

NITZAVIM (DEUTERONOMY 29:9-31:30)

Decisions, Decisions

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

(This week's message is dedicated to the memories of the innocent victims who perished last year on the 23rd of Elul -- September 11, and in honor of the brave men and women who extended superhuman efforts to save them.)

Not every choice is an easy one. But some are easier than others. "Would you like some asparagus, or would you rather have ice cream?"

"Should we go to the baseball game, or should we visit your mother-in-law?"

"Do you want 100 coins with Lincoln's picture on them, or would you prefer 100 coins with Kennedy's picture on them?"

In a similar vein, the Torah, in the first of this week's two Torah Readings, gives two options that seem to be a "no-brainer:"

"I have placed life and death before you...choose life. (Deuteronomy, 30:19)

Tough choice! Rabbi Eliezer Shach, of Blessed Memory, asked why the Torah gives us this advice. Isn't it obvious that we should choose life? Would a sane person even consider choosing otherwise?

Before I get to Rabbi Shach's answer, let us look at this week's second Torah Portion.

It was the last day of Moses' life. *"I am 120 years old today; I am no longer permitted (by G-d; healthwise he was fine -- Rashi) to go out and come in...G-d has said to me, 'you will not cross this Jordan.'"* (Ibid. 31:2)

The Talmud describes how Moses had fought tooth and nail against this decree. Moses begged G-d to allow him to enter the Land of Israel. He desperately wanted to share in the great holiness of the Land. Moses understood that there are certain Mitzvahs that can only be fulfilled in the Holy Land; he wanted to participate in the spiritually uplifting experience of living in the land that G-d had promised to our People.

G-d explained to him that his term as leader of Israel had expired; it was time for his student Joshua to lead. "So let me become his student," said Moses.

"Fine," replied G-d. "Give it a try."

Moses soon discovered that he was unable to understand Joshua's lectures. Then, he observed his former student receiving a prophecy from G-d, and he felt a tinge of jealousy. That instantly changed everything:

"Better a hundred deaths than this envy! ... Master of the World, until now I asked you to let me live. Now, my soul is Yours to take!"

What caused Moses to change his mind? Throughout his life, he tenaciously argued with G-d whenever the need arose. He wasn't reluctant to debate the Master of the World if he felt that the future of Israel was at stake. He so very much wanted the opportunity to live in Israel and to observe the functioning of the Temple in Jerusalem. Why did he give up?

Moses did not want to live just for the sake of living. He wanted to continue to grow spiritually. He wanted to use every opportunity to get closer to G-d and His Torah.

He now saw that his ability to study Torah had been taken from him. He now saw that this situation would cause him to become jealous of another human being. Jealousy is an unacceptable characteristic. Moses refused to allow himself to be envious of another person. He now understood that it was time for him to leave. Once it became clear that his continued life would be a physical continuation, without the ability to grow spiritually, he saw that there was no longer a point in continuing. That is when he accepted G-d's decree.

Back to Rabbi Shach's question: Why does the Torah need to advise us to make the obvious choice of life, rather than death?

Rabbi Shach observes that a person can live a long pleasant life of luxuries and enjoyment, without realizing that from the moment of his first breath, he has begun to die. A life can be pleasant, but totally without values and meaning. Conversely, a person can live a life of poor health and financial adversity, yet invest his every day with spirituality and holiness.

Rabbi Shach states that someone who recognizes his obligations in the world can reach a particular age with the realization that he has in his hands ____ number of years of accomplishment. One who lacks this understanding knows only how many years have passed since his birth. (It's interesting to note that Rabbi Shach, who passed away last year, lived to the age of 107!!)

This Saturday, the 23rd day of the month of Elul, marks the first *Yahrtzeit* of the victims of the worst act of terrorism in U.S. history. Our misguided enemies believed that the purpose of their lives was to snuff out as many innocent lives as possible. These murderers lived a life that was clearly not worth living. They

wasted the divine spark that is infused into every human being. They began to die the moment they were born.

Others were heroes. Many people risked their lives to escort others to safety. Many good people lost their lives in the process. Such people were agents of G-d; such people live on forever.

When a righteous person leaves the world, he does so with the knowledge that he takes his good deeds with him to the next world. Such a person lives on well past the limits of his physical body's ability to function.

When the Torah tells us "Choose Life," it is telling us to carefully examine life's opportunities and challenges. It is telling us to choose to live a life that is worth living.

Have a great Shabbos

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