

And you shall choose life so that you will live, you and your offspring. (30:19)

We often make a mistake, thinking that one's personal decisions affect him – and only him: "It is my life, and I will live it the way I want to live." The Torah intimates that such declarations are not only selfish; they are foolish. One does not live only for himself. (One who does is not really living. He is merely existing.) We have responsibilities to our children – present and future. For every choice that we make, we must factor in whether we are prepared or have the right to impose on our children the ramifications of the lifestyle that we choose for ourselves. How one dresses, eats, learns, observes *mitzvos* will impact his future legacy. What we think may be fun, but can come back to haunt us a few years down the road.

Having said this, we focus on the enjoinder, *U'bo'charta ba'chaim*, "And you shall choose life." Are we dealing with someone who is so cognitively challenged, such that he must be encouraged to choose life? Once the Torah equates life with blessing, and death with curse, choosing life should be a foregone conclusion. This is an undeniable solution to many of life's ills. One does not eat poison and expect to live. *Chazal* (*Midrash Rabbah Parashas Re'eh*) views this exhortation as a *chiddush l'tovah gedolah*, an innovative and kind gift from Hashem. How is it a *chiddush*, and wherein lay the kindness?

Horav Elyakim Schlesinger, shlita, cites *Rabbeinu Yonah* (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 2:10) who writes, "One who hears/listens to the rebuke rendered by *chachamim*, spiritual mentors, defers and accepts in his heart to accept rebuke – this person, in that one instant, emerges from darkness (sin) to great light. For once he will follow through, repent and return to Hashem, he will be transformed into a new individual. From this moment on (from the moment of choice), he has acquired for himself a tremendous merit and reward for all the *mitzvos* that he will perform."

Rabbeinu Yonah is teaching us a powerful lesson, an intriguing lesson which we seldom consider. We think that when one has two paths before him, one of blessing and one of curse, he will undeniably choose blessing/life. The choice itself is not significant in its own right, since it would have been foolish to choose otherwise. *Rabbeinu Yonah* says that the actual decision, the choice to follow the path of life, is in and of itself considered a critical component of *teshuvah*, for which he will receive merit and reward. In other words, in addition to actually following the path of life, the choice to follow that path is significant and transformative.

A common misconception exists in the spiritual life that, if we fail to follow through on our positive decisions, those moments of inspiration are worthless. In other words, "I chose life, but just could not follow through. So, why bother choosing?" This is a vision that does not align with the Torah's view of spiritual growth. The Torah writes: "Choose life." It does not say achieve perfection – just make the right choice. The mere decision to do the right thing is a step toward complete transformation. That step creates a new identity. The actions that follow build on it.

Horav Yitzchak Hutner, zl, once wrote to a *talmid*, “A failing that is accomplished by inner struggle, by a yearning for greatness, should not be discounted. Know that your soul’s desire to ascend – even if you fail – is in and of itself a ladder upward.” The choices one makes alter his spiritual persona. If he follows through on his good intentions, he builds upon the foundation that he has established. If not, if he sees no immediate results, he has hope – hope that one day he will pick up where he left off.

One who makes the right choice essentially plants a seed. The seed is real, representing incredible potential, but seeds must be nurtured in the soil. Otherwise, they will just lay there dormant. Following through on the commitment gives life to seed, which, over time, will grow and bloom. Not all seeds make it to the top. I heard an insightful observation: “Anyone can count the seeds in one apple. It takes a Supreme Being, however, to count how many apples can be derived from one seed.” I may add that some seeds grow immediately, taking to the soil, germinating and beginning to grow. Other seeds require special attention, coaxing and care. The same applies to *teshuvah* or other consequences of the *u’bo’charta ba’chaim* decision. Some seeds of “choice” take time to produce. For some, the seed lay dormant. It is possible that one day it will emerge – perhaps not the way one would have liked, but it is a seed and it is inevitable that something, however insignificant or unusual, will sprout. The following story might not be a perfect fit with the above Torah thought, but the “seed” aspect is.

One *Shabbos* morning, an elderly man entered Bais Pinchas, the *Bostoner Rebbe’s* Chassidic Center. He came to *shul* wearing a *tallis* and a *kippah serugah*. The *Rebbe’s* son and successor, *Rav Naftali*, asked the *gabbai*, sexton, to call the man to the Torah. The elderly man refused the *Aliyah*. He thanked the *gabbai* for the gesture, but he would decline the honor. *Rav Naftali* thought that perhaps the man had difficulty reciting the *brachos*, so he instructed the *gabbai* to honor him with *gelilah*, rolling and binding the Torah. The man once again declined the honor. He also refused to open the *Aron Kodesh* for the recitation of *Anim Zemiros*. It was almost as if he were allergic to anything related to a Torah scroll.

After *Kiddush*, the present *Rebbe* asked the man for an explanation. He said, “While I may now be from St. Louis, in the 1960’s, I was a practicing physician at Massachusetts General Hospital. During that period, I became friendly with your father (*Horav Levi Yitzchak Horowitz*, the *Bostoner Rebbe*). My own father was born in Europe and raised in a strictly Orthodox home. Religion was a vital part of his life until he emigrated to America, where he gave it all up and became secular in outlook and observance. My father maintained one connection to his religious past. He still respected the Torah. He could not completely turn his back on the lifeblood of our people. Thus, he felt it would be disrespectful for someone like him to touch a Torah scroll. So, on the rare occasion that he went to *shul*, he would never accept an *Aliyah* or even touch the *Sefer Torah*. This is my family background.

“In the 1960’s, I was offered a prestigious position in St. Louis. The hospital where I would work was a far cry from Mass General. I was left in a quandary: Do I choose prestige over hospital, or

stay where I am and patiently wait for a position to open up? I went to the *Rebbe*, who asked me if I had children. I replied that I had two boys and a girl who attended the local public school. He asked if I was pleased with the public school education, and I replied that my wife was happy with it. Upon hearing this, the *Rebbe* encouraged me to move to St. Louis and enroll my children in the Orthodox day school. He would speak to the Rabbi to ensure our children's acceptance in the school.

"I followed the *Rebbe's* guidance. Today, my two sons and their families are observant. One lives in Israel. My daughter, sadly, decided to continue her secular affiliations. I have your father to thank for my sons' adherence to Torah and *mitzvos*."

The *Rebbe* planted one seed, and it produced spiritual growth—perhaps not all that they had hoped for, but far better than if they would have remained in Boston. Now, for the rest of the story.

The man elaborated on his family's history and their origins as Orthodox Jews. "My grandmother grew up in Lutzk, Poland. The *Bais HaLevi* was the *Rav* at the time. When the Russian army attempted to draft him, my great-grandfather went to the *Rav* to seek his advice and blessing. Soldiers in the Russian army were 'discouraged' from practicing their religious faith. Judaism was at the top of their list. The *Bais HaLevi* said, 'I will hide your son in my house.' He remained there until it was safe to return home. He married and had a son, whom, when he was of age, he sent to Dvinsk to study under the *Ohr Sameach*. He became an expert *sofer*, scribe, but it was not a lucrative vocation in Europe at the time. He left for America, where he settled in Pennsylvania. Living in an area that was bereft of *Yiddishkeit* did not provide a positive religious influence, and, before long, he was no longer keeping *Shabbos*. He married a like-minded woman, and I am their son."

The *Bais HaLevi* initiated the process. The *Ohr Sameach* continued it. The ball was sadly dropped for two generations, until the *Bostoner Rebbe's* advice played a role in bringing it back. The seed does not decompose. It lies dormant, waiting for the right opportunity for it to grow.