

HA'AZINU

BEYOND BECHIRA

A

Consistency and Dependability

This week's *parsha* begins with Moshe's appeal to the heaven and earth. "*Haazinu ha'shamayim va'adabera v'sishma ha'aretz imrei fi*. Let the heavens hear as I speak and let the land listen to the utterances of my mouth." Rashi cites the Sifri that writes: Hashem told Moshe to tell the Jewish people, "Look at the sky and land that I have created to serve you. Have they ever changed their ways? This is a *kal va'chomer* that should persuade you. These things never change. They never receive reward and are never punished, and they don't have children to worry about. They consistently do God's will. You, though, do get rewarded for doing good things. And if you would do bad, you would get punished. You also have children to worry about. Shouldn't you also consistently do the *mitzvos* without changing?"

At the beginning of his speech, Moshe addressed heaven and earth because he wanted the nation to consider the character of the two. He wanted us to think that heaven and earth never deviate from their assigned functions and they continuously do what they do.

The question, though, is obvious. Heaven and earth are programmed. The laws of nature are immutable because they have

no way of changing. People, though, have choice. We've been given the gift of choice by God. How could Hashem tell us that we should be as unchangeable as heaven and earth? For us, the consequences are much more severe. If a person makes a bad choice, the punishment is terrible. If a person makes a good choice, the reward is immense. But heaven and earth have no choice. There is no *kal va'chomer*. You can't compare heaven and earth to people. People do have free choice, and we do change.

If heaven and earth would have choice, and nonetheless they would choose not to change—despite not receiving reward—then it would be a good *kal va'chomer*. Then a person—who will receive reward—should also choose properly to do what's right. But heaven and earth have no choice. The sun must rise and must set. The ground must grow grass. What does this have to do with people?

B

First Choice

Shem Mishmuel has an interesting discussion about the gift of *bechira chofshis*. Hashem gave all people the power to choose, particularly between good and evil. Was it always this way?

The first people, Adam and Chava, were placed in Gan Eden. From the Torah it seems that Hashem's original plan was that they would not eat from the Tree of Knowledge and would stay in the garden forever. In that idyllic situation, were they supposed to make choices? Did they have *bechira chofshis* before they ate from the Eitz Hada'as? At first glance, one might think that they did have choices. After all, Hashem commanded them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and they did choose to eat from the tree. They clearly had the power to choose whether or not they would listen to Hashem.

Shem Mishmuel suggests another understanding. Maybe Hashem created them with limited choice. Adam and Chava only

had free choice to choose whether or not to eat from the tree. But their choices in other areas were, in fact, limited. Aside from the Tree of Knowledge, they were not able to choose evil.

In our times, our free will is also limited in a sense. For example, a person cannot choose to fly on his own. Our tradition tells us that angels do not have free will. They have great intelligence, but they cannot choose to do evil. Angels can only do good. A human being, though, is given the freedom to do good and bad. Were Adam and Chava originally created with choice? Did they experience other challenges in which they had to make choices between good and evil?

C

Clear Choices

Regarding the era of Mashiach, the *mefarshim* disagree. The Ramban in Parshas Nitzavim writes that when Mashiach comes, the world will enter a new and different stage, the messianic era. Hashem will remove the choice to do evil. People will naturally avoid evil, just like a person knows he can't fly and therefore won't try. People will feel that it is impossible for them to do evil. It won't be part of their nature at all to have any temptations. They will be so repulsed and disgusted by the prospect of doing evil, it would be as appealing as eating someone else's vomit. The 613 *mitzvos* that we work hard to follow now will no longer challenge us once we are in the messianic era. We will be like Adam was before he sinned. *Bechira chofshis* will change.

The Rambam strongly disagrees. He writes that people will still have a *yeitzer hara* and will have to decide between good and evil. However, the environment will be positive and conducive to choosing good. People will know about Hashem and accept Him, and there will be peace among us. *Bechira chofshis* will remain but will be less of a challenge.

Regarding Adam and Chava, though, Ramban says clearly that they originally did not have a tendency to do evil, excluding that one area of the Eitz Hada'as. However, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 56) says that Adam was given several of the seven *mitzvos bnei Noach*. (He wasn't allowed to eat animal meat at all, so he was not prohibited from eating *eiver min hachai*, the seventh *mitzva*.) So how would Ramban explain these *mitzvos*? If a person doesn't have a challenge, how could he have a *mitzva* or *aveira*? The very existence of a command implies the ability to defy it. And if a person wouldn't have the ability to defy the *mitzva*, how could he get credit for performing the *mitzva* when, essentially, he is merely acting as programmed?

