Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Re'eh |

Choose Life

Making Choices

Right in the first *possuk* of this week's parsha the Torah teaches us an important lesson. ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה - *See that I have placed before you today bracha and its opposite etc.* Hashem is telling us that he has given us two options, and it is up to us to choose which one we want. Later in Parshas Nitzavim we have a similar *possuk* ראה נתתי לפניכם היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע ובחרת בחיים - *See that I have placed before you today life and goodness, death and evil... Choose life!*

Our power of choice is what makes us different from animals. The *possuk* says מותר אדם מן הבהמה אין… "Man has 'no superiority' over animals", the *seforim* say as follows: The superiority of man over an animal is *the ability to say no*.

Animals are 'programmed' to do certain things and behave in specific ways; only people have the ability to make choices. The Rambam writes openly that someone who thinks that a person doesn't have the power to choose, is a *kofer*. We need to believe that *we can choose*. Hashem places us in situations with multiple options all the time, and He wants us to choose wisely.

It's About You

It's true that some situations bring out the worst in a person, making it very difficult to choose what's right. (It is also true that we should not judge anyone who is dealing with a difficult situation.) However, for ourselves we must know that a difficult situation doesn't justify a bad decision. At the end of the day, it was our choice.

Very often I hear from people about decisions that they made that had undesirable outcomes. Surprisingly, they don't feel any responsibility for what happens next. A husband described to me how he did various things that drove his wife crazy, and then she went ahead and retaliated in a way that really wrecked their marriage. He looked at his own actions as 'something that just happened', but felt that his wife 'chose' to wreck the marriage. Not so fast. You chose to do what you did and that resulted in a wrecked marriage, which you now have to deal with.

You have to acknowledge that life is about choices, and anything you do is a choice you make. Don't blame the other person, telling him 'it was your choice, you chose to do what you did'. Realize that you also had the opportunity to decide how to proceed; it's all about you and your choices as well.

The Ultimate Choice

One husband wrote a disconcerting, but very powerful, letter to his wife that emphasizes the point that we all have the ability to choose (he gave me permission to publicize it). He writes as follows:

When you accused me of not helping you ever, when actually, I

was – It was your choice to see it that way.

When I offered to drive you to where you needed to go - it was your choice to see it in a bad way, and say that I didn't really want to help.

When you hit me afterwards while I was driving you – it was your choice to do so.

When you decided not to talk to me anymore - it was your choice to do so.

When you later locked me out of the house - it was your choice to do so.

When you then ran away with the kids without telling me where you're going - it was your choice to do so.

Everything that a person does is his own choice. It's your own choice to look at me and my actions in a good way or unfortunately, the opposite.

It's your choice to decide that you want to be alone, and not live with me.

Now it's time for me to make the choice of my life about how I want to proceed. My concern is, and always was, the children that we have, and that is why it is so difficult for me to make this decision. But I think that at this point it would be better for the children to have divorced parents than no parents at all, and I am now making that choice.

This is a very difficult letter to read, and the writer may not be right about what he says. But he brings out this point very clearly; our actions are *our choice*.

No Choice?!

We cannot justify our actions by saying, 'well, I didn't have a choice'. There is no such thing. You may not be able to choose your situation, but you *can* choose your response.

Sometimes it can be very hard to make the right decision, but that difficulty is actually part of the decision itself. You are deciding how much you are willing to invest in that particular matter.

When something is *bein adam lamakom*, between you and Hashem, you are supposed to make the right decision. However, when there is an additional person involved in your decision making, there is an added element of responsibility and accountability.

From Bad To Worse

Chani* was very hurt and upset about something Yehuda* had said to her that morning. Later when Yehuda came home, he found supper on the stove, with Chani hiding resentfully in the bedroom. Subsequently, she defended her choice with the claim that she could really have done something much more unpleasant. 'I could've thrown his supper in the garbage. I actually think that I was being very nice.'

People sometimes justify their decisions with the unreasonable argument that they could have chosen to do something even worse. However, the truth is that to some degree, we are required to make the right choice. When it comes to someone that you are living with, that has done so much for you, that you're married to – you are expected to make the right choice. You should not expect to receive accolades for not doing the wrong thing.

