

# LIFE: THE SCHOOL OF GROWTH

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*"See I have placed in front of you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing: if you will listen to all of the mitzvahs of HASHEM your G-d as I have commanded you today..." — Devarim 11:21*

## There are two paths in front of you...

In these *posukim*, the Torah sets out two divergent paths. One path leads to ultimate success and blessing, and the other to devastation and curses. If you follow in the ways of HASHEM, you will be richly rewarded. You will look back at your years of sacrifice with enormous joy and satisfaction, saying to yourself, "Whatever price I paid was so worth it. I am now being compensated beyond anything I could have imagined." On the other hand, if you don't follow the Torah's ways, there will come a time when you will deeply regret your mistake and you will look back and say, "Woe is me! How could I have been so foolish? How could I have chosen so poorly?"

## A moshol for life

The *Daas Zakainim* brings light to this concept with a *moshol*. He says it is comparable to a crossroads. One road begins as a difficult thorny trail, then it opens up, and the rest of the way is clear. The other path begins as a smooth passageway, but ends in a thicket of thorns. An old man sits at the crossroads and warns the passersby, "Be careful. This road begins smoothly, but ends up all thorns. Rather choose the other road. Even though it begins as a difficult path, it opens up and will carry you well." Anyone who listens to the man will work at the outset of his journey, but will travel in peace the rest of the way; whereas anyone who ignores the advice of the old man will get caught in the thorns for rest of his passage.

The *Daas Zakainim* explains that this is what the Torah is telling us. If a man sins and follows his inclinations, he will find comfort in this world, but when he dies, he will go to *Gehennom*, which is all thorns. However, if one works in this world and labors in Torah study and *mitzvahs*, he will merit the World to Come, which is all goodness, joy, and happiness.

## What do we gain from the parable?

This *Daas Zakainim* is difficult to understand because the meanings of the *posukim* seem self-evident – serve HASHEM and you will receive blessing; violate the *mitzvahs* and you will be cursed. It doesn't seem that he is adding much to our understanding with this *moshol*. If the point is that punishment and reward aren't in this world, but rather in the Next, that concept doesn't need a parable. Simply state, "the Torah is referring to the World to Come." What point is the *Daas Zakainim* trying to bring home to us with this *moshol*?

To understand this, we need a different perspective of life.

## Progressive weight training

A rather *yeshivishe* fellow went to a power-lifting gym to learn how to work out. As a kid, he had little experience with sports and was clearly out of his element. Recognizing this, the coach showed him various exercises and worked closely with him. One day, this fellow was overheard saying, "That coach, I don't know what's with him. Every time I get the exercise right, he goes and adds more weight to the bar. What's wrong with him?"

The point this fellow missed was that **progressive weight training** is all about increasing the load. The goal of the activity is to coax the body to grow. By gradually increasing the work load, the body is called upon to respond. The work should never be easy. The nature of the activity is to incrementally increase the demand placed on the body, thereby causing it to grow.

This is a good parable because in life we are put into many situations. If a person doesn't understand why he is on this planet, he will have many questions. Why is life so difficult? Why is it that when I finally get things under control, a whole new set of circumstances arises that sets everything out of kilter? Why can't life just be easy?

The point that he is missing is the very purpose of life. HASHEM put us on this planet to grow. Many of the challenges and situations are given to us specifically for that reason. It isn't by accident, and it isn't because HASHEM doesn't pay attention. Quite the opposite, these situations were hand-designed to demand from us. They are catalysts to change who we are.

In weight training, the movement of the bar isn't the significant part; the demand on the body is. So too in life, the situations I face are far less significant than my reactions to them. Who I become is a result of my attitude and the way I handle my challenges.

When a person understands this perspective, then life itself makes sense. If not, then the situations in life seem arbitrary and unfair.

## The answer: why the Daas Zakainim used a moshol

The answer to the *Daas Zakainim* seems to be that this *moshol* defines our path in life. The road that we are being asked to take isn't easy. It isn't laden with roses and doesn't smell like lilacs. It has thorns. A life properly led will have moments of doubt, pain, and confusion. That doesn't mean that we are on the wrong path. Quite the opposite, if life is going too smoothly, it's a bad sign. Since the purpose of life is to grow, we need the challenges of life to help us reach our potential. If the road is too level, that is likely a sign that we have chosen the wrong path.

HASHEM wants us to enjoy our stay on this planet, but there is a plan and a purpose to it all. If a person lives his life in accordance with the Torah, he finds deep satisfaction, an inner sense of peace and tranquility, and true *simcha*. But it isn't a walk in the park. There is much work along the way. There are trials, travails, and circumstances that demand growth. If a person responds appropriately, he finds a sense of inner peace because he is in synch with his purpose in life. That sense of balance is an indicator that he is on the right path, and the work that he puts in on that path will bring him to true joy, happiness, and elation in this world, and much more so in the World to Come.

**For more on this topic please listen to Shmuz #24 - Understanding Life Settings**

Rabbi Shafier is the founder of the Shmuz.com – The Shmuz is an engaging, motivating shiur that deals with real life issues.

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