

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Nitzavim

Deut. 29:9-30:20

The Parshah of *Nitzavim* includes some of the most fundamental principles of **the Jewish faith**:

The **unity of Israel**: "You stand today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your **heads**, your **tribes**, your **elders**, your **officers**, and **every Israelite man**; your **young ones**, your **wives**, the **stranger** in your gate; from your **wood hewer** to your **water drawer**."

The **future redemption**: Moses warns of the exile and **desolation** of the Land that will result if Israel abandons G-d's laws, but then he prophesies that, in the end, "You will return to the L-rd your G-d... If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you... and bring you into the Land which your fathers have possessed."

The **practicality of Torah**: "For the Mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you nor is it remote from you. It is **not in heaven**... It is not across the sea.... Rather, it is **very close** to you, in your **mouth**, in your **heart**, that you may **do it**."

Freedom of choice: "I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil; in that I command you this day to love G-d, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments... Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose **life**."



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Nitzavim

Deut. 29:9-30:20

Summary and Commentary

This week's
Torah reading
consists of two
portions,

bearing the contrasting names of *Nitzavim* ("standing upright") and *Vayelech* ("and he went"). Both consist -- as does the whole of the book of Deuteronomy -- of Moses' parting words to the Children of Israel on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land:

*You stand upright **this day**, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: Your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water --*

*To have you enter into the covenant of the L-rd your G-d, and into His oath, which the L-rd your G-d makes with you this day. In order that He may establish you today for **a people** to Himself, and that He may be a G-d to you, as*

Commentary

***this day:** You stand upright this day, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d (29:9)*

"This day" is a reference to Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we all stand in judgment before G-d (the Torah reading of Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah). (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

***a people:** You stand upright this day, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water (Deuteronomy 29:9-10)*

The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who fell ill and was at the brink of death when his father's prayers brought him back to life. When he came to, his father asked him: "My son, what did you see (in heaven)?" Rav Yosef replied: "I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top here, are on the bottom there; and those who are here regarded as lowly, are exalted in heaven."

That the leader or the sage is superior to the wood-hewer or the water carrier is only from our earth-bound perspective, which sees a "hierarchy" of roles. But when "you all stand before G-d" there is no higher and lower -- what seems "low" here is no less lofty and significant in G-d's eyes. (Alshich)

Like the various organs and limbs of a body, each of which complements, serves and fulfills all the others, so, too, the Jewish people: the simple "wood-hewer" or "water-carrier" contributes something to each and every one of his fellow Jews, including the most exalted "head."

(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

He has spoken to you, and as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath; but with those who stand here with us this day before the L-rd our G-d, and also with those who are not here with us this day.

Moses also warns of the consequences of Israel's failure to remain faithful to their covenant with G-d: the **devastation** of the land and the people's banishment from it into *galut* (exile).

The Future Redemption

Commentary

Our sages have said: "All Israel are guarantors for each other" (Talmud, Shevuot 39a). But a person cannot serve as a guarantor unless he is more resourceful in some way than the one he is guaranteeing. For example, a poor man obviously would not be accepted as a guarantor for a rich man's loan. So if the Talmud says that *all* Jews serve as guarantors to each other, this means that in every Jew there is a quality in which he or she is superior to all others. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

devastation: *G-d rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great rage (29:27)*

It is written (Psalms 79:1): "A song to Asaf: Alien nations have entered Your estate, they have defiled Your Holy Temple, they have laid Jerusalem in ruins..."

Should not the verse have said "A weeping to Asaf," "A wail to Asaf," "A lament to Asaf"? Why does it say "A song to Asaf"?

But this is analogous to a king who built a nuptial home for his son, and had it beautifully plastered, inlaid and decorated. Then this son strayed off to an evil life. So the king came to the nuptial canopy, tore down the tapestries and broke the rails. Upon which the prince's tutor took a flute and began to play. Those who saw him, asked: "The king is overturning the nuptial canopy of his son, and you sit and sing?" Said he to them: "I am singing because the king overturned his son's nuptial canopy, and did not vent his wrath upon his son."

So, too, was asked of Asaf: "G-d destroyed the Temple and Sanctuary, and you sit and sing?" Replied he: "I am singing because G-d vent His wrath upon wood and stone, and did not vent his wrath upon Israel."

(Midrash Rabbah on Lamentations 4:15)

Future Redemption: *And it shall come to pass... (30:1-10)*

The *Melech HaMoshiach* ("anointed king") is destined to arise and restore the kingdom of David to its glory of old, to its original

But together with the dire warning, comes the promise:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you; and you will take them to heart, among all the nations, into which G-d your G-d has driven you.

You will return to G-d your G-d, and obey His voice, according to all that I command you this day; you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul.

The L-rd your **G-d will return** your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you

from all the nations, amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has **scattered** you.

If your outcasts be at the utmost **parts of heaven**, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, and from there will He **fetch** you.

The L-rd your G-d will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers.

