

THE CHOOSING PEOPLE

by Rabbi Label Lam

When you go out to war ("al"- over) against your enemy... (Devarim 21:10)

The Torah only speaks versus the yetzer hara- the negative inclination... (Rashi)

The Lubavicher Rebbe had a solidly practical insight on these opening words of the first verse. He said that when you go out to war, go above your enemy! Do not go down to their level. Choose the high road and not the low road! Which enemy are we speaking of? Where is this war of which we speak?

The Chovos HaLevavos- Duties of the Heart tells an apocryphal story about a certain pious man that confronted some soldiers returning with the spoils of war after vanquishing their enemy in a fierce battle. He told them, "Now that you are returning victorious from the small battle, get ready for the big battle." They asked him in great wonderment, "Which big battle?" He answered them, "The battle with your-self!"

Years ago I asked a Rebbe of mine, whose family I truly admired, "What is the secret of raising a wonderful family?" His answered shocked me! "Don't get personally involved!" His words mystified my wife and me for a long while. We had one little baby at the time and he was the apple of our eye. Every gurgle was poetry. We had taken hundreds of rolls of film in the first few months alone. (We have no pictures of his brother, our second child.) Are we to be cold and distant? It took years to appreciate the value of those golden words.

Sometimes it's best to be like a judge. Coolly banging the gavel and declaring, "Motion denied!" What about emotions!? Are they denied? No! I have a phrase, "Feelings are real to the feeler, but they don't rule." The good parent, teacher, friend, employer, employee has to float like a boat. The boat is in the water, touching the waves, but not being pulled down into the water.

If a boat is not equipped to be a submarine and it becomes submerged in the swirl of emotions, it's lost like the Titanic. Some part of the boat must float securely above the frantic cries, focusing on what's the best thing to do! "I know you want xyz dear! However, the answer is still "NO!"

This ability to maintain equanimity and objectivity saves us from being reactive and even over reactive to situations. Nobody is then able to manipulate us! We gain freedom and retain our dignity thereby. We are not controlled by circumstances as long as we choose our response.

Probably the greatest example of this is embedded in the following story about the Klausenberger

Rebbe. While imprisoned in a Nazi camp during the Holocaust, but he retained an unswerving dedication to Torah and Mitzvos. He continued to wear Tefillin, which he had hidden with him. One day, a Nazi guard discovered him with his Tefillin.

He fell upon the Rebbe, beating him furiously. Then, once the Rebbe had fallen, the guard placed his foot on the Rebbe's face, pressing the bottom of his boot into the Rebbe's cheek. "Now," mocked the guard, "do you still think you are the chosen people?"

According to the version I heard, the Rebbe replied, "If you'll let me speak I will explain why I believe we are the chosen people." In that moment of temporary reprieve the Rebbe asked, "If I was in the same position of dominance over you as you are over me, would I be doing to you what you are now doing to me?" The guard paused thoughtfully and shook his head "no". The Rebbe concluded convincingly, "Then we are the chosen people!"

Now I know the notion of a Chosen People is mis-understandably noxious to a select few but perhaps it can be better appreciated if the focus was in the other direction as we proudly carry the mantle of **the choosing people!**