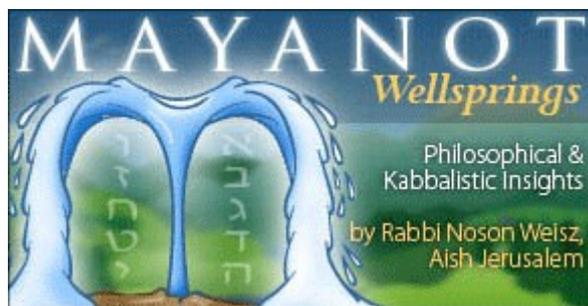


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**Choices and Rewards**

This Shabbat is the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashana and we are preparing ourselves to face judgment. Jewish tradition teaches us that the judgment on Rosh Hashana concerns the events of this world. As we recite in this majestic prayer:

On Rosh Hashana will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed: how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who will die before his time; who by water who by fire; who by sword who by beast; who by famine, who by thirst; ... who will rest and who will wander; who will live in harmony and who will be harassed; who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer; who will be impoverished and

who will be enriched; who will be degraded and who will be exalted.

But although the prayer service informs us about the sorts of matters that are decided on Rosh Hashana, it is less explicit about the considerations that enter the deliberations of the heavenly court. Consequently, it is all too easy to miss the entire point of the day. Not only does such an error result in a missed opportunity, it also opens the door to the possibility of failing to obtain the best possible judgment.

Judgment is a concept that involves the determination of "just deserts" and is related to reward and punishment. Thus, a decree for a trouble-free, healthy life in the coming year represents a reward, while a bad decree that results in poverty and sickness is a punishment.

But Jewish tradition would appear to dictate that as far as Rosh Hashana is concerned, nothing could be farther from the truth. It is impossible to receive the reward for any mitzvah in this world (Talmud, Kidushin, 39b).

The commentators explain that it would be utterly cruel of God to reward any good deed in this world when the option exists to reward it in the next. The reward for any good deed preformed by someone with a share in the World to Come (*Olam Haba*) should automatically be received later on simple utilitarian grounds. The payoff in this world is incomparably less, and rewarding the good deed here would be an unconscionable waste of a valuable resource.

## THE REWARD OF A MITZVAH

The real reason goes deeper. The truth is that the reward of a mitzvah simply doesn't fit into this world. If you lined up the pleasure felt by all human beings from the beginning of the world to the present and squeezed it into a single moment, it would still not equal a moment's pleasure in the World to Come.

Reward in this world is mainly distributed to those who cannot receive their reward in the World to Come because they simply won't make it there. (The exceptions are too complicated to explain in the context of this essay.) But even such people, known as *reshaim gemurim*, or "totally evil," have many good deeds to their credit. They may have been good fathers or husbands, they may have helped people when they felt the urge, and consequently they need to be rewarded.

Of course, it is impossible for us to grasp how such people with all these good deeds to their credit can be considered *reshaim gemurim* without appreciating how evil is to be understood, according to Jewish tradition.

Nachmanides explains (Genesis 1:4) that the word *tov* or "good," refers to something "everlasting," and that the word *ra* or "evil" refers to something "temporary." This view is intuitively sensible as well -- God wants the good to last forever, whereas evil is clearly a temporary phenomenon.

According to this perception, a *rasha* is not necessarily an evil person in the common sense of the word; rather, he is a person who is attached only to the temporary and

transient and has never connected himself to the everlasting.

*Look, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil, that which I command you today, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to observe His commandments, His decrees, and His ordinances ... But if your heart will stray and you will not listen, and you are led astray, and you prostrate yourselves to strange gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will surely be lost ... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life so that you will live, you and your offspring... (Deut. 30:15-19)*

Our Torah portion presents us with the choice between life and good, and death and evil.

As Nachmanides explains: Life and good and death and evil are not different things but synonymous; the good is life everlasting, and the evil is death because it is temporary. This passage states that life is gained through choice: *choose life so that you will live*. The *rasha* is not evil in the common sense; he is merely a person who chooses the temporary and the short-lived rather than the everlasting.

But there is another concept that needs to be understood before we can understand who the *rasha* is.

