

## Shabbos Acharei Mos / Kedoshim - Pirkei Avos Chapter Three

*The hallmark of a Jew is our claim that we are totally free willed to conquer our personal demons and to choose any opportunity for personal growth. We affirm that we are not enslaved to our passions nor predisposed to instinct and possess the ability to change the strongest of conditioned behavior.*

*In these days of being 'imprisoned' in our homes our choices seem to have diminished. Or have they?*

*In these days of deep introspection, I believe our choices are greatly enhanced.*

*I share with you an essay which reveals the true essence and opportunity of free will, revealing a remarkable chiddush from the holy Baal Shem Tov.*

*Hope you enjoy!*

*B'Ahava,  
Zvi Yehuda Teichman*

### Seize the Moment!

The credo of every Jew is embedded within a blueprint for Jewish life - the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law.

The very first directive in *Shulchan Aruch*, that sets the foundation for the mission of fulfilling all the numerous details that follow, begins with the charge:

*(א) יתגבר כארי לעמוד בבוקר לעבודת בוראו שיהא הוא מעורר את השחר (או"ח סי' א סעי' א) One should strengthen himself like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator, so that it is he who awakens the dawn!*

This strength of character inherent to the Jewish nation was ironically observed and admired by none other than Bilaam the Wicked. In absolute frustration he is compelled to articulate the inevitable truth:

*הן עם כלביא יקום וכארי יתנשא לא ישכב עד יאכל טרף ודם חללים ישתה (במדבר כג כד) Behold! the people will arise like a lion cub and raise itself up like a lion; it will not lie down until it consumes its prey and drinks the blood of the slain.*

This verse is the source for this opening statement in the *Shulchan Aruch*. (ביאור הגר"א שם)

The Midrash (תנחומא בלק יד) elucidates that this verse refers more specifically to their awakening from their slumber with alacrity each morning, like lions, **חוטפים קריאת שמע** וכשבא לישן מפקיד, וממליכים להקב"ה... "seizing" the opportunity to recite *Shma* in the morning, רוחו ביד הקב"ה and when going to sleep at night, entrusting their soul to their creator with the saying of the Bedtime *Shma*.

## Shabbos Acharei Mos / Kedoshim - Pirkei Avos Chapter Three

What are we extolling here? Is it the adherence to the *mitzvah* of reciting *Shma* per se, or is it the eagerness and swiftness that we display in our observance of His will in general?

The Talmud (שבת קיט:) records the opinion of Rav Avahu who claimed that it was as a result of the neglecting the *mitzvah* of reciting the morning and evening *Shma*, that Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Jewish nation went into exile.

He derives it from a series of verses in *Yeshaya*. (ישעיה ה יא-יג)

הוי משכימי בבקר שחר ירדפו מאחרי בנשף יין ידליקם, *Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may pursue strong drink; that tarry late into the night, till wine inflame them!*

והיה כנור ונבל תף וחליל ויין משתייהם ואת פעל ד' לא יביטו ומעשה ידיו לא ראו, *And the harp and the lute, the tabret and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of G-d, neither have they considered the operation of His hands.*

לכן גלה עמי מבלידעת... *Therefore, My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge...*

It is not readily apparent from the cursory reading of these verses any clear evidence of their not having recited the daily *Shma*. It would seem that their sin was more associated with their indulgence in alcohol and partying. Perhaps they indeed recited their daily prayers and fulfilled their obligations, but they were just more focused on the objective of drink and festivity.

Rashi on the verse that compares the Jewish nation to an “arising lion” utilizes that same phrase as the Midrash, לחטוף מצוות, to “snatch *mitzvos*”.

What does this notion of “grabbing” a *mitzvah* connote?

Many of us live our daily lives according to natural assumptions. We daven, put on Tefillin, recite our prayers, study Torah and engage in acts of kindness. We would not have it any other way, this is what we expect from ourselves. The question however remains, how many free willed choices do we make on any given day? How much real “choice” governs our actions. For the most part, most of us just “go with the flow” of life in accordance to the way we were brought up or have committed ourselves to.

Yet we can still choose.

If we fight the urge to stay in bed and decide to arise out of initiative rather than waiting until that last inevitable snooze alarm goes off; at a point where we have no alternative but to get out of bed lest we miss Shul, carpool or work, then we have “grabbed” a *mitzvah*.

## Shabbos Acharei Mos / Kedoshim - Pirkei Avos Chapter Three

We can decide to do an act of kindness that we would otherwise “have to do”, like assisting our spouses, or transform the duty to devote time to Torah study into an inspired activity, or transmute perfunctory prayer into a meaningful relationship by simply choosing to approach it with enthusiastic “choice” rather than inevitability.