For example, the human stomach is programmed to digest food. A person does not choose whether or not to digest his food. Therefore, digesting food cannot be a *mitzva*. To eat could be a *mitzva* because I can choose not to eat. If Adam was commanded not to do idolatry or murder or have inappropriate relationships, doesn't this imply he had the ability to choose these actions?

D

Moving Beyond Choice

Shem Mishmuel teaches an interesting theory about the question of choice. Generally, people have choice. We face challenges and options and choose among them. Doing something one way is a *mitzva*; the other way is an *aveira*. For example, if I see someone left some money in the room, I have several options. If I would steal the money, I would commit an *aveira*. If I would leave the money there, I would perform a *mitzva*. I feel a temptation to take it because I would like more money. But the reason to leave it there is that I have loyalty to God or to people. I have an ethical sense. The *bechira* question in this case is: should I follow my ethical sense, or should I give into my desire to have more money in my

pocket? Hopefully, we would always choose to leave the money. This is a typical example of *bechira*. It is rooted in the idea that the person feels a pull to do the *aveira*.

Shem Mishmuel points out that if I feel no pull at all to an *aveira* and it is completely meaningless to me, then we do not consider this a choice. It might be that I am so well trained to respect other people's money, it doesn't even occur to me that I could take it. Why would I want to take something that doesn't belong to me? Many religious Jews often see gentiles eating non-kosher food. However, most of us have no temptation to eat non-kosher. Ham and eggs and bacon don't appeal to us. They simply do not tempt us, and so it's not a question of choice.

If we would develop our religious sensitivity properly in all 613 areas, then we wouldn't have to make choices. It would be so obvious that we would have to do the right thing, just like I don't feel any draw to eat the bacon or the *treif* pizza in the local shops. The same would apply to any *mitzva* or *aveira* in the Torah. If I developed a proper sensitivity, I would only do *mitzvos* and not even consider *aveiros*. The evil side wouldn't even exist for me.

If a person would focus on the potentially horrendous punishments that could come to him or her in hell for doing an *aveira*, it wouldn't be possible for him to do it. For many centuries, Jews had *magidim*, traveling preachers who would speak graphically about what it means to be in hell and all the suffering there. It really scared people then and it kept them in line. Would a person be tempted to stick his hand into a fire? No way. If hell has burning fires like that, no person would choose to enter into that situation.

Today, we are not motivated so much by this kind of talk. Hell is something that we choose not to think about. It is too frightening and stressful; we don't want to deal with it. This is a choice. If I choose not think about the suffering of sinners in hell, I now have temptation. The fires don't exist in my mind. Now I have to make a choice between good and evil. This is a graphic way of presenting this idea.

Training Not to Choose

There are many things that a person could think about and work on to achieve a level of self-perfection, a point at which he would be left with no choice but to do good.

The Gemara says that every morning Dovid Hamelech would wake up and *daven shacharis*. He planned to deal with matters of state immediately after *davening*. But invariably, as he walked to the royal chambers, he found himself in the *beis midrash*. Without even thinking about it, Dovid had a natural instinct to go study Torah. He didn't have to make a choice anymore. This was simply the way he functioned. Consider a person who gets used to *davening shacharis* for forty-five minutes. He simply can't pray in just fifteen minutes. Getting to that point involves time, training, and making the right decisions. But after that, you can turn on autopilot. That is how Dovid wound up in the *beis midrash* every morning.

Most of us do function on autopilot when we eat only kosher. For people who are used to keeping Shabbos, we are not tempted to turn on lights or electronics on Shabbos.

You can, and we do, reach the levels that the Ramban is talking about, in many areas. I am not challenged by that evil side because it is so beyond me that I can't even think of myself doing that. We become angels in this sense. This is a very interesting phenomenon. If a person allows the temptation to be there, then he or she is presented with a choice. The Torah tells us, "You should choose good." *U'bacharta ba'chayim*. However, when there is no inclination to choose evil because there is no temptation, then people will do the right thing. But you cannot call that a choice. It is an instinctive way of living. A person who does not feel temptation will do the right thing, whether it's keeping kosher or Shabbos, or being honest. This is beyond *bechira*, beyond the level of choosing

to do good. We can choose to have a choice. We can also choose to move beyond choice.

