

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to the sponsors of today's drasha:

- David and Renee Bienenstock, in memory of David's mother, Nechama bas HaRav Yaakov Aryeh, whose yahrtzeit is this Shabbos, 25 Av.
- Idie and Isser Goldsmith, in memory of Isser's father, Rabbi Yechiel Goldsmith, whose 20th yahrtzeit is this Shabbos, 25 Av.
- Marvin and Debra Szatmary, in memory of Marvin's father, Shammai ben Moshe, whose yahrtzeit is 30 Av.

May all their neshamos have an aliya, and may all the sponsors be zoche to bracha and hatzlacha for their generosity and dedication to the shul.

The Yamim Noraim registration email has gone out. It has taken weeks of planning to get us to this point—designing a workable setup involving several locations, finding multiple baalei tefilla, renting tents, and securing chairs. I want to thank President Kenny Friedman and Vice President Itzi Barr, Executive Director Shira Glickman, Seating Chairman Avi Zuckerbrod, and our medical advisors. Things will be a little different this year, but only from the outside. The essence of the Shomrei Yamim Noraim experience--the energy, the passion, the camaraderie, and the kavana and simcha-filled ruach--will be the same. This is all a work in progress, and we are trying our best to accommodate everyone's needs, while maintaining the highest levels of safety. We ask for your continuing patience and understanding as we work through this process.

I also want to stress that we are in no way out of the woods when it comes to Covid-19. There are still hundreds of new cases each day in Maryland, and Baltimore City remains a hot spot, even if our community still is seeing low numbers. We must remain vigilant with mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing.

Friday is the first day of Elul, exactly one month before Rosh HaShanah, as we count down to the Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgment.

According to Chazal, Rosh HaShanah is one of four days in the year when Hashem judges us. Why, specifically, will Hashem be judging us then, on the day man was created?

The **Seforno** teaches that when Adam was created בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹהִים, in God's form, it means that God created human beings with the ability to emulate Hashem by choosing their own path in life.

This means that the definition of our humanity is built on the **choices** we make—our role in actively controlling our destiny.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, in a letter (Igros 42, page 71) printed in *Igros Pachad Yitzchak*, wrote: *"The avi avos hatumah (highest level of impurity) of our time is the degradation of man. . .the essence of man is his free will. . ."*

And this is the main judgment of Rosh Hashana...in the past year, to what extent did we **choose properly**. While we cannot choose all our circumstances, we **can always** control our attitude and actions. We can control our response to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We can control what we make of our circumstances.

In the speech that begins this week's parsha, Moshe Rabbeinu highlights the centrality of the idea that man controls his own destiny—and is responsible for choosing his own path in life.

דברים פרק יא: (כו) ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה:

See and recognize **today** that there are two choices in life: bracha and klala—blessing and curse—right and wrong.

In a similar speech in Parashas Nitzvaim, Moshe Rabbeinu defines bracha and klala as חיים וטוב Life and good vs. מות ורע death and bad

דברים פרק ל

(טו) ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע:

(יט) העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך:

Moshe Rabbeinu makes sure that the Jewish people, as they prepare to enter Israel, understand this idea, that life is a constant struggle between good and evil, between blessing and curse.

But why is there no in between, no middle ground, no golden mean between blessing and curse?

The **Seforno** writes that Moshe is teaching an important lesson. When you have the great potential and responsibility that were given to the Jewish people, there really is no in between. Jews have always risen to the top...or suffered at the bottom. It is a promise of unusual success or failure.

ספורנו דברים פרק יא פסוק כו

(כו) ראה. הביט וראה שלא יהיה עניןך על אופן בינוני כמו שהוא המנהג בשאר האומות. כי אמנם אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה והם שני הקצוות כי הברכה היא הצלחה יותר מן המספיק על צד היותר טוב. והקללה היא מארה מחסרת שלא יושג המספיק ושניהם לפניכם להשיג כפי מה שתבחרו:

But I believe another answer to this question is based on an accurate definition of life and death—of blessing and curse. There is no in between because blessing is found in the act of making moral choices.

As the Pasuk writes:

את הברכה אשר תשמעו אל מצות יקוק אלהיכם אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום:

Rav S. R. Hirsch comments: Significantly, it does not say here תשמעו as it says of the קללה in the next verse לא תשמעו rather, it says תשמעו. *The observance of God's commandments is in itself part of the blessing. The blessing does not come only as a result of obedience to the mitzvah, but already begins to materialize in the very act of obedience and mitzvah observance. The spiritual and moral act of faithfully observing the Torah constitutes in itself a blessed advancement of our whole being; hence, each time we carry out a mitzvah, we bring blessing upon ourselves.*

Making moral choices, expressing our דמות אלקים, our essential humanity, **is** the achievement of blessing.

I believe that is why the word נתן is used לפניכם היום, ראה אנכי נתן, connoting a present or gift, is used in context of man's ability to choose. Because it is **truly a gift** to be in control of our own destinies. The ability to choose, itself is, itself, the blessing and reward.

That is why the **Rambam** writes in *Hilchos Teshuva* that the highest level of avodas Hashem is not keeping mitzvos in order to achieve reward **from** Hashem. Instead, the highest level is achieved by emulating God, by making proper choices, correct and moral choices; by expressing our דמות אלקים.

