

Sparks

by Rabbi David Aaron
Founder and Dean, Isralight
Rosh Yeshiva, Orayta

Choose Good, Feel Great *Secrets to Living Your Best Life*

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 -----Deut. 30:19

Goodness that isn't chosen is not complete goodness. If we didn't choose goodness—if we were just naturally good, or if goodness was the only option available—how could that be the highest expression of goodness?

I know a fellow that has dozens of guests over at his home every weekend. When I complimented him on his hospitality, he said, “What are you talking about? It comes naturally to me. It's not a struggle for me. I love to do this!”

Is he really choosing goodness? If it comes naturally, is it complete goodness? Goodness that wasn't chosen is not the greatest good. Only after you struggle with evil and chose goodness will you accomplish true and complete goodness.

Does God struggle with evil? Can God experience complete goodness through overcoming evil and choosing the good?

Yes, through you and me. God participates in complete goodness through our choices. Our service to God is to choose goodness. That's why we're in a world so full of allurements to do evil—so that we can rise to the challenge and choose good. That's our service to God. For there to be choice, evil has to be pretty attractive. There is no choice if we're not interested in one of the alternatives. In other words, if somebody puts in front of me a gorgeous, delicious meal, and next to it a plate of (forgive me) vomit, would it be a tremendous choice that I opted for the meal and not the vomit?

Therefore, in order for there to be the optimal opportunity to choose goodness, evil has to be extremely attractive. People think the Devil is an independent character who has a red ugly face, horns on his head, and a pitchfork in his hand. Kabbalah teaches that the forces of evil were created by God and the strongest ones are a counterfeit of good. They look just like goodness. That's why they present such a great challenge. Evil and good are not always like black and white. High- grade, superclassy evil looks just like good, but it's counterfeit nevertheless. Counterfeit means that it looks like the real thing but isn't.

I walk into a store. I hand the cashier a bill. The cashier says, “Thank you, sir. Oh, wait a second! ... Sir, I'm sorry, this hundred-dollar bill is worthless; it's counterfeit.” I then begin to argue, “What are you talking about? This is a hundred-dollar bill! Do you see the number 100 in the corner?”

The cashier shrugs. “No, I'm sorry, sir, this bill is a worthless piece of paper. President Washington's right eyeball is slightly off.”

“No, no, this is one hundred dollars. What’s an eyeball got to do with it?”

“Sir, just because it looks, smells, and feels like a hundred-dollar bill doesn’t make it a hundred-dollar bill. Unless it’s printed at the U.S. Mint, it’s worthless.”

So, too, the choices for goodness in real life are often much more subtle than most people recognize. There is a subtle but real difference between “looking good” and “being good.”

Torah and Kabbalah teach that God created the world in order to facilitate the possibility for ultimate goodness, which means goodness that has been chosen. Our service to God is to choose goodness. Life is all about choices. There are always choices to be made. Every day we are all handed choices. Every day we all get different challenges. No one can expect life to be a piece of cake in a world of choices.

But don’t worry. Try your best, and if you make a mistake, you can do *teshuvah*. You can be forgiven. Remember, God knew the stakes were high, and God is with you in your pain and struggle.

In fact, the Talmud tells us that before God created the world, He created the power of *teshuvah*, because the likelihood of our making mistakes was so great that we couldn’t even last a moment without the possibility of *teshuvah* already available.

Teshuvah is amazing. The Talmud teaches that if we transgress but later on change because we fear punishment, then our offense is considered null and void. But if we transgress but later on mend our ways because of our love for God, then our offense is counted as a merit in the spiritual realm.

Imagine a person who spent their whole life choosing evil and darkness. But moments before they die, they do *teshuvah* for the love of God. They are able to take all their offenses and turn them into merits and light. How is this possible?

When we do *teshuvah* out of fear, it means we’re afraid of the pain that is the likely consequence of our choices. When fear motivates our personal transformation, it is because we want to protect ourselves. And that’s a noble move.

However, when we do *teshuvah* out of our love for God, the underlying motivation is that we acknowledge the pain and disappointment we have caused God. We realize that God was counting on us to beat evil and choose good, and we failed Him. And we are so sorry for the missed opportunity to reveal this great goodness born out of choice.

Teshuvah done out of love arises from the realization that we are here on earth to perform a divine service—to choose goodness for God’s sake. God wants to participate in complete goodness through our struggle against evil and our choice to do the good, but we have failed Him. We do *teshuvah* not because we fear punishment but because we love God and know that we have, so to speak, let God down. This realization itself brings us closer to God, even closer than we were before we made the mistakes. Therefore, all our offenses turn into merits. The darkness is converted into light.

If God is absolutely good, why did He create a world that has so much evil? Ultimate goodness, which is the goodness achieved through choice, requires the possibility for evil. Once you understand this, you will appreciate how central a role evil plays in this world. What’s so good about this world is the evil in it. This world offers the opportunity to beat evil and choose good.

In other words, Kabbalah is teaching that the main feature and advantage of this world is the evil in it. This world was not created for what is already good in it. This world was created to be a forum for a new and higher kind of goodness—the goodness born out of overcoming evil and choosing to do good.

Imagine you walk into a factory and you see them trucking in tons and tons of garbage. You then find out that they actually buy this garbage and that it is their most valued raw material. This all sounds crazy to you until you find out that this factory is actually a recycling plant. They take garbage and turn it into usable products. Welcome to World, Inc.!

Yes, this world is really a recycling plant. This is why it is filled with so much garbage. All the trash around us and within us is here for us to recycle into usable products—lessons and realizations, growth and accomplishments. Before I learned this lesson from Kabbalah, I always wondered why there was so much evil in the world. However, after this secret was revealed to me, I asked: Why isn't there more evil in this world? The answer, of course, is that there is less evil because we are working so hard and succeeding in our mission on earth to choose good.

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of *Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Living A Joyous Life, and The G-d-Powered Life*