## LIFE CHOICES

Rabbi Dessler explains that while we make many choices in life, most of them are not

the type of choices that are referred to by our passage. It is obvious that a choice between a gray suit and a black one cannot be considered a life choice, but Rabbi Dessler explains that even most moral choices cannot be regarded as life choices as defined here.

Most of our moral decisions do not involve facing down wrenching moral dilemmas.

A person who loves his wife will sacrifice a great deal for her without experiencing any conflict or difficulty. He doesn't do it out of a sense of right and wrong, or because he is obeying God's will, he does it because he wants to. People take pride and joy in depriving themselves in order to be able to educate their children. Rabbi Dessler explains that such sacrifices, although they are clearly right and good, are not the sort of choices that attach a person to eternal life.

The type of choices that are able to accomplish such attachment are those that are taken precisely for the reasons stated in the passage. Choices taken for the express purpose of attaching to life and to good instead of what is temporary and therefore to the evil.

These kinds of choices are made in the context of confronting moral dilemmas when we are torn in two directions, and we do not have a powerful inner program instilled by heredity or environment pointing us in the right direction. We desire one thing, but we know that the right decision is in the other direction -- not because of our inner program but because God told us in the Torah that that is the way to go. It is in

these sorts of situations that present us with the opportunity of attaching ourselves to life.

Thus, in the Torah view, a person can be considered a *rasha* in the eyes of God, even if he seems like a very fine person to us.

Many people are blessed with loving natures and come from the sorts of fine upbringing that naturally predisposes them to do the right thing in most situations as a matter of course. Indeed, that is the major goal of all successful child rearing -- the creation of character traits that will automatically guide our children into taking the right and moral course in any of life's dilemmas. In other words, our aim is to build the type of complex and powerful program into our children's characters that will force them into the correct moral choices by the anxiety that an immoral choice would generate.

But even when people are programmed or educated to do good, they can still be *reshaim* -- that is, people who will not have a share in the World to Come because they have never chosen to attach themselves to the everlasting and the eternal.

They have merely acted out their inner programs, and in fact, have always done what came easiest for them, no matter how difficult it may have appeared to the outside observer, who was not fortunate enough to be instilled with an inner program of such high quality. Whenever these *reshaim* encountered a situation which was outside their program, they failed to come up with the self-sacrifice to make the correct moral

choice and always fell into the easy and convenient option. They chose to go against what God dictated in the Torah by means of various rationalizations, such as that the Torah's injunctions really didn't apply to their particular situations and the circumstances. Despite their good deeds such people have no share in the world to come.

On the other hand, people who have attached themselves to the eternal, even if they have only done so once in their lives, will make it to the World to Come eventually in spite of the multitude of their transgressions.

Jewish tradition teaches that God's policy is never to allow a person's mitzvot to be cancelled by his transgressions. Therefore, if a person performed his mitzvot with the type of dedication that is required to attach himself to God and to eternal life, this act altered his inner reality permanently. He is now a person who is attached to *Olam Haba* once and for all and he will eventually enjoy that life.

### **PAST TRANSGRESSIONS**

But what about that person's past transgressions? His transgressions are a barrier to the enjoyment of *Olam Haba* and consequently they must be dealt with and purified. Consequently, the transgressions of such a person must be dealt with either in this world or in *Gehenom* or Hell. But once again utilitarian considerations mandate that the necessary purification be accomplished in this world. Therefore, anyone who belongs in the World to Come but is blemished by transgressions -- as

most of us are-- this world is logically be expected to be a vale of tears.

On the other hand, for our *rasha* who has failed to attach himself to the eternal even once in his life, but who has performed many good deeds which must be rewarded, this world is the only place where such rewards can be made available. As the rewards of mitzvot are so incomparably large, we would expect him to have a wonderful life in this world.

We have now arrived at the difficulty of comprehending Rosh Hashana.

We certainly do not want to think of ourselves as *reshaim*. But most of us know that we are not *tzadikim gemurim*, "totally righteous people" either. If so, we will make it to the World to Come with God's help, as all people in general do except for the *reshaim*. But this means that something has to be done to cleanse us of our many evil deeds. This can either be done by the means of hardships that we suffer in this world, or by subjecting us to the tortures of *Gehenom* or Hell after we die.

As the tortures of Hell are infinitely more painful than any tribulation we might experience in this world, we ought to prefer to complete our purification in this one. So why are we asking God for an easy year? And how could the decree of a good year possibly be considered a favorable judgment?