F

Two-Stage Process

We can say that this is really what was going on with Adam. Ramban says Adam didn't have a choice; Rambam says he did. Adam had six *mitzvos*. Did he or didn't he have a choice?

There are two separate stages in this kind of personal growth. The first is when we learn a skill or a commit to a certain value. Consider a person who is beginning to keep kosher or Shabbos. Consider someone *frum* who recently married and is learning how to be a good wife or husband. At the beginning, they have to make good choices. Imagine that one spouse does something the other is not used to. How will you react? Will you get upset? Will you stay positive? At first, it is a matter of making the right choice. You do so and continue. This is during the first or second year. But when people have been married for thirty-five years, they are beyond that. It's not an issue of deciding to deal with their spouse in a certain special way. We have dealt with this already and achieved a positive way of dealing with this situation—each spouse recognizes the other's strengths and weaknesses, and they work together as a team. It becomes expected, and not a matter of choice.

Many situations of Torah and *mitzvos* go through these two stages. The first is a *bechira* stage, in which a person may be tempted to make bad decisions. In stage two, after the person has made the good decision many times, it becomes ingrained as part of his character. At this stage, it is obvious that he or she will make the right choice each time. In a sense, stage one is real *bechira chofshis*, real challenge and decision-making. Stage two is an automatic process, beyond *bechira*, when the person functions like

a programmed angel. This only develops as a result of the person programming himself to reach the level of automation. It becomes part of who the person is. When Dovid Hamelech started his day, he naturally and automatically walked to the *beis midrash*. That is where his legs walked, without an explicit decision.

How do we start? We begin our religious development at stage one. We have the challenges. We need to make the right choices and go through the process of self-perfection. Eventually we want to reach the level at which we are beyond choice and will always do the right thing.

G

The Snake's Bad Advice

Adam, experienced these two stages, as will all people after Mashiach comes. But, Shem Mishmuel says, instead of the present first-stage *bechira* leading to post-*bechira*, the order will be reversed.

Adam in Gan Eden experienced the reversed order. He started with a powerful instinct to do good. He was not tempted by evil at all in his six *mitzvos*. There was so much godliness in his daily experience. He spoke to Hashem, he lived in the Garden of Eden imbued with Hashem's presence everywhere, even in every leaf. While he had the power of choice, Adam was instinctively driven towards good and did not have to struggle with evil.

But then the *nachash* came to Chava and spoke to her about the tree. In the first few lines of their conversation, Chava does not appear to feel any temptation for the tree. Then the snake told her, "If you eat from the tree you will be like Hashem. Wouldn't you like to be like Hashem?" The next *pasuk* then says that she looks at the tree and she felt a strong desire for its fruit.

Shem Mishmuel says at that point she left the awareness of God that had protected her and Adam from temptation until then. Once she and Adam spoke to the snake, they switched mindsets,

substituting the *da'as* of the snake for the *da'as* of Hashem. Instead of rejecting the snake's claim, Adam and Chava started to consider the tree. They adopted the awareness of the *nachash*. Once they made the decision to block out the total awareness of Hashem and introduced the awareness of other things, they dropped from stage two (above choice) back into stage one. They decided not to have the instinctive, automated decision-making process to do good. They left that level and, following the snake's advice, they lowered themselves to the level of choice where they could feel temptation. They chose to make decisions, they chose to choose.

Once they began to consider the arguments of the snake, they thought that maybe the snake had a point. God never told them that eating from the tree could be a *mitzva*. This was a totally new theory. They wondered, "Maybe we should be like Hashem, and Hashem will agree with us." When Adam and Chava decided to consider the snake's ideas, they moved into the level of *bechira*. They made the wrong choice. They regressed from stage two to stage one.

H

Messianic Choices

In the days of the messiah, we won't be angels. Ramban's opinion that there will be no *mitzvos* is a very difficult opinion. The Rambam agrees that our instinct will be to do good. We will not be tempted by the foolishness of this world. We will see God everywhere. How could you think of going against your Creator Who gives you blessings in so many ways in all areas of your life? But we can choose to pull our awareness away from Hashem. And then we would regress to stage one. The only temptation will be to remove ourselves from the tremendous awareness of Hashem, which will drive us to do His *mitzvos* with love.

Shem Mishmuel's analysis here is extremely powerful and resolves many questions.