Power to Choose

One technique to help you in making the right choices is to frequently review the idea that you have the power to choose. Tell yourself, 'I have the ability to choose what to do, and I'm choosing to do the right thing'.

Sometimes you are very emotionally involved and it's too hard to choose the right thing on your own; but recognize that a choice lies ahead of you. Turn to a friend or a mentor, tell them what happened, and ask them to guide you in making the correct decision. It can be extremely difficult to make the right choice, and I am not here to criticize, but often people are just looking for validation by a third-party and feel exempt from taking any action or accepting any responsibility (even of Torah obligations). Regardless of the difficulty in your choice; if it is clear to you that you have the power to choose, you will hopefully end up choosing wisely.

The Importance of Choice

In Yesod Ha'emunah, R' Boruch'l Kosover discusses the famous paradox of Hashem's Yediah - his knowledge of all things past and future, and our *bechira*, our ability to choose. One can either believe that Hashem knows everything and as a result man has no power of choice, or he can believe that he has the right to choose, which seems like *kefirah*, contradicting Hashem's absolute knowledge.

He answers based on the possuk הלואי אותי עזבו ותורתי שמרו - *They may abandon Me, as long as they keep My Torah.* It is better

to remain unclear about how Hashem knows everything, and accept the idea that people have *bechira* in keeping the Torah.

If you believe that Hashem knows everything, but you don't have the right to choose, you'll make bad choices. So focus on your power to choose, *at the expense of your emunah,* says R' Boruch'l Kosover. One day you'll understand how this fits in with Hashem's *yediah*. But in the meantime if you can't make peace between the two of them, choose to do the right thing.

Better Choices

There is no question that you are definitely *allowed* to choose either way, as the Torah clearly states. However, you must acknowledge that this is a choice you are making.

The power of a human being, of a yid, is the power of choice. Think about how you can stop blaming other people, the situation, your past, or your upbringing. Instead see where you can slowly start choosing differently, making better choices that will help you and your marriage.

Your spouse also has the right to choose, but that doesn't mean you should blame him/her for bad decisions. Just the opposite, make it easier for them to choose correctly. Understanding the power of choice is also about understanding that you can help someone else to do the right thing

Chinuch: Give Choices

Parents often control their children by telling them, 'This is what I'm telling you to do, This is what will happen'. That is a bad message for them. Those children may grow up resentful, and feel no responsibility for their actions, because they were taught that they did not have any choice about what to do.

It's much healthier to tell a child 'It's your choice, I hope that you will choose wisely'. When he makes good decisions, compliment him, and tell him how proud you are. This will help him develop his power of choice and believe in it, empowering him to make correct choices in the future.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: My son is not doing so well, and he's struggling with certain things. He would like to ride his bike from Williamsburg to Borough Park at night for a *simcha*, but I prefer that he shouldn't. However, I know that if I tell him not to, he will probably do it anyway.

Answer: When you're dealing with a child who feels choked and resentful, it is usually a little bit silly to try to force him to do what you want. Very often it's 'saying no' and controlling that is actually making things so hard. Not allowing him to do what he wants might just cause him to do something worse next time – *without telling you*.

Of course children are supposed to listen to their parents, but their parents have to understand what a child can handle. Sometimes a child doesn't listen anymore simply as a result of being told "No" too many times.

At the same time, you don't have to encourage whatever he decides to do, telling him, 'go ahead with my blessings'. That can end up with him feeling that he controls you, which will be very bad for him and for your future chinuch.

Just tell him that if he feels that it's okay, you'll trust his decision. Explain to him that you will be very worried about him riding his bike on the highway at night, but you'll allow him to choose what he thinks is the right thing to do.

By talking about how you feel, and not telling him what he has to do, you minimize his resistance to your opinion. This actually gives you the best chances of him understanding you, and willingly doing what you want. You may even end up being able to thank him for being considerate of your feelings, making you a winner on all sides.

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail rabbigruen@lehair.org
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