And the L-rd your G-d will **circumcise** your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live...

Commentary

sovereignty. He will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his times, all laws (of the Torah) will be reinstated as before; the sacrifices will be offered, the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year instituted as outlined in the Torah.

Whoever does not believe in him or does not anticipate his coming, denies not only the other prophets but also the Torah and Moses. For the Torah testifies about him: "G-d shall return your captivity and have compassion upon you. And He will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you... If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, from there He will take you... G-d will bring you..." These explicit words of the Torah encapsulate all that has been said [regarding Moshiach] by the prophets...

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:1)

And it shall come to pass: *And it shall come to pass...* (30:1-10)

The events prophesied in this chapter are still destined to be fulfilled, as they had yet been realized, not in the days of the the First Temple, nor in the days of the Second Temple; it is the sum of our comfort and our hope, and the cure for all our troubles. (Abarbanel)

G-d will return: *G-d will return your captivity...* (30:3)

The Hebrew word used here for "he will return" is not *veheishiv* - which means "he will bring back" -- but *veshav*, which literally means "he will come back." Our sages learned from this that the Divine presence resides among Israel, as it were, in all the misery of their exile, and when the Jews are redeemed, G-d speaks of it as His own redemption -- He Himself returns along with Israel's exiles.

Commentary

scattered: *...from amongst all the nations, where G-d has scattered you (30:3)*

It a kindness that G-d did to Israel, that He scattered them amongst the nations... Does a person then sow a measure of grain, if not to harvest many measures? So, too, the people of Israel were exiled amongst the nations only so that converts be added to them... (Talmud, Pesachim 87b)

parts of heaven: The "converts" of which the Talmud speaks refer not only to the non-Jews who joined the community of Israel in the course of their exile, but also to the "sparks of holiness" contained within the physical creation which are redeemed and elevated when a Jew utilizes the resources he or she comes in contact with in every part of the world towards a good and G-dly purpose. (The Chassidic Masters)

fetch: Another interpretation: The day on which Israel's exiles will be gathered is so monumental and difficult, that it is as though G-d Himself must literally take each individual Jew with His very hands out of his place. Thus the verse says "And you will be gathered up, one by one, O children of Israel" (Isaiah 27:12). We find this also regarding the exiles from the other nations, as the verse says, "And I shall return the exiles of Egypt" (Ezekiel 29:14). (Rashi)

circumcise: *And G-d shall circumcise your heart...* (30:6)

From the time of the creation of the universe, man had the choice to be righteous or wicked. So it was for the entire duration of the Torah, in order that there be merit for us in choosing good and punishment for desiring evil. But in the days of Moshiach, the choosing good will be in our nature, and the heart will not lust for that which is not proper for it and have no desire for it at all. This is the "circumcision" spoken of here, as lust is a "foreskin" blocking the heart, and the "circumcision of the heart" is the removal of lust. In those times man will return to what he was before Adam's sin, when he naturally did what is proper to do and there were no conflicts and contradictions in his will...

Practicality and Choice

Two more fundamental principles of Judaism are stated in the parshah of *Nitzavim*: The practicality and accessibility of **Torah** --

For this mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?"

Commentary

This is the meaning of what our Sages said, interpreting the verse (Ecclesiastes 12:1), "There shall come days of which you shall say: I have no desire in them" -- "These are the days of Moshiach, in which there is neither merit nor guilt" (Talmud Shabbat 151b). For in the days of Moshiach there will be no desire [of evil], and thus no merit or guilt -- since merit and guilt are both the product of a free will. (Nachmanides)

Torah: *This mitzvah which I command you today... It is not in heaven... (30:11-12)*

If it were in heaven, you would be required to climb up there and learn it. (Talmud, Eruvin 55a)

It is not in heaven: *It is not in heaven... (30:12)*

[An oven] that was cut into parts and sand was placed between the parts, Rabbi Eliezer maintained that it is pure (i.e., not susceptible to ritual impurity). The other sages said that it is susceptible to ritual impurity....

On that day, Rabbi Eliezer brought them all sorts of proofs, but they were rejected. Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, may the carob tree prove it." The carob tree was uprooted from its place a distance of 100 cubits. Others say, 400 cubits. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from a carob tree."

Said [Rabbi Eliezer] to them: "If the law is as I say, the may the aqueduct prove it." The water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct."

Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, the may the aqueduct prove it." The water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct."

Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, the may walls of the house of study prove it." The walls of the house of study began to fall in. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, "If Torah scholars are debating a point of Jewish law, what are qualifications to intervene?" The walls did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Joshua,

Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who shall cross the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?"

Rather, the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

and the principle of **free choice** --

See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil....

Commentary

nor did they straighten up, in deference to Rabbi Eliezer. They still stand there at a slant.

Said he said to them: "If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!" There then issued a heavenly voice which proclaimed: "What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer -- the law is as he says..."

Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: "The Torah is not in heaven!" ... We take no notice of heavenly voices, since You, G-d, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah (Exodus 23:2) to "follow the majority."

Rabbi Nathan subsequently met Elijah the Prophet and asked him: "What did G-d do at that moment?" [Elijah] replied: "He smiled and said: 'My children have triumphed over Me, My children have triumphed over Me.'" (Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a-b)

free choice: *Life and death I set before you, the blessing and the curse. An you shall choose life (30:10)*

Freedom of choice has been granted to every man: if he desires to turn toward a good path and be righteous, the ability to do so is in his hands; and if he desires to turn toward an evil path and be wicked, the ability to do so is in his hands...

This concept is a fundamental principle and a pillar of the Torah and its commandments. As it is written [Deuteronomy 30:15]: "See, I have set before you life [and good, and death and evil]" and "See, I set before you today [a blessing and a curse]"... For were G-d to decree that a person be righteous or wicked, of if there were to exist something in the very essence of a person's nature which would compel him toward a specific path, a specific conviction, a specific character trait or a specific deed...how could G-d command us through the prophets "do this" and "do not do this,"...? What place would the entire Torah have? And by what measure of justice would G-d punish the wicked and reward the righteous...?

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:1-3)

I call heaven and earth to witness this day: Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life, so that you live, you and your seed.

To **love** the L-rd your G-d, to obey His voice, and to cleave to Him, for He is your **life**...

Commentary

love: *To love the L-rd your G-d... for He is your life (30:20)*

How is it fitting to love G-d?

A person should love G-d with such great and powerful intensity that his soul is bound in this love and is constantly pursuing it as one, for example, who is smitten with lovesickness -- as one who is so obsessed with a carnal love that his mind is never free of desire for that woman... Even more so is the love of G-d in the hearts of those who love him...

This is what King Solomon meant when he said by way of metaphor, "For I am sick with love." Indeed, the entire Song of Songs is a metaphor for this concept...

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 10:3)

life: *To love the L-rd your G-d... for He is your life (30:20)*

It was a hot July day during the summer of 1866. The children of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, five-year-old Sholom DovBer and his brother Zalman Aaron, had just come home from *cheder* and were playing in the garden which adjoined their home.

In the garden stood a trellis overgrown with vines and greenery which offered protection from the heat of the sun. It was set up as a study, with a place for books etc., and the Rebbe would sit there on the hot summer days.

The children were debating the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew. Zalman Aharon, the elder by a year and four months, argued that the Jews are a "wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6) who could, and do, study lots of Torah, both its revealed part and its mystical secrets, and pray with devotion and *d'vaikut* ("attachment" to G-d).

Said the young Sholom DovBer: But this is true only of those Jews who learn and pray. What of Jews who are unable to study and who do not pray with *d'vaikut*? What is their specialness over a non-Jew?

Zalman Aharon did not know what to reply.

The children's sister, Devorah Leah, ran to tell their father of their argument. Rabbi Shmuel called them to the trellis, and sent the young Sholom DovBer to summon Bentzion, a servant in the Rebbe's home.

Commentary

Bentzion was a simple Jew who read Hebrew with many mispronunciations and barely understood the easy words of the prayers. Every day he would recite the entire book of Psalms, pray with the congregation, and make sure to be present in the synagogue when *Ein Yaakov* was studied.

When the servant arrived, the Rebbe asked him: "Bentzion, did you eat?"

Bentzion: "Yes."

The Rebbe: "Did you eat well?"

Bentzion: "What's well? Thank G-d, I was sated."

The Rebbe: "And why do you eat?"

Bentzion: "So that I may live"

The Rebbe: "But why live?"

Bentzion: "To be a Jew and do what G-d wants." The servant sighed.

The Rebbe: "You may go. Send me Ivan the coachman."

Ivan was a gentile who had grown up among Jews from early childhood and spoke a perfect Yiddish. When the coachman arrived, the Rebbe asked him: "Did you eat today?"

"Yes."

"Did you eat well?"

"Yes"

"And why do you eat?"

"So that I may live"

"But why live?"

"To take a swig of vodka and have a bite to eat," replied the coachman.

"You may go," said the Rebbe.

(From the writings of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn)

THE LONGER SHORTER WAY

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: "Once a child got the better of me."

"I was traveling, and I met with a child at a crossroads. I asked him, 'which way to the city?' and he answered: 'This way is short and long, and this way is long and short.'

"I took the 'short and long' way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: 'My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?' Answered the child: 'Did I not tell you that it is also long?'"

(Talmud, Eruvin 53b)

Also in life there is a "short but long" way and a "long but short" way.

In his *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi sets down the fundamentals of the Chabad-Chassidic approach to life. On the cover page of this "Bible of Chassidism" he defines his work as follows:

"[This book is] based on the verse (Deuteronomy 30:14), **'For [the Torah and its precepts] is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it'**-- to explain, with the help of G-d, how it is indeed exceedingly close, in a long and short way."