### **DIVINE PROVIDENCE**

The answer lies in understanding what is known as *Hashgacha Pratit*, or Divine Providence.

This world and what happens in it is not about reward and punishment. As we have explained, reward and punishment become a part of our world due to purely secondary considerations.

This world is a workplace. The Divine policies that apply here are generated primarily by concerns over maximizing production, just as you would expect in any industrial setting. After all, the product of this world is the manufacture of eternal life. Practically speaking, this means that the creation of a place in *Olam Haba* for all of us is the focus of *Hashgacha Pratit*.

There are three primary factors involved:

1. We all must be placed into a situation that will force us to produce. For example, suppose A is sent into the world to correct the character trait of arrogance and cruelty. The extent of the correction achieved will determine A's place in the World to Come. Providence will have determined that A must be born rich or become wealthy early in his adult life. Such a life situation will guarantee that he will always contend with the character traits he was sent to correct. People will constantly ask him for help, and with each instance he will have confront his streak of cruelty. The very fact that everyone will always be asking him for help and attempting to curry favor with him will ensure that he has to confront his trait of arrogance. On the other hand, B is sent to the world to correct the trait of self-pity and to

demonstrate the cheerful acceptance of one's lot. Providence will arrange for B to be poor, as his poverty will automatically force him to contend with the very problems he was sent into the world to work on. If A were poor and B were rich neither would automatically be forced to do their jobs, and their productivity would be entirely dependant on their inner motivation, a very inefficient policy in terms of assuring maximum productivity. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. No one has ever come up with a better motivator. A's wealth and B's poverty thus have zero relationship with reward and punishment. The determination is based on purely utilitarian considerations.

2. The second function of Providence is to provide help. As the Talmud states "someone who seeks to make himself spiritually impure, they open the way for him, and if someone desires to purify himself, heaven assists him" (Talmud, Yuma 38b). Providence is always there to provide assistance; how much assistance, and what sort will be available, is again based on considerations of productivity. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto in "Derech Hashem" explains that there are three levels of assistance in either direction. The person who begins on the path towards the World to Come automatically receives some assistance. The person who is firmly set on his way gets more; his

assistance comes in the form of redefining his job so that it is easier to complete. The person who has already gone most of the way gets the most assistance; God provides him with whatever it takes to guarantee that he successfully completes his job.

For the *rasha* who is headed in the opposite direction there are also three levels of "assistance."

Someone who has begun on the path away from the World to Come loses the assistance he could have received and is left to his own devices, but Providence doesn't hinder him from turning back to face the right direction either. On the other hand, for the person who is well on his way on the road that leads away from the World to Come is positively hindered from turning back. Providence places him in a situation that makes it difficult for him to change directions, while the confirmed *rasha* is placed in a life situation that renders a change in direction next to impossible.

Luzatto provides a practical example to bring this down to earth. Changing one's direction in life requires introspection, self-criticism and thought. These in turn require opportunity and motivation. Thus the *rasha* may be so loaded down with the trials and cares of poverty and ill health that his daily struggles make it impossible for him to enjoy the peace of mind that is required to really look

closely at his life and figure out that he is headed in the wrong direction. Or Providence may decide to bless the *rasha* with great wealth which will remove his motivation to indulge in searching self-criticism. Why rock the boat when everything is going well? The method selected by the Providence will depend on whether the *rasha* needs to be rewarded for his good deeds in this world or not.

3. This determination of Providence, of how much positive help a person deserves, or how many obstacles should be placed in his path, is a function of judgment. This is what the judgment of Rosh Hashana is about.

### **JUDGMENT OF ROSH HASHANA**

Let us return to our examples A and B.

A, the wealthy man who was sent into the world to struggle with arrogance and cruelty has been doing a poor job. He hasn't been at all charitable and he has become unapproachable and haughty. He knows about the workings of Providence that we have just described and stands before God on Rosh Hashana, desperately afraid. His wealth was given to him only to ensure a productive struggle with his negative character traits. As he is losing the struggle and not being productive, if he were God, at this point he would decide to take his wealth away as a means of making the task of reaching his objective more cumbersome and difficult.

What can he do about it? He should say to God that he realizes that until now he has

been deficient in his task but from now on he intends to fully engage in the activities for which he was born. If he can persuade God of his sincerity, he will not lose his wealth.

