

Choose Life (Parshat Netzavim)¹

David Fachler

Parshat Netzavim is always read (whether on its own or together with Parshat Vayelech) a week before Rosh Hashanah. Naturally, it is a time we think about the meaning of life. Interestingly, the results of a search on the *Concordance*² reveal that Netzavim is the only parsha that speaks about life (*chayim*) in an abstract form. The word *chayim* can either be a verb (when used in the plural form) or an adjective (describing if something is alive) or it can be an abstract noun meaning life. It is only in our parsha where it denotes the last meaning and in this context, it is used a few times³.

One of the most famous contexts for this use is the simple instruction “choose life” which appears in the second last verse of our parsha (Deuteronomy 30:19). Our commentaries have argued what exactly this statement means. In the translation attributed to Jonathan ben Uziel, the author states that G-d is telling us to choose a life of Torah. In a similar vein, the *Baal Haturim* tells us that the numerical value of the Hebrew word בחיים is 70 and this alludes to the 70 ways in which the Torah may be interpreted. The later commentator and polemicist, the *Malbim*, agrees with this interpretation and says that choosing life means choosing the path of the Torah.

There are however dissenting views in this respect. The Jerusalem Talmud in Tractate *Kiddushin* (cited by the *Torah Temimah*) says that choosing life means teaching one’s child a trade, and if that child was not taught by his father he has an obligation to teach himself. Interestingly the *Torah Temimah* adds that dealing in commerce and business also qualifies under this injunction. Other *Tanaim*, notably Rabbi Akiva, interpret this verse as a commandment for parents to teach their children to swim. This was a particularly useful survival tool in the days when sea vessels were primitive but often used as necessary transportation.

There appears to be a sharp divide between the two schools of thought on what ‘life’ here, in an abstract sense, entails. One school, which is probably dominant, sees ‘life’ as eternal or spiritual and concludes that the only ‘life’ which encompasses these values is one based on Torah values and Torah learning. The other school sees ‘life’ in a more literal way. It suggests that G-d is telling us that our lives must be sustainable and self-supportable, and we should embark on a trade and profession and not rely solely on G-d’s beneficence. Some even see it as basic survival skills.

I propose that a careful reading of the context in which this statement is made may accommodate both interpretations. Let us look closely at the last two verses of Chapter 30 in Deuteronomy:

19. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed; 20 to love the LORD thy God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him; for that is your life, and the length of thy days; that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

We see that the words: “choose life” do not come at the beginning or end of a verse but rather in the middle. This would suggest that they do not form a separate commandment but rather G-d is telling us that since He has placed life and death before us and since we would therefore choose life we should

¹ Adapted from a drasha I delivered at Alon Shvut Darom Synagogue on 15 September 2017, 24 Elul 5777

² An online Concordance <https://mg.alhatorah.org/MikraotGedolot/Concordance>

³ In other places in Tanach it is also used in the abstract form, but as far as the Chumash is concerned this is the first parsha to use it in such a manner.

do so for the reasons stated in the next verse. Indeed verse 20 opens with the word “to” and can only be read as a reason or result of verse 19.

What exactly are the reasons for choosing life? The verse tells us: “to love...G-d, and to...cleave to Him”. And why should we cleave to Him, “for He is your life and the length of your days”. This first half of the verse accords with those who say that life should be lived in the spiritual G-dly realm, and as Jews we all agree that this spirituality can only be found in living the ways of the Torah and learning its lessons and insights.

The question is what we are to make of the continuation of the verse. Does it mean, as Samuel David Luzzatto implies⁴, that we should cleave to G-d so that we may dwell in His land? Following this interpretation there is a three-pronged process. We first choose life, so that secondly, we can cleave to G-d, who is an All-Sustaining Deity and by cleaving to Him we thirdly merit dwelling in the Holyland.

Alternately (and the JPS punctuation suggests this alternate reading), the verse could be providing two reasons for why we should choose life. First, to cleave to G-d, the source of all life, and secondly so that we may dwell in His land. Indeed, this reading is suggested by the *Or HaChayim* who instructs us to imagine a *vav* placed before the second clause- so that it should read “to love G-d....; [and] that you may dwell”. In other words, life is worthwhile both for living a Torah life, and equally importantly for dwelling in Israel, which the *Or HaChayim* reminds us is tantamount to keeping all the commandments.