The Torah and its commandments (mitzvot) are the Creator's blueprint for creation, detailing the exact manner in which He meant life to be lived and His purpose in creation to be fulfilled. But is a life that is ordered by Torah indeed feasible? Can the ordinary "everyman" be realistically expected to conduct his every act, word and thought in accordance with the Torah's most demanding directives?

The Torah itself is quite clear on the matter: *"For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven... nor is it across the sea... Rather, it is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it."* Torah is not an abstract ideal, a point of

reference to strive toward, but a practical and attainable goal to achieve.

But how? In the *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman develops the Chabad approach -- a holistic approach to life in which the mind and intellect play the leading and pivotal role. First, a person must study, comprehend and meditate upon the quintessential truths of existence: the all-transcendent, all-embracing, all-pervading reality of G-d; the root and essence of the soul and its intrinsic bond with its Creator; man's mission in life, and the resources and challenges that are extended to him to fulfill it. Since these concepts are extremely subtle and abstract, one must toil "a toil of the soul and a toil of the flesh" to grasp them and relate to them.

The next step of this approach is to translate this knowledge and comprehension into emotional feelings. Because of an innate superiority of the mind over heart that the Creator has imbued in human nature, the understanding, assimilation and meditation upon these G-dly concepts will compel the development of the appropriate emotions in the heart: the love and awe of G-d. "Love of G-d" is defined by Rabbi Schneur Zalman as the unquenchable desire to cleave to Him and be unified with His essence; "awe of G-d" is the utter abhorrence towards anything which erects barriers between Him and man.

Finally, when a person has so oriented his mind and so transformed his heart, his observance of the Torah's precepts becomes not only possible, but a compelling need. He craves the fulfillment of the mitzvot with every fiber of his being since they are the bridge between him and G-d, the means -- and the only means -- by which he can connect to his Creator. And any transgression of G-d's will, no matter how attractive to his material nature, is literally revolting to him, since it disrupts his relationship with G-d and runs contrary to his own true self.

But a person may argue: Why spend a lifetime pursuing this demanding regimen of mind and heart? Why must I toil to understand and feel? Why not take the direct approach -- open the books and follow instructions? I'm a simple Jew, this person may maintain, and the attainment of such lofty spiritual states as "comprehension of the Divine", "love of G-d", and "awe of G-d" are way beyond my depth. I know the truth, I know what G-d wants of me -- the Torah spells out the do's and don'ts of life quite clearly. I have a material and egocentric nature? An inborn inclination towards evil and self-destructive desires? I'll control them. My faith, determination, and willpower will do the job.

This, however, is the short but long way. As the most direct and simple line between two points, it is misleadingly the surest way to town; but in truth, the direct approach is a dead end. As with the route which Rabbi Yehoshua first chose, it seems to lead straight to the city -- only somehow it never quite makes it. For it is a path of never-ending struggle, the scene of perpetual duel between the self-oriented animal soul of man and his upward-reaching G-dly soul. True, man has been given free choice and furnished with the necessary fortitude and spiritual staying power to meet his every moral challenge; but the possibility of failure, G-d forbid, also exists. No matter how many times he will triumph, tomorrow will bring yet another test. On the short and long road one may win battle after battle, but there is never a decisive victory in the war of life.

On the other hand, the long but short way is winding, steep, tedious, and long as life itself. It is full of ups and downs, setbacks and frustrations. It demands every ounce of intellectual and emotional stamina the human being can muster. But it is a road that leads, steadily and surely, to the aspired-to destination. When one does finally acquire an aptitude and intellectual taste for the G-dly, when one does develop a desire for good and abhorrence for evil, the war has been won. The person has transformed himself into someone whose every thought, deed and act is naturally attuned to his quintessential self and purpose in life.

Based on the teachings of the [Lubavitcher Rebbe](#); adapted by [Yanki Tauber](#)

ON THE ESSENCE OF CHOICE

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

You have chosen us from all the nations; You loved us and desired us. You raised us above all tongues and sanctified us through Your commandments... (Siddur, mussaf prayer for the festivals)

[Freedom of] choice has been granted to every man... This concept is a fundamental principle and a pillar of the Torah and its commandments (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:1)

The concept of choice is central to the belief and philosophy of the Jew. Two of Judaism's most basic principles revolve around choice: G-d's choice of Israel as His chosen people, and the free choice that has been granted to man.

In this article, we shall examine the Lubavitcher Rebbe's unique conception of the dynamics of choice in both the human and supernal realms: as it is exercised in the mind and soul of man, and how these dynamics are paralleled in G-d's choice of the people of Israel.

Choice in Three Dimensions

Since, by definition, a choice is not coerced, it would seem that the word "free" in the phrase "free choice" is superfluous. But there are various degrees of freedom that a chooser may possess in making his choice.

All told, there are three levels of choice:

a) Compelled choice

One level of choice relates to the conventional, everyday usage of the term. We each make countless choices every day: Coffee or tea? Shall we paint the picket fence white or green? Should I take the job in New York or the one in Montana?