B also stands before God knowing that his poverty is a result of the workings of Providence. But he has done an excellent job and worked on his self-pity and has tried to accept his situation with good cheer. He tells God that he has struggled hard and long and been productive and now he would like some help. He would like his task made easier and therefore there is no more need for him to be poor. Let God consider what he has accomplished as enough and let him contend with other character traits such as arrogance and cruelty. Let Providence place him in a life situation that would make him productive in these new tasks. Let Providence make him rich.

Rosh Hashana is indeed about judgment. The judgment doesn't concern ultimate rewards but is about the availability of Divine assistance. Unlike the ultimate rewards which are the direct results of the inner transformations accomplished by the person himself and therefore cannot be awarded but must be chosen, assistance is a variable commodity whose availability is never absolutely fixed. Like everything else in this world it is relative rather than absolute, and human beings can employ their creative ingenuity to increase it.

We stand before God on Rosh Hashana to present our case for increased *Hashgacha Pratit* - Divine Providence. May it be His will to judge our worldly task as finally complete

and witness the arrival of the Messiah.



## The High Holy Days: Belief in Man

The Rosh Hashanah - Yom Kippur season is upon us, filling our minds and hearts with so many thoughts and emotions that go beyond our normal framework. This unique time of the Jewish year stands in stark contrast to the New Year's experience marked by the Gregorian calendar: The approach to Rosh Hashanah is counted down by a month of prayer, introspection and rapprochement, while the approach to the secular new year is marked off in shopping days. Rosh Hashanah is steeped in awe and reverence; more often than not, 'new year's day' is characterized by the hangover left from a night of revelry.

Throughout the ages and in every corner of the globe, Jews gather in synagogues to hear the shofar, not in Times Square; we kiss the Torah, and not the somewhat inebriated person who happens to be standing nearby.

Yet while our mood is more somber, our thoughts more serious, our holiday season has a festive, even celebratory element as well. This is the frame of mind that envelops us as we connect to holiness and re-

discover the purity of our souls. In common with the secular celebration of the new year, we, too, make "new year's resolutions", although our aspirations are of a higher order and, it is hoped, our resolve greater and our follow-through more successful. Judaism instructs us to use this time to shine a spotlight on our lives and lifestyles. With great thought, soul searching and angst, we strip off the veneer and examine the core of our existence. We are given the opportunity to set aside this time to ask the great existential questions: Who am I? Who do I wish to be? Have I made the wrong choices? Am I falling short? What do I need to change?

This process is called *teshuva*. To better understand the concept of *teshuva*, we may view it through the prism of concepts taken from our own frame of reference. One approach is to consider our personal "balance sheet"; the traditional term for this approach is *heshbon nefesh*, a very personal calculation that allows us to measure the spiritual assets and liabilities accumulated over the course of our daily lives. The process of *teshuva* allows us to restructure- that is, to convert debts into equity, either through repentance and/or by taking decisions and actions to increase our assets. This is the 'recovery plan' at the core of the High Holy Days: *teshuva*, *tefilla* (prayer) and *tzedaka* (acts of charity) turn us back from the brink of spiritual bankruptcy and dissolution.

The scriptural source for the concept of *teshuva* is found in Parshat Nitzavim, the Torah reading for this coming Shabbat, read every year just before Rosh Hashanah:

And you will return to God your Lord, and you will obey Him, doing everything that I am commanding you today. You and your children [will repent] with all your heart and with all your soul. (Dvarim 30:2)

The verse seems quite clear, yet rabbinic authorities differ in their understanding of its implications. Some of the sages read this verse as a commandment, requiring every Jew to undergo the process of *teshuva* we have described. This approach focuses on the first word of the verse, "*ve-shavta*", 'and you will return', and disregards the larger narrative context in which it appears. Other rabbinic authorities, reading the verse in context, understand it as a description of a time in the future when terrible things befall the Jewish people, and they return to God.

