

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Re'eh)

Thousands of feet up in freefall, travelling over 100 miles an hour, Yosef Goodman had only seconds to make a decision. His parachute had become tangled in his commander's chute above him, preventing both of their parachutes from opening. They were probably twenty second away from certain death, and none of the backup measures were working. On a training jump in the IDF's elite Maglan paratrooper unit, they were testing a new form of gliding parachute, but something had gone terribly wrong. With such a short timeframe, and no other possible solution, Yosef, over the protesting screams of his commander, calmly pulled out his army knife and sliced through the parachute chords connecting their chutes, saving the life of his Commander but dooming himself to certain death as he hurtled towards the ground at close to 130 miles per hour.

A subsequent investigation determined that his decision was the correct one, and the only way to allow at least one of them to survive. But the ability to make such a decision, in such a short amount of time buffeted by the winds at such high speeds, is nothing short of incredible. His commander, breaking down as he eulogized Yosef at his funeral the next day, recognized both the incredible bravery it took to make such a decision as well as the inspiring ability to make the decision under such enormous pressure.

This week in the portion of *Re'eh*, Moshe exhorts the Jewish people to 'see the blessing and the curse placed before them (Devarim 11: 15-19). And he describes to them the exact place to which they must journey when they enter the land of Israel in order to receive these blessings and curses which will be given to them.

What does it mean to be given blessings and curses? And how can blessings and curses be placed upon a mountain? And why are the Jewish people told to see these blessings and curses? Should they not be commanded to hear them? Would it not make more sense in this instance to be enjoined to *listen*, rather than to *see*?

The **Ramban** (Deuteronomy 11:29) explains that what is being set before the Jewish people is the *path* to blessings and the *path* to curses. On the banks of the Jordan river, as they are about to enter the land of Israel at long last, the second generation of Jews who were born free are given the highest level of freedom: the ability to choose. A slave does not really have the freedom to choose; he must do whatever his master commands. The ultimate freedom is the ability to make our own decisions. And it is this great privilege that Moshe gives to the Jewish people now "today" as they prepare to come home at last to the Promised Land.

Almost 70 years ago, in the shadows of Treblinka and Auschwitz, the Jewish people repeated this journey and came home after two thousand years of exile. And the greatest impact of the beginning of the end of the Jewish exile is our ability at long last, to control our own destiny; to make our own decisions. And although ultimately it is only Hashem (G-d) who makes the decisions, Judaism believes that we are given freedom of choice, for which we will be accountable in this world. And the ability to make decisions based on those choices, is the essence of who we are, and all that we are meant to be. In fact, it is not accidental that this portion is always read the Shabbat preceding the new month (Rosh Chodesh) of Elul, which leads up to Rosh HaShanah and begins the process we call Teshuva; repentance'

So... how do we know what the right decision is in any given situation? And how do we know we actually made the right choice? Some people are paralyzed by decisions, and even when they finally make one, will often struggle with whether they made the right one.

So here are a few points to consider when confronted by the need to make a decision:

1. You will for sure not know what the right decision is, if you never make it.
2. Trying to figure out what the perfect choice is (the best airfare, the perfect hotel, the perfect marriage partner ...), is what will paralyze a person. Good enough really is 'good enough'. So look for the 'good enough' option
3. You can't really keep all your options open, just like you can't walk through all the doors. You have to play in the game in order to win; even if it means you might lose
4. Whatever decision you make; you can *make it be* the right one; at that point it's all about attitude.
5. Eventually we have to decide our dreams are more important than our excuses. The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are.
6. It's not hard to make decisions once you know your goals and values; if your decision is taking you away from achieving your goals, something is wrong. (And if you don't know what your goals and values are, then you are probably not ready to make a decision).

As we approach the New Year, Hashem should bless us with the courage to take on life's difficult decisions, along with the wisdom to make the right ones....

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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