As long as no one is forcing your decision, yours can be said to be a "free choice". But are you truly choosing freely? Each of the options confronting you is armed with an entire array of qualities to sway your choice. The taste of coffee draws you to it, while your sense of decorum dictates tea, which everyone else is having. White will liven up your gloomy backyard but will also

show the dirt sooner than the green. The pay in New York is higher but so is the crime rate.

You will weigh all the factors and make your decision. But have *you* chosen? Or have the chosen thing's qualities, together with elements of your upbringing, personality and past experiences, conspired to compel your choice? Ultimately, you chose what you did because there is something about it which made you need or want it. Even if the reasons for both options were equally compelling, the one that you *did* choose was chosen because of its particular qualities. You made a choice as to which set of influences to succumb to -- hardly the epitome of freedom.

b) Random choice

But suppose that you are above it all. Suppose that nothing about these choices has the power to hold or sway you. That, to you, the taste of coffee and social niceties are equally irrelevant, and white and green are simply two cans of paint. That you are utterly immune to salary figures and the threats of the big city.

Since the advantages and shortcomings of both options are of no significance to you, you are in a position to make a free (i.e. non-influenced) choice: to select one of two (or more) options for no reason other than that that's the one you've chosen.

Nevertheless, this is still not the ultimate in choice and freedom. True, you are free of the attractions and rationalizations which ordinarily influence the choices of men. But how *did* you choose? By a mental throw of dice? By some totally arbitrary surge of will? The choice could have gone either way, correct? So where were *you* in all this? In what way have you exercised your freedom to choose? You have merely surrendered to something that is beyond you.

c) Quintessential choice

We seem to be in a catch-22 situation. Is there ever a free choice between A and B? If you chose A for a reason, if there is something about its qualities that attracts you, then it is not really you who is doing the choosing -- your choice is determined by its qualities and by your own biases and behavior patterns. And if you choose it for no reason, again you are not choosing, only serving as a pawn to the capricious turns of fate.

But what if your choice is determined by the very essence of what you are? What about the choice to live, the choice to be free, the choice to have a child? Certainly, these choices are motivated by a reason.

But theirs is not an external reason, nor is it a reason that is related to your external self (i.e. your mind-set, your emotional make-up, your personality). The reason for these choices is *you*. For life is but the desire to be. And what is freedom if not the opportunity to realize one's most quintessential potentials? And what are children if not the continuity of self? The quintessence of your being is what dictates that you choose life, liberty and parenthood.

The fact that the outcome of these choices is determined makes them no less free. On the contrary: this is the ultimate proof of their freedom. Because when choice is truly free, when the quintessence of self asserts itself, then the other, anti-self option (death, enslavement, childlessness) is obviously rejected. In other words, we usually see the existence of more than one option as the hallmark of choice -- "choice", in the conventional definition of the term, means the ability to choose between A and B. But when it comes to the ultimate definition of choice, the very opposite is true. When your choice is free of all constraints and inhibitions, external or internal, there is no other option -- any more than there is another you.

To summarize: On the first and lowest level of choice, our choices are determined by external factors -- the qualities of the chosen thing and the mental and emotional baggage we lug through life. The only thing that makes this any sort of choice at all is the existence of more than one option: we can resist one set of influences to embrace another.

A second, higher level of choice is one that is free of compulsion -- at least, there are no identifiable factors, conscious or otherwise, that influence our decision. Again, there are two or more options (if there weren't, it wouldn't be a choice). But the very fact that the choice can go either way indicates that, ultimately, it is not the person himself -- that is, his singular essence -- who is doing the choosing.

On the third, highest level of choice there is only one option: the course that represents the uninhibited choice of one's deepest self. The ultimate criterion of free choice is not "Is it determined?" but "What determines it?" *Every* choice is determined by something, be it a rational motive or an intuitive flash of no traceable origins. True choice is when one's course of action is determined by, and only by, the very quintessence of self.

Three That Are One

These three degrees of choice are actually three aspects of the same phenomenon. Often, we experience only the

most external layer of our power to choose. But there are also points in our life in which this outer layer is peeled away and we are in touch with a deeper -- and freer -- dimension of our choice. Finally, there are those rare moments when our most deeply rooted drives assert themselves, effecting a decision that is the very core and quintessence of choice.

Let us take the example of a choice we make countless times, and in countless different ways, every day -- the choice to live. No matter how difficult and tiresome the effort may become, we continue to elect life and survival.

As we generally experience it (if and when we think about it at all) this is firstly a choice in the most commonplace sense of the term. We are faced with two options: to live, or not to live (G-d forbid). On the one hand we have the reasons for life: its joys and rewards, our commitments to our loved ones, etc. On the other hand we have its burdens and heartaches. We decide that it is worth the effort. We have been swayed by the many compulsions for life.