We must “seize” the moment in order to make it into the free willed act we were created for, thus giving it meaningful and enthused “life”.

Rav Avahu sees in the verse in Yeshaya a description of a people who have set for themselves objectives other than those outlined in the Torah. They are not necessarily prohibited ones nor activities that preclude our performance of our obligations to G-d. But when our day and its religious duties are merely the stepping stones to get to my “other” objectives, than they remain predictable and barren of “choice” and will never inspire us.

It is alleged in the name of one the greatest Jewish leaders of our generation, HaRav Aharon Kotler, that when children gaze at the clock during their morning studies, counting the minutes to recess, then the entire learning is valued as merely an instrument to eating lunch.

The declaration of *Shma* is commonly referred to as קבלת עול מלכות שמים, *accepting the yoke of Heaven*. This represents the ultimate expression of בחירה, *free willed choice*, the greatest strength man possesses, that no one can take away.

Whether we approach the beginning of our day as merely an encounter with the inevitable or as an opportunity to “seize the day”, that is laden with endless possibilities, will determine whether we are created in the image of G-d or are mere lemmings marching towards extinction.

When we “awaken the dawn” and “strengthen ourselves like a lion” we exercise that spark of divinity we are all invested with. With that choice we accept the “yoke of Heaven”.

The last verse in Yeshaya defines the ultimate consequence of living life with superficial objectives, ...מבלידעת, *Therefore My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge...*, living mindlessly!

We created our own destiny by not investing our life with “choices”. By doing *mitzvos* without contemplative purpose, we lost the enthusiasm associated with בחירה, free will. We succumbed to the mindless pursuit of that which naturally soothes, forsaking the joy that comes with emulating our Creator in making free willed choices.

How we start our day sets into motion an attitude that pervades everything we do.

Rabbi Dosa ben Hurkinos teaches in Pirkei Avos (ג יא):

שְׁנֵה שָׁל שְׁחֲרִית, וַיְיוּ שֶׁל צְהָרִים, וְשִׁיחַת הַיְלָדִים, וְיִשִּׁיבַת בְּתֵי כְּנִסְיוֹת שֶׁל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ, מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם:

## Shabbos Acharei Mos / Kedoshim - Pirkei Avos Chapter Three

*Late morning sleep, midday wine, children's chatter, and sitting in the assemblies of the ignorant, remove man from the world.*

Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas in this seemingly simple piece of advice, subtly alludes to the four areas we exhibit weakness.

We all want pine for creature comforts, who does not love to sleep an extra hour in the morning.

We all love food and drink and the soothing sensation that accompanies it.

We are all emotional beings, who like children, find a satisfying release of emotions when we chatter on end about our frustrations.

And everyone needs a social group to belong to that provides one with a sense of self and belonging, although not always a healthy one.

It all begins with who takes control. Do I dare to choose?

Do I arouse the dawn or does it seduce me into a deeper state of unconsciousness?

That lack of choice initiates a spiral downward that leads one towards overindulgence in food, uncontrolled emotion and precious time wasted in mindless social interactions.

But man can face all these challenges and not only survive but thrive!

The saintly Imrei Chaim of Vishnitz revealed what the Holy Baal Shem Tov taught us regarding the key to greatness.

Man need not submit oneself to pain in order to attain the curative and purifying power of suffering. The Baal Shem instructed that "ואינטער דער ווארעמע דאכינע", even while "under the warm quilt", one can achieve the cleansing of יסורין, infliction, by "awakening the dawn", warding off the temptation to stay in bed.

Furthermore he taught that one need not subject oneself to fasting in order to achieve atonement. One can "פאסטן ביי די שישעלי", "fast while eating from the plate", by exhibiting thoughtfulness and self-control, one can enjoy yet accomplish that which fasting can.

Additionally, he added, one need not always express ones deepest emotions outwardly in order to achieve the catharsis that comes with emoting. The Baal Shem conceived a notion of "זיצנידיג טאנצען", "dancing in place". One who senses the presence of G-d in his life can overflow with quiet emotion whether in joy or sorrow knowing that G-d hears like no other can.

## Shabbos Acharei Mos / Kedoshim - Pirkei Avos Chapter Three

Finally we can interact with people without allowing ourselves to be drawn in to the weaknesses that people so often find common comfort in. He displayed the concept of התבודדות בין אנשים, "*isolation among men*". With G-d by our side we need no validation other than the realization that He is our greatest encourager.

We have a misconception that greatness lays in magnificent acts of sacrifice and devotion, when in truth it is at everyone's doorstep and at every experience.

If only we would begin to appreciate the greatness invested in us by our loving Father in Heaven, who empowered us with the ability live with inspiration and true joy every moment of our existence.

In this notion, lies the secret to our redemption.

The choice is ours!