In this vein, we find an intriguing formulation in the writings of Maimonides. While apparently sidestepping the debate regarding *teshuva* as a commandment, Maimonides' thoughts on this verse may be an even more powerful statement:

...The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of the exile, and will be redeemed immediately, as stated [in the verse]: "There shall come a time when [you will experience] all these things... and you will return to God, your Lord..." (Maimonides, Mishne Torah: Laws of Teshuva 7:5)

For Maimonides, *teshuva* is not just a good idea and sound spiritual accounting; it is the

destiny of the Jewish People. This is our future, a glorious national renaissance in which the individuals that comprise the Jewish nation move closer to God and mend their ways. It is the culmination of our history, the light at the end of the tunnel of millennia of suffering and existential struggle.

In a sense, the belief in this glorious future is in actuality a belief in the Jewish People. It is a belief that, as a collective, we have the spiritual sensitivity, intelligence, fortitude and acumen to make the right decisions. It is the belief that each and every Jew has the power to move the nation as a whole in a positive direction. With this understanding, debating whether or not *teshuvah* is a commandment becomes irrelevant; in this time of heightened awareness, people will undergo the process of repentance solely because it is sound spiritual advice. Whether or not it is required of us, we will be eager to fix the past and recalibrate our souls. We will not need to be commanded to take advantage of an opportunity for our debts to be erased, our spiritual books to be balanced.

Following Maimonides' formulation, the gathering of Jews in synagogues on the High Holy Days may be seen as a microcosm of the messianic age. When houses of prayer fill to capacity, when we feel the unprecedented pull of Jewish souls gravitating towards God, there is more than just guilt at play. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in the verse in Parshat Nitzavim, the expression of the great spiritual renaissance that is part and parcel of Jewish destiny.

May this holiday season be a harbinger of the messianic age, releasing us all from our spiritual debts and uplifting us to the great spiritual heights of which we are capable.



## Why Judaism?

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and God.

Their parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, "We will do and obey all that God has declared" (Ex. 24:7). But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation *and all future generations* will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, "God made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound." That is why Moses says:

It is *not with you alone* that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the LORD our God, and *with whoever is not here* with us today. (Deut. 29:13-14)

"Whoever is not here" cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means "generations not yet born." That is why the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai*, "foresworn from Sinai." <sup>1</sup>

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A bat or bar mitzvah is not a "confirmation." It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "It is *not with you alone* that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... *whoever is not here* with us today," meaning all future generations.

But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we

bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents - most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today's parsha. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born.<sup>2</sup> However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since God's covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to God?<sup>3</sup>

But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us can we give our consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: why be Jewish? What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before?

Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, "Why be Jewish?" did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

In fifteenth century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its Kristallnacht in 1391, and from then on until the expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*.<sup>4</sup> But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19).

*Choose* life. No religion, no civilization, has

insisted so strenuously and consistently that *we can choose*. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.<sup>5</sup> We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients with their belief in fate, fortune, *moira*, *ananke*, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature, did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says No. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct - what Freud took to be the mark of civilization? Can you practise self control - according to the "marshmallow test," the surest sign of future success in life? To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives. "We *have* to be free," said Isaac Bashevis Singer, "We have no choice!"

*Choose life*. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after

death, or the soul in unbroken communion with God, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find God down here on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks, not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

It does not deny pleasure. Judaism is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find God not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study and acts of kindness, in community, hospitality and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on whom God has set his image and likeness. We are the people God has chosen to be his partners in the work of

creation. We are the nation God married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people God called on to be his witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth.

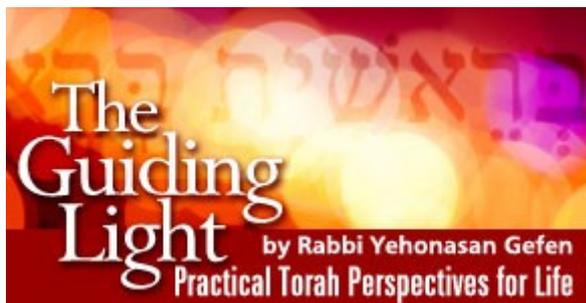
We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because God values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

*Choose life.* Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that "Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath ... but also with those who are not with us today." His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much greater than ourselves we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life.

1. Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a.
2. Shavuot 39a.
3. Isaac Arama, *Akedat Yitzhak*, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim.
4. Published in Britain as *Radical then, Radical now*.
5. Hilkhot Teshuvah 5:2.
6. Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, Bantam Press, 2014.