But then there are those circumstances under which all the conventional reasons to live no longer apply. When life and death, stripped bare of their advantages and faults, are seen as equally significant (or non-significant). Yet something inside us says "Live!" Why? There is no why, only the simple fact that a choice has been made -- a choice free of all the motives which compel it in its lower, lesser incarnation.

On this level, we experience choice as a completely arbitrary throw of dice, which could just as easily have fallen on the other, negative side. The chooser can offer no reason, no explanation for his choice. "This is what I chose," is all he can say, this is what I have drawn from the lottery of choice.

In truth, these two experiences of choice are two perspectives on one reality. Also one who chooses life because of its positive qualities is, on a deeper level of self (--a level of self to which the life's benefits are irrelevant), really making a blind supra-rational choice. His "compelled choice" is but an expression of the arbitrary choice which transcends the external reasons for life.

Ultimately, however, *both* these dimensions of a person's choice are outgrowths of a third, even deeper dimension which lies at their core: choice as the uninhibited assertion of his quintessential self. A person experiences choice on this level when he recognizes that, ultimately, his desire for life is not caused by its particular benefits, nor is it the lot he has

drawn from the blue yonder of arbitrary impulse. It is an expression of his very "I": an expression of a definitive, unequivocal choice to project his being and potentials into the arena of physical existence.

So when we choose life in many little and ordinary ways every day, we are actually making this choice on three different levels. On the rational and emotional level, we choose life because of its rewards. On a deeper level of self, where such mundane considerations are irrelevant, it is a "blind" supra-rational choice. Simultaneously, the very core of our being is choosing life, and it is this very choice that is being reiterated by the more external layers of our self.

A Seeming Contradiction

This explains an apparent contradiction in what the Torah says regarding the free choice of man.

In the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy we read:

See, I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil; in that I command you this day to love G-d, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments...

Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life...

What is meant by the words "And you shall choose life?" Is this a commandment? A promise? A statement of fact? In any case, the Torah has no doubts about the ultimate outcome of man's choice between good and evil. "In the end of days," prophesies Moses, "you will return to G-d your Lord and you will obey His voice" (Deuteronomy 4:30). No matter to what depths we may fall, no matter how far we may stray from the fulfillment of his purpose, "G-d... devises means that the forsaken one be not forsaken" (II Samuel 14:14). In the words of Maimonides, "The Torah has already promised that Israel is destined to repent at the end of their exile and will immediately be redeemed." How is this to be reconciled with the fundamental principle of free choice?

The same question could be asked on the cosmic level. The purpose of creation is that man develop the divine goodness and perfection that has been invested within his own soul and in all of existence by the Creator. The ultimate realization of this purpose is the era of Moshiach, described by the prophets as a world free of evil and strife, a world in which man has overcome ignorance, jealousy and hatred to bring about the harmonious world that G-d envisioned at creation and outlined in the Torah.

A basic principle of the Jewish faith is the belief in Moshiach as an absolute eventuality: the belief that man not only can, but actually will, attain this goal (indeed, can the possibility exist that G-d's purpose in creation will not be realized?!). But if man has been granted freedom of choice, how can we be certain of his eventual election of good? Does not freedom of choice mean that it can go either way?

The Choice(s) of the Jew

As explained above, choice is a three-tiered affair, consisting of three dimensions or experiences of the same act of choice. The same applies to our choice to pursue good and reject evil by following the commandments of the Torah.

On the most elementary, everyday level, we choose the path of Torah as the most beneficial course to life. We see how Torah refines a person's character, establishes a harmonious social order and imbues our lives with meaning and purpose. After all, G-d is the designer and creator of life; it stands to reason that His instructions on to how to live it are the surest path toward spiritual and material fulfillment. Not that a selfish and hedonistic life, unencumbered by morals and responsibilities, doesn't have its enticements. Indeed, this is what makes our choice between good and evil a *choice*: we are faced with two options, each with its own attractions and compulsions. Our choice of good is because of its virtues: because we understand that "I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil" -- that good is synonymous with life while evil ultimately spells its destruction.

But not always are the advantages of good perceivable. There are times when "darkness covers the earth and a fog envelops the nations," when a world gone amok eclipses the vitality of good and the goodness of life. When "the way of the wicked prospers" while the righteous suffer. When our sensitivity to the spiritual rewards of fulfilling the divine will is deadened. Such conditions serve to elevate our choice of good to a higher -- and freer -- level: no longer is our commitment to the Almighty advantageous in any perceivable way; no longer is it compelled by our reason and by our perception of reality. When we choose good under such conditions, it is a pure choice: beyond motive, beyond rationale, beyond anything save our blind faith in G-d and the fact that we have cast our lot with the fulfillment of His will.

What both these levels of choice have in common is that they share the conventional definition of choice: the existence of two options (good and evil). On both

these levels, we could have conceivably chosen otherwise -- we could have opted for the advantages of evil, or we could have failed to make the leap of faith that the second level of choice demands.

