

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

The Torah informs us that the choice between a life devoted to Torah principles versus one that is not is tantamount to the choice between life and death. Two lessons are to be derived from this *pasuk*. First, Torah is the path to life; a life without Torah is the path to death. It is as simple as that. Torah is equated with good and life. No Torah is compared to evil and death. Second, the choices are equal. Torah is pure life; no Torah is pure death. They are commensurate. No grey areas exist. It is all black and white.

In his early years, **Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl**, would gather the young boys of the neighborhood and learn with them. He would warm their spirits with his captivating stories, and his inspiring talks would infuse them with faith. It was a small group, which met on a regular basis. One day, one of the boys did not appear for class. Naturally, the next day, *Rav* Sholom asked the boy, "Where were you yesterday?" The boy replied, "*Rebbe*, the truth of the matter is that I love to learn, and I greatly enjoy attending the *shiur*. There is one thing, however, which I love and enjoy even more than the *shiur*, this is the sport of soccer. Yesterday, there was a soccer game. I gave it precedence over the *shiur*."

The boy was straightforward. He told the truth, hiding nothing. He enjoyed his sports more than he did his Torah study. This did not mean that he did not enjoy his Torah lessons. It is just that they were second to soccer. *Rav* Sholom listened to the boy and replied, "I always thought that there was nothing sweeter than Torah. Now, you tell me that soccer is even sweeter. This is incredible. Tell me about this soccer game. I would like to understand it."

The boy began to explain the objective of a football game. He was quite knowledgeable, explaining that the objective of each team was to get the ball across the goal of the other team. *Rav* Sholom asked about the score and the length of time played. The boy explained that the home team had won with a score of two to one and that the game had lasted ninety minutes. *Rav* Sholom began to think out loud, "Hmm, three points; ninety minutes. I have a thought. Is there a field nearby?" "Yes," answered the boy. "Good," said *Rav* Sholom. "Tomorrow, after the *shiur*, you and I will go out to the field. Now, let us learn."

They came to the field, where *Rav* Sholom announced, "Torah gives a person the ability to think more astutely. I have been able to conceive a way to score thirty points in half an hour, ninety points in an entire game." The boy, of course, did not believe what his *rebbe* was saying. Such a score was practically impossible. *Rav* Sholom was adamant. He said that he would show him that it was possible.

Rav Sholom told the boy to kick the ball toward the goal. Since it would take about one minute to kick the ball and retrieve it, in the space of ninety minutes, the score would reach ninety points.

“But, *rebbe*,” the boy countered, “such points do not count. First, there is no opposing team to block the ball from reaching the goal, and, even if the ball gets past the members of the team, there is a goalie that will block the ball from reaching the goal.”

“Oh,” said *Rav Sholom*. “Now I understand, but now, I would like you also to understand. Learning is sweeter than honey. To experience the precious nature of Torah, one must study when there is a challenge – like when there is a soccer game that competes with one’s time. The sweetness of such study becomes intrinsically more valuable. When one must give something up for Torah, its study becomes more meaningful. Furthermore, similar to soccer, in which the playing field must be even, with each team requiring eleven players, likewise, we find that the greater one is, so, too, the stronger is his *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination. The challenge must be equal.”

Everyone is confronted with the challenge, a challenge in which each side has equal power. The winner receives nothing less than life – the loser nothing less than death. When the stakes are so high and the opposing team is so strong, one must work hard to win, but his first priority is *u’bacharta ba’chayim*, choose life. One must know wherein lie his goals. He could be a great player, but if he hits the wrong goal post, he has, sadly, lost the game.

The *yetzer hora* knows that our time is a limited gift from Hashem. If it can convince us to waste this precious time, it has won a good part of the battle. When the *Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl*, would see *yeshivah* students engaged in mere talk, he would remark to them, “You are not killing time, you are killing yourself!”

The **Gaon, zl, m’Vilna**, was meticulous concerning every moment of his life. Once, prior to *Rosh Hashanah*, he calculated that, for six minutes during the past year, he had not been actively engaged in Torah study. He understood that each minute lost was a minute lost for eternity. He would never retrieve that minute. This is how the *Gaon* lived. This is why he was the *Gaon*.

Rav Gifter would often quote **Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl**, who offers a brilliant insight into the action *Chizkiyahu Hamelech* took in order to promote Torah study among his constituents. The *Talmud Sanhedrin* 94b teaches that “*Chizkiyahu naatz cherev al pesach bais hamedrash* – “He stuck a sword by the entrance of the *bais hamedrash* and declared, ‘*Sancheirev* is here with a powerful army with which he has been able to conquer the rest of the world. We are the last bastion, the last nation which he has not yet attacked. He has a *cherev*, sword, and we must be fearful of that sword.’”

The king then unsheathed his own sword and put it into the door of the *bais hamedrash*, and said, “Whoever leaves the *bais hamedrash* and halts his study of Torah shall be killed with this sword”. As a result of this powerful motivation, *Klal Yisrael’s* collective level of Torah erudition was unsurpassed. Indeed, when a census was taken of *Klal Yisrael*, it was discovered that nary a man, woman, or child was found that was not proficient in the laws of ritual purity – which is a very complex topic.

Chizkiyahu's action, although commendable for its zeal, comes across as lacking on a realistic basis. Does someone deserve to be killed because he does not study Torah? Clearly, Torah study is most important. It is what keeps our people going. It is the lifeblood of the Jew, but to be killed for not studying seems to be much too demanding, almost irrational. No law imposes the death penalty for not learning. Since when is not carrying out a positive *mitzvah* grounds for the death penalty?

The *Lutzker Rav* explains that *Chazal* are conveying a penetrating lesson to us. We know that when we actually feel something with our senses, it leaves a greater impact upon us. While we know that Torah study is our life, "knowing" is not the same as having someone stand in front of us brandishing a sword in his hand, implying that it is either "learn or die"! Thus, we realize that not learning is committing an act of murder – our murder!

Chizkiyahu was intimating, "You see, Torah is your lifeblood. With that, you will succeed against Sancheirev and his army". The people listened, abandoning their fields and vineyards, and other areas of livelihood. When they arrived at the *bais hamedrash*, they were greeted by the sword. This was a reminder to them, 'If you leave the *bais hamedrash*, you are actively killing yourself. If you stay in the *bais hamedrash*, there is no sword that can harm you.'

The *Rosh Yeshivah* would add his own thought, "During war, if a soldier abandons his post, he is AWOL, a deserter! Likewise, one who does not enter the *bais hamedrash* in a time of war is a deserter!"

The **Ramchal** writes in his classic *Mesillas Yesharim* what has become for many – and really should become for all of us – the catchphrase of our life: *Adam doeig al ibud damav, v'eino doeig al ibud yamav*; "Man worries about the loss of his money, but does not concern himself with the loss of his days." (Sadly) *damav einam ozrim, v'yamav einam chozrim*. "Man's material possessions do not help him, and his days do not return."

Next week, we will entreat Hashem for renewed life, longer life, healthier life. Do we know what life means? Do we understand the inestimable value of life? Do we understand that time is the most precious commodity there is – and, thus, Hashem's greatest gift? If we are going to ask, we should at least know what we are asking for.