I

The Heavens and Earth

Now we return to our original problem. Moshe told Bnei Yisrael to take a lesson from heaven and earth. Heaven and earth follow God's will without rebelling, and they get no reward, so we should also follow God's will. But heaven and earth don't have temptation! They have no choice. What is this *kal va'chomer*?

But now we understand that we can make a decision to move beyond temptation. We can become like heaven and earth. A human being like Dovid developed himself to the point that he had no choice but to go to the *beis midrash*. We, too, can have no choice. We have the power to move beyond choice. We can become like angels and not have to worry about making bad choices.

How can we get there? How can I use my heart, mind, and body to go beyond choice? It is possible and has been done. We are already doing it in many areas. We won't need to be stuck with *bechira*. This is the *kal va'chomer*. Moshe said, "Why must you stay at the level of *bechira*? Train yourselves so that you will automatically do the right thing, just like heaven and earth. You don't need to constantly struggle and worry about making the wrong choices. Be like heaven and earth. You can go beyond the struggle. You have a good reason, and you will receive *s'char* for going beyond choice." Even though Dovid had no choice but to walk to the *beis midrash*, he received reward because he got there through exercising his choice. Every time we walk down the street and don't feel the pull to non-kosher food, we get reward, since being beyond choice is a product of the exercise of our choices.

If a person would decide like Adam, God forbid, to forget about Hashem and put himself into temptation, he would be

punished for that. Don't say, "I need a challenge." You are beyond challenge. You should be like heaven and earth, go beyond choice.

J

Snake's Advice

This, of course, is an ideal, and not so easy to achieve. For people who were born *frum*, there is no question of choice in some areas, but other areas are difficult. For example, a gay lifestyle was never an issue for Jews. Avoiding it was so deeply ingrained in the culture of Jews of Europe and North Africa. They had proper relationships between men and women. But, today, in some places it has become a question of choice. This is a *yeridas hadoros*. We went from being instinctively good at it to having some circles in which people have to make a choice in this regard. Now, even though we have gone down, we still need to make the right choices.

Four hundred or 500 years ago, practically all Jews kept Shabbos. But then Shabbos became a matter of choice. It is sad when good things that were taken for granted become controversial issues that require people to make choices. Unfortunately, most of the things I am thinking of I don't want to discuss now. God's Will used to be obvious and now we have issues, controversies, and problems—and many choices.

Shem Mishmuel is telling us that the goal is to go beyond the choice. Make the choice not to have the choice.

This is often a question of environment. A young person has to make a choice about going to college. Pick a Jewish college, a *frum* college. How could someone say, "I will go to a regular university"? It is a place of temptation and will require many choices. So, go beyond choice, choose the higher level. Why go to a school where they give tests on Shabbos? Why do you need to be tempted with a gentile girl sitting next to you in class? You can be in a men's or women's college. Why go into a co-ed, non-Jewish university,

when you can choose a school that offers you a spiritually safe environment? The same thought process applies for our jobs, and the neighborhoods where we live. Choose a neighborhood where many religious people live. Of course, some people have logic for why they want to live in a place with fewer Jews. But you should be in a religious neighborhood. Your neighbors will strengthen you and your children.

Some of the *meforshim* say this was the advice of the snake. “You don’t have enough temptations,” said the snake to Chava. “Put the evil inside of you, so you will experience temptation, and your service to God will be greater.” This is not true. Life has enough challenges. God will send you the ones that you need. In the meantime, choose a conducive, supportive, and strengthening environment. Let your legs take you to the *beis midrash*.

Go beyond choice. If you are in a situation of choice, work on yourself so you can reach a level beyond choice. Be like Adam before the sin, like the world after Mashiach, where your world will support your choices.

Every person has challenges. Even Moshe Rabbeinu at his level had challenges. Let yourself struggle with the higher-level challenges. And let the lower-level challenges disappear so we can continue to grow. Our goal can be to make ourselves like heaven and earth, which is to do what is right because it is right, not because we make a choice.

May we serve Hashem at every level, both with our *bechira* and beyond *bechira*.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Did Adam have choice in Gan Eden?
2. What are the two levels of choice between good and evil?
3. Explain how these two levels worked for Adam.
4. Explain how these two levels work for us.
5. List three areas in which you are at level two of choice.
6. List three areas where you are at level one of choice.

EXERCISES

1. Develop a program to go from level one to level two in one area of choice you have.
2. Follow the program for six months.
3. Did you succeed in moving from level one to level two?