But on the highest level of choice there is no other option. Our quintessential identity as G-d's chosen people breaks through all our secondary and superimposed personas, and freely translates into the unequivocal commitment to the fulfillment of the divine will in our daily lives.

This is the deeper significance of the three separate sentences, quoted above, in which the Torah sets down the principle of free choice. Indeed, there is a level of which G-d says "See, I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil" -- a choice that is based on the fact that we see and sense goodness as beneficial and evil as detrimental to life. There is also a higher level of choice on which "Life and death I have set before you" -- when life and death are simply set before us as equals. But both these choices are but echoes of the ultimate choice: "You *shall* choose life." When you truly choose, that choice will be life.

And also when you choose life because of its virtues, or when you choose it without apparent cause or reason, the true source of your choice is the fact that *you* are choosing -- and you, the real you, always chooses life. And because this is the choice dictated by your quintessential self, it is the choice that will eventually assert itself in *all* your decisions. For your true self can only remain suppressed for so long: ultimately, inevitably, it must come to light.

So it is with absolute certainty that the Jew believes that there will come a time when the quintessential truth of every created being will assert itself and opt for life. This is not in contradiction with the concept of free choice -- it is its ultimate expression.

G-d's Choice: Layers and Projections

From my own flesh, I perceive G-d (Job 19:26).

G-d, of course, is a purely singular being -- He certainly does not possess a "character", a "personality" or the many other components which make the human self such a multi-layered affair. And yet, there *is* a certain parallel between the human and the Divine, a parallel which enables us to employ the workings of our own self as a metaphor by which to gain insight into the divine reality.

This parallel exists because, although G-d does not intrinsically possess an external self or character, He

chose to project such a "self" from His singular essence in order to impart certain characteristics to His relationship with our existence. This is the divine act of constriction (*zimtzum*) discussed in the teachings of Kabbalah: G-d's projection of His infinite and featureless self via the relatively finite and anthropomorphic reality of His attributes (*sefirot*), in order to touch our lives in a manner that we can relate to.

"From my own flesh, I perceive G-d." Just as our exercise of "choice" is expressed on three different levels, so it is with G-d's choice of Israel as His cherished people from among all the nations. Here, too, we have three different dimensions or definitions of choice. And here, too, the three choices, despite the dissimilarities between them, are actually three successive incarnations, each extrinsic to the other, of the same reality.

On the most external level, G-d's choice of the people of Israel has its reasons. Abraham, the first Jew, was the only member of his generation to search for the truth and recognize the One G-d; he then devoted his life, to the point of self-sacrifice, to bring this truth to a pagan world -- a legacy and mission he imparted to his child and grandchild, out of whom sprung the Jewish nation. In the words of the Torah, "Because He loved your forefathers, He chose their children" (Deuteronomy 4:37). Our sages also cite our faith in G-d and the preservation of our identity throughout our long and bitter enslavement in Egypt as virtues which made us deserving of redemption and choice. The very nature and character of the Jew, attests the Talmud, is "modest, compassionate and charitable," and "Even the transgressors of Israel are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate [is full of seeds]."

But can we say that G-d chose us because of our positive qualities? Indeed, can any reason compel or influence His choice? Can the paragon of infinity and perfection need or benefit from anything? True, G-d does care about the behavior of man. He Himself tells us that our positive deeds cause Him pleasure and that He is angered by our sins. But this is only because He desired to grant import and significance to our deeds. In other words, when we speak of G-d's desire of good and His abhorrence of evil, we are speaking of a projected divine self through which the Almighty chose to relate to us and to be affected by what we do. It is on this level that we are chosen because of our virtues. In truth, however, G-d is beyond all that. "If you sin, how have you affected Him? If your transgressions multiply, what do you do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give Him? What can He possibly receive from your hand?" (Job 35:6).

On this level, when G-d chooses, it is a choice, pure and free, without reason and compulsion. The prophet Malachi cites G-d as saying: "Is not Esau a brother to Jacob? But I love Jacob" (Malachi 1:2). Even from the perspective in which Jacob is no more worthy (for worthiness is a non-issue), G-d chooses Jacob.

Does this mean that His choice could have gone either way? That the lot could have conceivably fallen to Esau? That we are G-d's chosen people by an arbitrary toss of supernal dice? Ultimately, the answer is no. For also this higher level of choice does not describe the true nature of G-d's choice of Israel. This, too, relates to a projected divine reality rather than to the divine essence, a projection whose purpose is to create a reality in which "Also darkness is not dark for You... for darkness is as light" -- a reality that is oblivious to good and evil, allowing for the free choice of man between right and wrong (level #2 of free choice).

Ultimately, however, the nature of the divine implies that our choice as G-d's people was *not* arbitrary. Can G-d be subject to whim? To chance? To a twist of fate? Obviously, the Infinite and Omnipotent is not subject to anything. He is the determinant of all, and no determinants -- rational or inexplicable -- determine anything in regard to Him.