I would like to adopt this commentary by the *Or HaChayim* but with a slight variation. While the verse is definitely speaking about living in Israel, it is also speaking about the concept of “dwelling in the land”. If we accentuate this aspect and try and bracket off the fact that it is the land which G-d promised us, we could read the verse as telling us that we should choose life both to lead a spiritual life, and to lead a life where we can sustain ourselves in one land, one country. To fulfil the second clause, it is obvious that one needs to build an economy and in order to do so we must produce a population that is made of professionals and of businessmen.

The idea that both Torah and the ways of the world (*derekh erez*) are necessary components of living in this world was greatly popularized by the German Jewish writer and commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, but its roots may be traced back to the Mishna. In *Ethics of Our Fathers* (2:2) it states:

Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say: Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the world, for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten. Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin.

The idea therefore that a “beautiful” Jewish life is one that combines Torah with the way of the world goes back to Mishnaic times. Indeed, if one only studies Torah and does not concurrently work this brings about sin. According to most commentaries this is because if one does not work, one cannot make money and if one cannot make money this causes people to engage in theft. However, my illustrious ancestor Rabbi Marcus Lehmann⁵ tends to disagree. According to his reading even if a person is wealthy and does not need to earn money he should do voluntary work and not engage solely in Torah study. There is something ennobling in work that makes it indispensable and without which one’s quality of life is reduced.

Though we have concluded that a life best lived is one which combines Torah and the ways of the world we may also learn some hints as to how this Torah and this way of life is best practiced. I would like to isolate two lessons. At the beginning of the parsha we learn that the covenant between G-d and His

⁴ S D Luzzatto commenting on Deuteronomy 30:20:

ג'ל לאהב'ה את ה' אלוהיך לשמוע בקולו ולדבקה בו כי הוא חייך וצרך ימך, ה' הוא חייך, ואתה תבחר לאהבה אותו ולדבקה בו לשבת על האדמה.

⁵ *Lehmann_Prins Pirkei Avoth* Feldheim 1992 p.74

People does not only apply to the generation entering the Land of Canaan but “also with him that is not here with us this day” (*ibid.* 29:14) which probably is a reference to future generations.

In the middle of the parsha we discover that observing the commandments is something anyone is capable of doing. Indeed “the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou may do it” (*ibid.* 30:14). Thus, if on the one hand the covenant is binding on all future generations and on the other hand it is eminently feasible for those bound by it, *per force* it must be relevant.

Torah committed Jews often look to the past for guidance to deal with modern challenges. Since it believes that the Torah’s values are timeless and unchangeable, this makes sense. However, we sometimes confuse values with practice. We follow certain behaviours merely because they were effective in the past. By doing so we risk making the Torah seem old-fashioned and out of touch. The late Rabbi Pinchas Teitz of Elizabeth New Jersey reportedly said that the “Torah speaks in the language of tomorrow”. We therefore need to update our educational methods, our modes of dress (within the parameters permitted by Halacha) and the viewpoints we adopt. In this way we retain the loyalties of our children and we appeal to those who are not yet observant.

We also need to rethink how we relate to the outside world and what we perceive as a just economic system. We must abandon the romantic notion that those who work in the fields, who settle the land and who teach are necessarily superior to those occupied in business related fields. We should realize that good and evil is found in any profession; there are teachers who exert a bad influence on the classroom, and there are lawyers and stockbrokers who provide for their family and who are a credit to their society. It is often the free market that provides equitable solutions while social welfare unfairly punishes the worker and rewards the slothful.

A second lesson we may learn, and one that is related to the first comes from the famous verse in the middle of the parsha: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (*ibid.* 29:28). On a simple level, it means that we and our children should perform the words of the Law that have been revealed to us. However, I think it is also teaching us about the Law, the Torah. It is telling us that only that which is truly revealed to both us and our children constitutes true Torah.

In order for our life to be run in a proper fashion we have to abide by a Torah that is transparent. We cannot tell others that they are too removed to understand the Torah and it is too complicated and mysterious for them. Quite the opposite. The Torah is not in heaven. It is plain, simple, and transparent. It may not be easy; it may require the toil of the mind to uncover some of its more brilliant aspects. However, it is rational, logical, and understandable and does not rely on heavenly secrets which only the elite few can unlock.

In the same vein in business and in any profession, we need to strive towards a life that is as transparent as possible. We need to account for what we teach, for what we earn and for what we charge. This is an obligation as well as an opportunity of spreading certainty and pleasantness into our lives.

So long as everything is performed for the sake of heaven we should only look forward to continued blessings and a life well lived.