

Therefore, Choose Life!

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Parashat Nitzavim contains a well-known *pasuk* (verse) that is very timely in the final days before Rosh Hashanah: “This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses [that I have warned] you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live.” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:19, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Tanach Complete Tanach*) As Rosh Hashanah approaches, we look back upon the past year and reflect upon the many changes that life has wrought. These thoughts naturally lead us to focus upon the meaning of the phrase: “You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live.”

Rashi (1040-1105), suggests the following interpretation:

[G-d says: “Even though you have free choice [nevertheless,] I instruct you to choose the portion of life.” It is like a man who says to his son, “Choose for yourself a fine portion of my estate,” and then directs him to the best portion, saying to him, “This [is the portion which] you should choose for yourself!” And regarding this, the verse says, “The L-rd is my allotted portion and my cup; You guide my destiny” (*Sefer Tehillim* 16:5).

One of the key elements found herein is the idea of free will. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) emphasized the singular import of this concept and devoted chapters five and six of *Hilchot Teshuvah* to its explication:

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and mitzvot as [*Sefer Devarim* 30:15] states: “Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil].” Similarly, [*Sefer Devarim* 11:26] states, “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse],” suggesting that the choice is in your hands. Any one of the deeds of men that a person desires to do, he may do, whether good or evil. Therefore, [*Sefer Devarim* 5:26] states: “If only their hearts would always remain this way.” From this, we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice]. (5:3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations)

Hashem wants us to choose the proper path of Torah observance upon which to tread. As the Rambam makes quite clear, nothing stands in our way. The choice to pursue that which is good and righteous or, G-d forbid, the opposite course is totally within our control. “...the Creator does not force or decree upon anybody to do good or bad, but lets them choose.” Yes, we will almost inevitably make mistakes. Nonetheless, if we begin our journey during the upcoming year with the proper attitude and orientation, if we dedicate ourselves to studying and living according to the Torah and the interpretations of our rabbis, we stand a much better chance of strengthening ourselves in precisely those areas that are crucial for “choosing life” for ourselves and our families.

The waning days of Elul are the time for us to ask ourselves life’s “big questions.” Perhaps the biggest of all of these queries is “What is life?” This is the question that has captivated introspective thinkers, philosophers, and theologians since time immemorial. In many ways, as well, this is the question that speaks to the center of our very being. Little wonder, then, that it has been answered in myriad ways throughout the course of man’s journey through time. Since each civilization, society, and religion has had its own unique response, we must look to the Torah and its Sages for the authoritative answer to such a central and fundamental question.

One source that can serve as an authentic guide is the *Siddur* (Prayer Book). On a daily basis, it helps us chart a course through the waters of confusion and grapple with the question, “What is life?” The *birchat hachodesh* (monthly prayer announcing *Rosh Chodesh*, the new Jewish month) provides us with clear thoughts as to how to understand “life” according to our holy Torah. Therein we beseech Hashem for a month filled with goodness and blessing. Specifically, we request the following:

- A life of peace
- A life of goodness
- A life of blessing
- A life of sustenance
- A life of physical health
- A life in which there is fear of heaven and fear of sin
- A life in which there is no shame nor humiliation
- A life of wealth and honor
- A life in which we will have love of Torah and fear of heaven
- A life in which our heartfelt requests will be fulfilled for the good (text based upon the *Artscroll Siddur*).

Life, as presented in this prayer, is like a diamond. It is comprised of many facets that are themselves composed of the multitude of our physical and spiritual needs. In addition, and in many ways, our relationship with Hashem emerges as the single most important aspect of our lives. This *bracha* teaches us quite clearly that everything in our lives stems directly from *chasdei Hashem* (Hashem’s kindness).

Yet, how can we hope to receive the blessings found in the *birchat hachodesh*? How can we achieve the closeness with Hashem that we so desperately need? How can we communicate with our Creator so that we will be able to enter into a genuine I - Thou relationship? Fortunately, the Torah answers these questions in the very next verse, after

we are urged to choose life: “To love the L-rd your G-d, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him. For that is your life and the length of your days, to dwell on the land which the L-rd swore to your forefathers to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob to give to them.” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:20) In many ways, this *pasuk* emerges as a synopsis of our obligations toward our Creator: We must love Him, we must listen to His voice, and we must cleave to Him. The Seforno (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaakov, 1470-1550) explains what we must do in order to cleave to Hashem: “that all of your deeds should be in His name.” In other words, all our actions, from the most mundane to the most sublime, must have one essential purpose: to completely dedicate ourselves to Hashem and bring honor to His name.

May we have the wisdom and vision to dedicate our lives to the service of Hashem. In turn, may we be the recipients of His unbounded kindness, so that our lives will be replete with all of the blessings of the *birchat hachodesh*. May we all, therefore, choose life!

Shabbat Shalom

Shanah tovah u'metukah

Tizku l'shanim rabot

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