The ultimate definition of choice is that it is the free and uninhibited expression of the chooser's quintessential self. So it is with G-d: if He *chose*, His choice reflects His singular reality. If He *chose*, His choice is absolute and unequivocal, not an arbitrary selection out of several possibilities. If He chose us, then it is ultimately a choice that is rooted in His very essence.

The two lower dimensions of choice are also valid descriptions of G-d's choice of Israel. But they are only part of the story -- the part that pertains to the level of reality on which they are effected. So when the Jew is chosen because of his virtues, it is a reasoned choice, but it is also much more than that; when the lot falls on Jacob it is a supra-rational, arbitrary choice, but it is also much more than that: ultimately, these are but outward expressions of the ultimate choice that is intrinsic to the divine essence.

This is the deeper significance to King David's words: "G-d... You endorse my lot" (Psalms 16:5). On one level, my relationship with You is based on the arbitrary "lot"; but *You*, your very essence, endorses my lot -- it is Your quintessential choice of me which translates into the falling of the lottery in my favor.

A Roll of Dice

This explains a curious thing about the most joyous day on the Jewish calendar, the festival of Purim.

Many developments contributed to the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman's decree: Esther's replacement of Vashti as queen; Mordechai's rousing of the Jews of Shushan to repentance and prayer; Achashverosh's sleepless night, in which he discovers that Mordechai has saved his life and commands Haman to lead Mordechai in a hero's parade through the streets of Shushan; Esther's petition to the king and her confrontation with Haman; the hanging of Haman; the great war between the Jews and their enemies on the 13th of Adar.

Each of these events played a major role in the miracle of Purim. And yet, the name of the festival -- the single word chosen to express its significance -- refers to a seemingly minor detail: the fact that Haman selected the date of his proposed annihilation of the Jews by casting lots (*pur* is Persian for "lot"). Obviously, the significance of the lot lies at the very heart of what Purim is all about.

Why, indeed, did Haman cast lots? Why didn't he simply chose the first convenient day or days on which to carry out his evil decree?

But Haman understood that in order to destroy Israel, he must first undermine their status as G-d's chosen people. He also knew that any attempt to discredit their deservedness of this status was doomed to failure. True, they had sinned in bowing to Nebuchadnezar's image and partaking of Achashverosh's feast, and these sins were what made them vulnerable to his threat in the first place. But are not even the transgressors of Israel as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is full of seeds? In the end, they always manage to scrape together enough merits to protect them. And Jews are notorious for repenting their inequities at the eleventh hour and restoring the Almighty's goodwill.

Haman thought of a better way. What was this famous "choice" anyway, but an arbitrary throw of dice? After all, G-d did not pick the Jews because of their Nobel Prize winners and charitable foundations. Is not darkness as light to Him? Is not Grandpa Esau a brother to Jacob? G-d chose them on a whim -- perhaps He will unchoose them on a whim as well.

"I'm not going to plan this thing rationally," said Haman. "I know that going by the regular route I don't stand a chance. Instead, I will cast it to the blind workings of

fate. I will focus on that aspect of reality that transcends the laws of merit and deficiency. I will induce that aspect of the divine before which all is equally irrelevant and arbitrary."

Haman cast his lots -- "The Lot" as the Book of Esther twice refers to it -- and his eyes lit up. The lot had fallen on the month of Adar, the month of Moses' death. This time, thought Haman, the lot has fallen to Esau.

But if Haman reached beyond the most external level of choice to evoke its deeper, arbitrary dimension, the Jewish people delved even deeper. For an entire year, every single Jew on earth faced the possibility of death, G-d forbid. As the Book of Esther relates, Haman's decree was never revoked. All King Achashverosh did was to authorize Mordechai and Esther to issue another decree, allowing the Jews, a small minority in a hostile world, to defend themselves against the slaughter that was ordered by Haman's decree. Thus, we celebrate the victory of Purim not on the day that Haman was hanged, but on the day, eleven months later, that followed the miraculous victory of the Jews in their war against those who sought to destroy them.

And yet, despite the death warrant that hung over the head of every Jew, not a single one broke ranks with his people. For an entire year they faced extinction, G-d forbid, rather than renounce their identity. This, in a time of spiritual darkness -- for the story of Purim took place at the juncture in history when the era of prophecy was coming to a close, when G-d ceased His open and direct communication with man.

So theirs was not a rational choice of good as perceivably beneficial to life, nor was it an arbitrary, supra-rational toss of a coin (what coin, tossed a million times, will fall a million times on "heads"?). It was an unprecedented assertion of the quintessence of the Jewish soul -- of its intrinsic, unequivocal choice of attachment to G-d. It was this expression of our choice, in its freest and most quintessential form, to which G-d responded by expressing the deepest element of *His* choice of Israel. The lot cast by Haman was now revealed to be but another expression of G-d's love for His people -- the lot which selected the month that was "transformed for them from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity."

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; adapted by Yanki Tauber