The **Rambam** says this was first demonstrated by Avraham Avinu. He was an iconoclast, a man who lived in a pagan culture but chose to follow God. He chose to swim against the stream, to take control of his destiny, and to make his own choices.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק י הלכה ב

העובד מאהבה עוסק בתורה ובמצות והולך בנתיבות החכמה לא מפני דבר בעולם ולא מפני יראת הרעה ולא כדי לירש הטובה אלא עושה האמת מפני שהוא אמת וסוף הטובה לבא בגללה, ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה מאד ואין כל חכם זוכה לה, והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבו לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה והיא המעלה שצונו בה הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידי משה שנאמר ואהבת את ה' אלהיך, ובזמן שיאהוב אדם את ה' אהבה הראויה מיד יעשה כל המצות מאהבה.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that the significance of our choices on our lives was taught first by Avraham Avinu, a man who defined his own path in life.

Rabbi Sacks writes that when Hashem said to Avraham לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך he was confirming this crucial concept of free will. Free will was challenged throughout the ages by many philosophers, most notably; Marx, Spinoza, and Freud. Each sought to show that we are not really free.

Marx said that we are a product of social forces, themselves shaped by the interests of the ruling class, the owners of land and other property. Therefore, Hashem said to Avraham, "Leave your land."

Spinoza said that we are made of innate instincts and biological drives (genetic determinism) given at birth. Therefore, Hashem said to Avraham, "Leave the circumstances of your birth."

Finally, **Freud** said that we are the way we are because of the traumas of childhood, the influence of our early years, our relationships with our parents. Therefore, Hashem said to Avraham, "Leave your father's house."

All of these approaches direct contradict the Torah's outlook. The **Rambam**, in *Hilchos Teshuva*, criticizes in very harsh tones anyone who believes that our lives are predetermined, anyone who sees life as just going through motions that have already been decided and programmed for him with no potential for change or improvement.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה ב

אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע, אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמשה רבינו או רשע כירבעם

The lesson is that when you **are in control**. And when you choose to live for a higher purpose; you are emulating God...which itself is true blessing.

That is why there is really no "in between." Depending on our attitude and connection to Hashem, as expressed through our own choices, everything is either a blessing or a curse, a mitzvah or an aveira.

Conventionally, it is understood that there are 613 mitzvos. But the **Chovos Halevavos** writes that there are really more than 613 mitzvos. Everything we do in life either brings us closer to God or takes us further away from Him. Something that brings us closer is a mitzvah, and something that distances us is an aveira. If we choose correctly, that choice itself is a mitzva and brings with it blessing...

שכל מעשי האדם אינם יוצאים מצווי ואזהרה ודי הספוק, כי כל מה שיוצא מגדר די הספוק או אל התוספת או אל החסרון, איננו נמלט מהשיג בצווי, **אם יהיה לשם שמים, או באזהרה אם לא יהיה לש"ש**.

Moshe Rabbeinu is imparting a timeless message: to take control of our destiny, to strive for a relationship with Hashem—such that every choice we make is a bracha, that is the coveted choice of life of true חיים.

But there are more valuable insights about our choices which Moshe Rabbeinu taught in this one simple phrase **ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה**. Commentators point out a grammatical inconsistency in Moshe's speech. **ראה** is singular, **לפניכם** is plural. You would think he should speak only in plural, as he is speaking to a group of people.

The **Chasam Sofer** explains that Moshe Rabbeinu is stressing the power of the individual. ואולי יש לפרש שמרמז מה שאמרו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה (קדושין מ ע"ב) לעולם יראה האדם עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו כאלו מחצה זכאי ומחצה חיב. זכה אשריו ושהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לזכות, וההפך בהפך. על כן בכל מעשה שיעשה אדם יראה עצמו ויאמר לנפשו הרי בזה אני ממית כל העולם או מחיהו הכל לפי המעשה. וכתוב זה מצוה לכל יחיד ויחיד. "ראה" בנפשך לאמר תמיד לכל העולם ואנשיו, אנכי נותן לפניכם היום במעשי ברכה או קללה הכל לפי זכותי.

The Gemara in Kiddushin 40b teaches that with one action, one good choice, we can tip the scales for ourselves and the entire world. Moshe Rabbeinu is teaching the Jewish people that our individual choices can affect the entire community and even beyond.

And the **Vilna Gaon** says that Moshe by adding the word **היום, today**, he was telling them it is never too late...and there is never a time when it is no longer expected of us.

אדרת אליהו דברים פרק יא פסוק כו

ושמא תאמרו הבחירה ניתן לאדם בימי בחרותו אבל לא אחר שהורגל במעלליו הקשים לכן אמר היום בכל יום ויום הרשות נתונה והבחירה בידו לילך בדרך טובים.

Similarly, the **Kedushas Levi, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev**, teaches that the word **היום, today**, tells us that this lesson remains relevant today—and that every day is a new day, with a new set of choices, new opportunities for proper choices.

קדושת לוי דברים פרשת ראה

ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום ברכה (יא, כו). לכאורה תיבת 'היום' אינו מובן. אך דידוע שהקב"ה מחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית (נוסח ברכת 'יוצר אור'), דהוא יתברך נותן בכל יום בהירות חדש, ומשפיע חסדים חדשים, ואדם העובד שמו יתברך מקבל עליו בכל יום בהירות ושכל חדש מה שלא היה יודע אתמול. וזה שכתוב 'ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום'. על דרך שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל (עי' רש"י דברים כו, טז) 'היום' בכל יום יהיו בעיניך כחדשים, רצה לומר בכל יום תקבל ברכה וחסד חדש:

We always have more to accomplish. Every moment is precious. It's never too late to change course.

Friday is the first day of Elul. As we look ahead toward the month of teshuva, we must understand that there are choices in front of us each and every day.

May we all take this lesson to heart to utilize every moment to live meaningful and productive lives, to choose wisely; developing a better and deeper relationship with God. May we all be zoche to see the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash, bimhera, viyamenu...amen.