions and behavior. As such, choices for life are always made in a gray area and are not generally as black and white as we would wish them to be. The Torah comes to help guide us through this unclear and muddled situation that we call

society. It comes to establish the rules by which we would always be wise enough to choose life and avoid the pitfalls of fads, desires and foolishness that can only lead to the loss of life, qualitatively and quantitatively.

Shabbat shalom  
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