## Repentance from Love

In this week's Torah portion the Torah tells us: "For this mitzvah that I command you today is not hidden from you and is not distant. It is not in the heavens for you to say 'Who can ascend to the heavens for us and take it for us and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?' Nor is it across the sea for you to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?'"<sup>1</sup>

There is a major dispute as to what the word 'mitzvah' refers to: Rashi explains that it alludes to the whole Torah. However, the Ramban and Seforno explain that it is going on the mitzvah of teshuva (repentance).

The Netsiv<sup>2</sup> agrees that the Torah is referring to teshuva but he understands, based on his reading of the verses, that the Torah is referring to teshuva m'ahavah in particular – repentance from love – this is a far higher form of teshuva than *teshuva*

*m'yirah* – repentance from fear. Based on this reading, the Torah is teaching that repentance from love is easily attainable.

This begs the obvious question that repentance from love would seem to be very difficult, so how can the Torah suggest that it can be accomplished with ease? An additional question is that the way one comes to love a person is to get to know them. When a person loves another person, it is because the first person knows what the second person is all about. People appreciate and understand each other to the point that they develop a strong attachment. The problem is that truly understanding God is beyond our ability. So how do we come to love Him and how can we come back to him out of "love?" And again, why is this so easy?

The Netziv answers by referring to the Kabbalistic idea that Israel and the Holy One, Blessed Be He, are one. This means that a Jew and God are intrinsically connected even without any actual knowledge of each other. The most relatable example of this is a parent to a child: A parent can love a child even if he does not know him and even if he never sees him. The first time that they meet, they will be immediately drawn to one another, after even the slightest introduction. The natural connection between parent and child bridges any gap that may exist.

Rabbi Yissachar Frand tells over a dramatic story in this vein:

There was a 49-year-old adopted woman in California, whose adoptive parents told her that

she originally came from Israel. The woman had always noticed she looked different than her parents. It was obvious that they were not her natural parents. She began to investigate her background. At about the same time, an Israeli journalist was doing an investigative article on a scandal involving Moroccan Jews who first arrived in Israel in the early 1950s.

Many Moroccan mothers, who could not speak the language well and did not have any connections in the country, were told that their children died during childbirth. In actuality, these children were stolen and sold for adoption, both in Israel and overseas. The woman from California traveled to Israel and met with the investigative reporter. They uncovered certain documents, and went back to the hospital where she was born. To make a very long story short, DNA testing enabled the woman to find her Moroccan mother — who had been told that her child had died shortly after delivery, 49 years earlier.

As Rabbi Frand explains, these were two women who came from completely different cultures. They had nothing to do with each other for nearly five decades, for almost the entire lifetime of the daughter. When they met for the first time, they fell into each other's arms and began kissing each other and crying uncontrollably. The mother did not know the daughter, and the daughter did not know the mother. They did not know

each other's language and could not even communicate except through their tears and their kisses and their hugs. Why did they react this way? They reacted this way because this was a mother and her daughter.

This is what the Netsiv is saying - a father and son - even if they never met one another - nevertheless, when they do meet, are drawn to one another after the slightest introduction, because it is part of nature that they are connected.

The Netsiv also discusses how each Jew connects to God through the medium of Torah in particular. It seems that just as there is an intrinsic connection between a Jew and God, the same applies between a Jew and the Torah, which is the way to connect to God. This is borne out by the saying of the Sages that teaches that a fetus in the womb is taught the entire Torah, and before it is born, an Angel strikes it above the nose and causes it to forget the Torah. However, the Torah does not leave the person, rather it goes deep inside him. His job in life is to learn Torah through hard work, but he has the natural connection to the Torah he learns, because it deep in his soul. Rabbi Noach Weinberg used to explain, based on this Gemara, that every Jew knows deep down the truth of Torah, so when he hears the truth, he will intrinsically connect to it even if the values that he was brought up with, totally contradict the Torah he is now hearing.

Thus, we see that teshuva and Torah are both 'easily' attained because of every Jew's inherent connection to God and His

Torah. Our job in this time of year is to try to tap into this natural connection, which may require removing layers of spiritual dirt that block the connection, but they never totally sever it. May we all merit to return to God and His Torah.

1. *Devarim, 30:11-13.*
2. *Emek Dvar, Ibid.* Cited by Rav Yissachar Frand, *shlit'a.*

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