

See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life. (30:15, 19)

After all, what else should one choose? Why would anyone be so foolish as to choose death? Apparently, some of us remain clueless with regard to the definition of evil and death. Indeed, some still have difficulty distinguishing between good and evil – life and death. Yes, there are those who think that they are very much alive, despite the fact that they are “living” a slow death. The Torah gives us a clue as to the meaning of life when it exhorts us to choose life. Why? Because – “so that you will live, you and your offspring.” In other words, if the choices that we made will destroy our legacy; if, as a result of my cravings, my obstinacy, my children will lose their opportunity for a life of Torah, a life with a future; then I have not chosen life. A life that does not ensure a viable future for our progeny is a bad choice – a choice of death.

Bechirah, free will, is one of the basic tenets of our faith. We are not compelled to do a thing. The choice to succeed or to fail is ours exclusively. **Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl**, asks: What is *bechirah*? We would answer that a person can choose what he wants. *Rav Elya* explains that this is not *bechirah*. Anyone, anything, can choose what he/it wants. An animal can choose what it wants. A gentile can choose what he wants. No one is standing with a gun to his head, forcing him to make a specific decision. The ball is in his court. He may decide as he pleases. So what makes *bechirah* so special for the Jew? *Bechirah* means that we can choose what we do not want! If our desires run counter to our intellect – we have the ability to transcend our desires and choose against them. We have the capability of waging war with the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, and emerging triumphant. We can break the hold that the *yetzer hora* has on us. This is the meaning of *bechirah*. If a person is willing to gird himself and overcome the challenges that the *yetzer hora* presents, he can prevail. He then proves that he is a *shomer Torah u'mitzvos*, an observant Jew who is willing to go in the ways prescribed by Hashem. We can choose to do what is right, despite our desires.

Much of what we do is a derivative of the *chinuch*, education, that we received primarily from our parents, but also from our *rebbeim*. It is noteworthy that we learn -- either directly or by osmosis -- from the little things that we noticed growing up at home. Likewise, we must acknowledge some of the less-than-proper lessons that our children have learned from us. How important it is to be alert and vigilant concerning the lessons we are indirectly imparting by virtue of our thoughtless actions. No one consciously intends to teach his child a lesson/behavior that can harm him later in life. More lessons detrimental to a child's spiritual/ethical development are taught indirectly than we care to concede.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, *Mashgiach* of Kaminetz Yerushalayim and one of the premier *baalei mussar*, ethical mentors, of recent generation, relates how an episode that occurred fifty years earlier still impacted his mindset.

The family lived in Brownsville, New York, a section of Brooklyn which at that time was home to many observant Jews – individuals who took their Judaism seriously. They lived simple lives, worked hard to eke out an honest living, and spent every available moment learning Torah, *davening*, and seeing to it that their children were following in their footsteps. As we explained earlier, this is the meaning of *u'bacharta ba'chaim* – “and you should choose life.” Rav Stern's father was an accountant who worked in an office in Times Square, approximately eight miles from home. A *shomer Torah u'mitzvos*, he was fortunate to have a job that allowed him to leave for *Shabbos*. Nonetheless, as a worker for someone else, he did not always have the luxury of leaving early enough to go home and prepare for *Shabbos* in an unhurried, relaxed manner.

One Friday afternoon in the winter, with temperatures hovering in the single digits and heavy snowfall, he saw that making it home in a timely fashion was inconceivable. Mr. Stern called his wife when it was barely a half an hour before *licht bentchen*, candle lighting, and said that he had been unable to leave the office earlier so that taking the train was out of the question, since he would not arrive before *Shabbos*. Therefore, he was emptying his pockets, leaving everything in the office (since he could not carry on *Shabbos*), and going downstairs to find the nearest *shul* in which he would *daven Minchah*, be *makabel Shabbos* and *daven Maariv*. Afterwards, he was walking home (eight miles). He instructed his family not to wait for him to recite *Kiddush*, since he would not be home until it was quite late.

Of course, the family waited, looking at the clock, trying to calculate how long it would take him to get home. They had not factored in the fact that it was freezing and that snow was falling at a steady clip. He had originally called at four o'clock. He arrived home at ten o'clock, soaked and frozen, but with a smile on his face. He quickly dried himself off, changed clothes, and recited *Kiddush*.

What a *Shabbos* that was. For the rest of his life, the *Mashgiach* has remembered that *Shabbos*, his father's appearance when he came to the door frozen and soaking through and through. The example of *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice for a *mitzvah*, remained etched in his mind. He understood how far one must go to serve Hashem, how prepared one must be to undergo the most difficult trials and challenges, to fulfill the *mitzvos* of the Torah. The lessons imparted that Friday night were more valuable and had a greater and more enduring impact than many of the lessons that he learned in the classroom.