BS”D

**Parshat Netzavim**

In this week’s parsha we read how Moshe presented Bnei Yisrael with a fundamental Divine choice:

*“Today I call upon heaven and earth as witnesses [that I have warned you]: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. And you shall choose life so that you and your children shall live.” (Devarim 30:19)*

Hashem is giving Bnei Yisrael and us a choice. Yet, this choice seems pretty straightforward. If you choose life and blessing, you shall live and by extension, if you don’t choose life, you will die). What type of choice is this? Who doesn’t want to live? And what does it mean by “choosing life”?

A person is walking along a narrow ledge over a cliff. If he slips, he faces a choice. He can throw out his hand and try to save his physical life by grasping a nearby tree root, or avoid attempting to save him from physical death. Most people would do everything they could to choose life. Now imagine that later that same day, this same person is confronted with an opportunity to avoid embarrassment about his predicament by explaining to others how it was actually his friend had told him to walk on this dangerous pathway in the first place. Right before he opens his mouth to blame his friend, he is faced with a spiritual choice – to say lashon hara and save face, or say nothing and suffer embarrassment.

It is the spiritual choices that we make each day that we must choose ‘life’ in. Most sane people will automatically want to choose physical life over physical death. But many of us are not even aware of the numerous spiritual choices we face every day, one option of which will lead to spiritual life and one to spiritual death. The threat of spiritual death that emanates from choosing the former is not nearly as obvious as the threat of physical death that he faced earlier in the day. This is because since the sin of Adam HaRishon, Hashem’s light is concealed from the world. But we all have a tzelem Elokim mimal, a G-dly spark within. And we are given the free will to choose to follow Hashem’s path,or not.

We face many spiritual choices every day. Some are big and obvious like where to send our children to school. Some are medium, such as whose house should we go to for Rosh Hashana. And some are almost imperceptible, such as whether to choose an outfit that is slightly more tzniut over one that is more comfortable. The passuk cited above is teaching us that it is precisely here – in a spiritual crossroads – that we are to actively choose Hashem’s path, and live.

But in this world of *asiya* where Hashem’s light is concealed, it is often difficult to choose the more spiritual option, or to follow Hashem’s laws in the face of *gashmius* temptations. What can help us make this choice of life easier? Let’s explore.

In the Rosh Hashana machzor we daven: “*Zochreinu L’Chaim Lemech Chofetz ba’chaim v’cho tvaynu b’sefer hachaim l’maan’cha Elokim chaim”- Remember us for life, King who desires life and write us in the book of life for Your sake the living G-d.*”

In a chapter titled “Real Life” from his excellent collection of shiurim “Drashos on Yamim Noraim”, Rav Ithamar Schwartz explains that the most fundamental thing we should be praying for on Rosh Hashana for the coming year is meaningful life (*chiyus*). He gives a powerful mashal of a man who writes a list of what to pray for on Rosh Hashana. This list includes health, livelihood, good children etc. But he dies three days after Rosh Hashana. Why? He forgot to ask for life itself. But the Rav clarifies that *kotvenu l’chaim* refers to two different types of life. First, we must pray for physical life (which is what we pray for on the second day of Rosh Hashana). But fundamentally, we must also pray to obtain a feeling deep in our heart of *chiyus* or “meaningful life’ obtained from spiritual choices (on the first day of Rosh Hashana). This second category refers to the inner, spiritual pleasure and purpose that comes from learning Torah and doing mitzvot.

(As an aside, a question arises as to why the first day is geared towards asking for spiritual life, and the second day for physical life. Surely we need physical life first before we can even ask for spiritual life. In other words, surely we need to make a kli or vessel first, into which to pour our spiritual ‘water.’ Perhaps we can explain this by considering an analogy. If we are giving our child a grocery list including the most vital ingredient being eggs which we need in order to make a dish for Yomtov. We may also add some treats to the list. But we will list the eggs first to guarantee the child remembers to purchase eggs. They do not as obvious a reminder to buy the treats! Alternatively, we could interpret it as being a reminder to us that spiritual life is more important (and ultimately more permanent) than fleeting physical life, which is only to serve as a kli for our spiritual work in this World).

According to the Maggid of Mezeritch, the sealing and inscription on the Day of Judgment takes place on our hearts. This is where our life-force resides. The power of our heart in making the right choices is revealed in our parsha itself, as it says: “But if your **heart** will stray and you will not listen…” (30:17) and “to love Hashem, your G-d…” (30:20).

When we ask for “life” on the first day of Rosh Hashana, we are asking not simply for a strong spiritual life, but for chiyus and vitality in our spiritual choices. We want Hashem to help make it easier for us to choose His path by helping fire up our ratzon and have a strong desire to follow His Torah path and way of life. By asking Him to help us feel pleasure and vitality from performing his Torah and mitzvot, we are essentially asking Hashem to help make our choice (between following Him and c”v following other ‘gods’ – comfort, materiality etc) easier.

But how does this experience of internal chiyus translate into more tangible terms? Though this is different for everyone, it may include things like feeling glad that we are making Hashem proud of us (giving *nachat ruach*) when we prioritise spirituality over physicality; feeling victorious in the growth of our middot and mitzvot, no matter how small; being happy when our yetzer tov manages to dominate over our yetzer hara; or feeling a deep, heartfelt contentment when we come one step closer to completing a beautiful bayit in the World to Come.

Since Hashem freed us from slavery to service Him, we have free will to choose to serve Hashem or not. And we are also granted the opportunity to feel positive about our choices. If we obtain internal chiyus from our spiritual growth and gains, the choice of which option to choose in each moment will be much more straightforward and rewarding. And in a beautiful cycle of living, the more inner vitality we obtain from making the right spiritual choice, the more motivated we will become to choose the right path again next time we face a choice.

How can we apply this message to our parenting practice this week?

Our children are constantly watching and listening to us. They learn more from our behaviour and choices that we make than any direct nagging or instructions. So when we make a spiritually healthy choice and choose to place Hashem’s laws above the laws of nature, to put the Torah above our personal comfort, they are watching us. And learning a most fundamental first-hand lesson about the value to place on following Hashem’s derech.

But even more than the actions we choose to undertake, our children notice how we feel about our positive spiritual choices. In the early part of the 20th century, many observant immigrants had a hard time earning a livelihood because of Shemirat Shabbat.  Of those who did manage to stay strong, many would complain “*oi s’iz shver tzu zain a Yid*” (it’s difficult to be a Jew). When second-generation immigrants ended up going off the *derech*, Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt”zl* attributed it to their parents’ constant discontentmentabout being Jewish (see Mishpacha Magazine “Happiness Not a Matter of Means” by Rabbi Shneur Aisenstark, 20 September 2010 for an amazing read on this topic).

Our children are noticing us – either consciously or subconsciously. How much simcha did Ima truly feel from making challot for Shabbas? Was it a chore for daddy to build the sukkah? Did mummy seem happier to wear the tzniut outfit even though it was less comfortable? Was it a drag for abba to learn Torah today? Or did his eyes sparkle with joy? Our children are calculating these answers and internalizing whether being Jewish will give them *simchat hachayim*. And whether this *derech* is a worthwhile choice for them.

On first day Rosh Hashana, we can pray not only for spiritual life, but for the *chiyus* to enjoy and extract meaning and rewarding depth from this *ruchniyus*. And to pray that our children also experience this *chiyus* in their *ruchniyus* too.

Wishing you a Shabbas filled with chiyus and vitality from your Torah and mitzvot

With bracha