

THE BEST CHOICE

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him..." (13:19)

The Talmud relates that while Bnei Yisroel were preoccupied with obtaining the wealth of the Mitzrim, Moshe was ensuring that the remains of Yosef and his brothers be transported to Eretz Yisroel for burial, thereby fulfilling the oath that Yosef had adjured Bnei Yisroel.¹ The Midrash continues that Hashem proclaimed "Chacham levav yikach mitzvos" - "The wise hearted take (for themselves) the mitzvos".^{2,3} The implication of the Talmud is that Moshe concerned himself with the performance of mitzvos whereas the rest of Bnei Yisroel were out satisfying their greed.

In last week's parsha Hashem pleaded with Moshe to urge Bnei Yisroel to take the valuables of the Egyptians prior to departing Mitzrayim so that our Patriarch Avraham would not complain concerning the treatment of his nation.⁴ Bnei Yisroel were "borrowing" the Egyptians' valuables to fulfill the commandment of Hashem. Why does the Talmud not view their actions as the performance of a mitzva? Why is Moshe described as "chacham" - "wise" for performing a mitzva and not "tzadik" - "righteous"?

The difference between the mitzva performed by Bnei Yisroel and the one performed by Moshe Rabbeinu is that Moshe was concerned with the performance of a communal responsibility, whereas the rest of the nation engaged in the performance of individual responsibilities. Great objectivity is required in order for a person to choose to perform a mitzva which does not directly benefit him individually, over a mitzva which does. The chacham is defined as one who learns from every man for he has the objectivity to put aside his own perspective and predisposition for those of others.⁵ Therefore Moshe is described as "chacham" for his behavior.

Throughout our lives we are faced with choices that pit the benefit of others against those of our own. Both options may even qualify as mitzvos, making the choice more difficult. It is easy to rationalize our actions as appropriate if they qualify as mitzvos. However, the right choice must be concluded objectively, and not based upon our own personal agendas.

1.Sotah 9b 2.Shemos Rabbah 20:19 3.Mishlei 10 4.10:2, Berachos 9b 5.Pirkei Avos

When It Rains It Pours

"...they went for a three-day period in the Wilderness, but they did not find water"(15:22)

After emerging from the Red Sea, Bnei Yisroel traveled for three days without water to drink. Moshe led them to Marah where they discovered water but realized that it was bitter and therefore, undrinkable. Moshe then cried out to Hashem who instructed him to take a tree and cast it into the water. Moshe did as he was instructed and the waters were miraculously sweetened.

The Talmud understands the lack of water to be an allusion to the lack of Torah, for Torah is compared to water. Therefore Moshe established that the Torah be read Mondays and Thursdays to ensure that three days would not pass without Torah study.¹

The Baalei Hatosfos ask why he specifically chose Mondays and Thursdays. Other combinations of days could accomplish the same goal.²

The Midrash relates that the Shabbos complained to Hashem, "Each day of the week has a mate, except for me." Hashem placated the Shabbos with the following response: "Bnei Yisroel will be your mate."³ What is the notion of a day having a mate? What are the mates of the other days of the week?

The Rambam teaches that everything in creation was formed from four basic elements: fire, water, earth, and air.⁴ Analysis of Creation reveals one of the four elements to be predominant on each day. On Sunday, Hashem created light, which is essentially the element of fire. Monday brought the creation of the sky, which the Torah describes as a separation of waters. Clearly, water is the dominant element. On Tuesday, dry land with its vegetation was created; this is the element of earth. The cycle is then repeated; on Wednesday, Hashem made two large lights to rule by day and by night, again the element of fire. On Thursday, all swimming and flying creatures were created, which were, according to the Talmud, generated from the very water itself.⁵ Friday issued forth the creation of animals, followed by man, both of whom emerged from the earth. Hence, man was called Adam, from the word "adamah", which means "earth".⁶

The Midrash is teaching that, just as everything in this world is produced by a male-female union, the elements themselves which Hashem used for Creation have male and female properties as well; these properties combine to produce the creations in which they play a predominant role. Sunday - Wednesday was the union which produced creations that are anchored by the element of fire. Similarly, Monday - Thursday produced creations which consist primarily of water. Tuesday and Friday introduced the earth-based creations. Since the basis for Moshe's enactment was the interpretation of water as a reference to Torah, the two days selected were the ones on which the element of water was dominant.

The only element not accounted for is "ru'ach" - "air". This element is the most spiritual of the four, which is apparent from the verses themselves: At the onset of Creation, Hashem's presence was described as "ru'ach Elokim".⁷ In His creative mode Hashem is described as "ruach". It is therefore most appropriate that "ru'ach" is dominant on Shabbos, for it is the union between Bnei Yisroel and Shabbos which generates the sanctity that permeates the remaining days of the week and give them their existence.

On Wednesday morning we recite the verse "lechu neranena" at the end of the Psalm of the day. It is not coincidental that this verse also introduces our Friday night liturgy, for Shabbos generates the energy for the rest of the days of the week. The first three days derive their energy from the Shabbos which has passed and the next three days from the upcoming Shabbos. We therefore recite the verses of the Shabbos liturgy at the end of Wednesday's Psalm of the week for we are entering the portion of the week which is influenced by the next Shabbos.

1.Bava Kama. 82a 2.Ibid 3.Bereishis Rabbah 11:9 4.Yad Yesodei HaTorah 3:10 5.Chullin 27b 6.Bereishis 2:11 7.Ibid 1:2
