

What Kind of Life Shall We Choose? | Dvar Torah Nitzavim Vayelech

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“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, so that you may live, you and your children.” - Deuteronomy 30:19

As we near the end of the life and times of Moses, his speech to the Israelites picks up steam and power. One of the most profound statements in the Torah is found near the beginning of this week's parsha. Moses tells the Israelites that heaven and earth bear witness that Moses has given the Israelites a choice. The ultimate choice. They can choose life or they can choose death. Then in dramatic fashion, the people are then instructed to choose life.

Choose life! To life! L'chaim! This is the essence of Judaism. We toast to life. We sing to life. Life is a gift and we choose to use it well. The life we are given is a life of choices. We are instructed to make the choices that are the choices of life. It is so simple, yet so profound. Especially when we consider the religious leanings of the ancients, where death was so integral to their religions, where human sacrifice was normal, the Torah's charge to choose life bellows loudly with its profundity and its eternal message echoes across the millennia.

This verse is an example of the best of the Bible. Its dramatic overtones staking out the all encompassing issues of the human experience. When our souls feel lost we must always remember to choose life. That is the great compass of Judaism. Find life and go that way. Choose life!

For all its drama in the Bible, the Talmud brings this verse back down to earth with a shocking thud. Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva have a dispute about just what it means to choose life. Rabbi Yishmael says that “life” refers to a trade or a craft - the ability to earn a livelihood. We are being instructed to choose a means to make a living. Rabbi Akiva says that

life refers to matters of safety and recreation like swimming and boating. To him, choosing life means taking care of one's physical condition and making certain that one is prepared for a physical world that carries with it inherent danger.

These interpretations, while utilitarian and wise, seem to be so impossible to hear in the context of the verse that we are left to wonder if these great rabbi can actually be serious. Moses is building to a crescendo in his speech and he takes a break from the sublime to discuss career options and water sports? The verse was so powerful in its basic meaning, where is the depth and the beauty now?

The obvious answer is yes. Indeed, it is sublime to live a life engaged in the world. That is the climax. That is the greatest life that can be chosen. We are to be active participants in the economic and social structure of our world and to do so ever mindful and aware of G-D and one's Judaism - that is life! To choose life is to live a life. An actual life. A normal, productive, material life. When one lives that life to its fullest and lives one's Judaism to the fullest we are truly choosing life.

Choosing life does not mean that one should cut their self off from society. Life is to live amongst men and women. But to live this life elevated and infused with spirituality as one lives amongst others - that is to choose life. There is a place for meditation and reflection or even temporary complete immersion into Torah and purely spiritual pursuits. But *u'vacharta b'chaim* - to choose life - is only when that is firmly welded to material pursuits and responsibility.

Rabbi Yishmael was the same great sage who famously argued with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. In his statement about the topic of working for a living, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught that one should do G-D's will and their work will be performed by others. Rabbi Yishmael argued that one should work the land and earn a livelihood. His views on this matter are clear. Life is to work.

Rabbi Akiva attached himself to Bar Kochba. He was not satisfied living under the rule of a despotic and anti-Semitic Roman government. He dreamed of autonomy and safety. The idea was to rise up and rebel militarily. With weapons and men at arms. Rabbi Akiva did not rely on his piety or Torah study to protect him or the people. Nor did he assume that his Torah study would be sufficient to restore the land into Jewish hands. Rabbi Akiva supported a physical army in addition to the merits of Torah and Mitzvos.

Choose life means choose to live a life engaged in the world all the while meticulously adhering to G-D's word and living a life of Torah, Mitzvos and Kiddush Hashem. Indeed, this is a profound statement worthy of placement in the climactic peak of this speech of Moses. It is not just life, it is our *way of life*.

Speaking to his congregation following the Woodstock Festival in 1969, Rabbi Lamm talked about Hippie culture as compared to Judaism. Hippies believed that life was an opportunity to "live it up." Love, music, and drugs were pathways to nirvana in their worldview.

To this, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva respond and say we choose life with work. To live means to earn a livelihood. To live means to be prepared for life's difficult moments. The truly virtuous life is not the life of shortcuts and temporarily highs. When we choose life we are choosing to live a life of challenges. We meet those challenges with Torah principles along with secular training. When we are able to navigate the difficult moments in our lives, when we can grow from trying times, when we use our gifts and talents to transcend the material world, then we are truly choosing life.

Hippies are passé. Woodstock a distant memory. But contemporary society has adopted so much of that worldview into modern thinking. Freedom and love are enough to give meaning to life and they are enough to truly live. Our response is that to truly find freedom and love we must work to get there. That is how we choose life. - Good Shabbos