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אור ישראל

Living Life Deeper

PARSHAS
VA'EIRA

BY RABBI NETANEL NAAMAT
RABBI NAFTALI ZIONS
RABBI AVICHAI BENSOUSSAN

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Before Moshe met with Pharaoh and threatened to bring the *Makkos*, Hashem informed Moshe that He will 'harden Pharaoh's heart' to the terrible toll of the *Makkos*, not allowing Pharaoh to free the Jewish people.¹

The idea that Hashem will 'harden Pharaoh's heart' is difficult to understand. If Pharaoh wanted to allow the *Bnei Yisrael* to leave but was unable to free them, why is Pharaoh punished for being obstinate?

The Ramban² explains that Hashem was not taking away Pharaoh's ability to choose, rather, He was preserving it! The *Makkos* were overwhelming, a challenge that that no normal person would be able to withstand. In the face of the *Makkos*, there was no doubt that Pharaoh would concede, and allow the Jewish people to leave. However, it would not have been his choice - the fury of the *Makkos* would have forced his choice. Therefore, Hashem had to 'harden his heart,' balancing out the effect of the *Makkos*, and returning Pharaoh's ability to choose.

This explanation is mystifying - why bother allowing Pharaoh free will at this point? Pharaoh was thoroughly evil, enslaving the Jewish nation and inflicting terrible horrors on the men, women, and children. Why not allow the *Makkos* to force Pharaoh to make his decision, thus giving the *Bnei Yisrael* their freedom?

The answer lies in the purpose of our existence. We are on this planet solely to serve Hashem. In essence, that means that we need to make choices, big and small, that will further the goal of *Avodas Hashem*. Alone among all creations, mankind was given the ability to make moral choices, whether to do good or evil. If a person's ability to choose between good or evil were taken away, they would effectively lose their humanity. Therefore, despite reasons to the contrary, it was important that Pharaoh retain his ability to choose to serve Hashem, as this is the entire reason for anyone to exist.

Hashem assigns so much value to our ability to choose, because it's the only way for us to come close to Him. We are given countless opportunities on a daily basis to use our free will, the greatest gift given to us. Let us choose wisely.

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Mind the Gap - Taking the Next Step

Our ability to choose is not something that we need to work on - it's something that Hashem has given us as a gift. However, our ability to choose wisely certainly is something that we should work on. But how does one do exactly that?

One idea is to appreciate our ability to choose between good and evil. This is something special and not to be taken lightly. Every choice of ours, big or small, uses this 'special power.'

We can apply this appreciation to the 'small' decisions - should I leave the last cookie over for my brother? Should I do my homework now, and play afterwards? Maybe I should get out of bed, that way I'll be on time to *Shacharis*.

When we exercise our ability to choose in a positive way, we create habits that carry over to the big decisions. And when we appreciate the great gift that we have, we engender excitement with every decision that we make.

These two factors together will help raise our level of *Avodas Hashem*.

1 *Shemos* 7:3

2 *ibid.* s.v. ואני אקשה

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When I study Mussar using Hispailus, (the method of R' Yisrael Salanter), the messages of Chazal enter my heart deeply, and I experience how Mussar B'Hispailus opens a refreshing stream of revival and joy in my life. - R' Naftali Amsterdam, Ohr HaMussar, Vol. 1, p. 246

A WISE CHOICE

Dovid Sasoon* had a problem. He was hearing reports from his son's Rebbi that his son, Eliyahu, was a bit of a bully. Nothing physical, but he was told that Eliyahu would say hurtful things to his classmates, and shaming them in front of others.

Needless to say, Dovid was surprised. His sweet Eliyahu, acting like this? It just didn't add up.

Later that evening, after Eliyahu had gotten home from school, Mr. Sasoon sat down, and asked, "Eliyahu, I'll get right to the point. I heard from your Rebbi that you've been hurting other people in class. What's going on?"

"Abba, you would do the same thing if you were there! There are these two fellows, and they are so annoying!"

"What do you mean - do they say things to you? Hurt you?"

"No... not exactly. Well, one chews with his mouth open. It's gross! And the other whines in class, like a baby! Whenever he doesn't get his way, he starts to whine, and he's ten years old!"

"So what happens then?"

"I tell them to knock it off! I copy them, so they should see how they are acting!"

Dovid Sasoon nodded. "I see. I imagine it's not that effective." Eliyahu shook his head. "It's not."

"Well," said Dovid, "I have an idea. I understand that it can really get under your skin, but at the same time, we both know that it's not very nice to make fun of people. And, to be honest, who's to say that what you're doing isn't actually worse than what they are doing?"

"How about you view this as a character exercise - whenever your classmates bother you, you have a choice. You can choose to ignore, take the high road, and build your moral muscles, or you can choose to respond in kind, and make yourself a meaner person."

Eliyahu came back from school the next day with a smile on his face. "Abba, it might not sound like much, but today I was really ready to give it to them. And then I remembered what you said, and I remained silent. I'm building those muscles already!"

**Names have been changed, based on a true story.*

"You can choose to ignore, take the high road, and build your moral muscles, or you can choose to respond in kind, and make yourself a meaner person."

DID YOU KNOW?

- Hashem does not intervene in a person's choices, even when the decision can be catastrophic or life-changing.¹
- The purpose of the Torah is to help a person make proper spiritual choices.²
- A person has the ability to make a decision even against an abundance of evidence contrary to his decision.³

1 *Sifsei Chachamim* ב רש"י *Rashi Bereishis 38:17* s.v. כי אם

2 *Sefer Akeidah* 3:1

3 *Rashi on Shemos 11:4* s.v. כחצת הלילה