

If a Ceiling Could Talk . . .

By Chaya Shuchat

When I was a child, I was fascinated by the stucco ceiling in our family room. One moment I'd be gazing at crags and cliffs, and then suddenly it would invert. Instead of jagged peaks, the ceiling would turn into a landscape of rugged curves and valleys. (Yes, I spent a lot of time staring at the ceiling.)

That textured ceiling has come to mind on occasion when I've had to grapple with a tough choice. First, there are agonizing hours of wavering and uncertainty. Then comes a sudden, almost breathtaking shift in perspective that makes the right decision stunningly clear.

In this week's Torah portion, we find the following directive: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life."¹

What does it mean to choose life?

What does it mean to choose life? It's not as if we need to be told to live. Rather, G-d is telling us that by choosing to follow His ways, we are choosing a good life. A blessed life.

But this brings us to the age-old question "Why do the wicked prosper?" Why do we see evil people enjoying success in this world while good people struggle?

One of the classic answers is that while evil people may seem to be living it up in this world, they will suffer in the next, while the righteous will receive their reward in the world to come. Earthly pleasures are finite, but spiritual pleasures are infinite.

The problem with this answer is that many of us haven't got the patience to wait for the world to come. Our struggles are now, and we want relief now.

But maybe the answer isn't some logical discourse, but a shift in perspective. A good life is defined not by what you get, but by what you give. And when you look at life this way, the question disappears. It becomes almost irrelevant. No matter how little I have, there is always something I can do—some way I can reach out to someone who has less than I do. By the same token, a life defined by how much you get can never satisfy. No matter how much you have, you always want more and more.

I am reminded of the story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife, Rachel, who lived in dire poverty after Rachel was disinherited by her wealthy father. One night, a beggar knocked on their door and asked for a bundle of straw.



His wife had just given birth, and she had nothing to lie down on. Rabbi Akiva gladly handed over one of their bundles. Later, he remarked to his wife: “See, my dear, there are those who fare worse than we do.”

I won’t say that I hold on to this perspective all the time. Like our stucco ceiling, I find that it shifts in and out of focus. Some days I am able to lift myself above the challenges and see how, indeed, my life is pretty good. Other days I get bogged down by the daily grind, and I wallow in self-pity over the things I don’t have.

In order to be able to “choose life,” we need to be able to see it—to recognize it as life. And this is what the Torah’s command gives us. It’s not really a directive. The point isn’t to tell us what to do, but to show us—to help us hold on to the perspective, to help us see how much more there is to life than physical ease and comfort.

On the words “And you shall choose life,” Rashi comments:

It is like a man who says to his son, “Choose for yourself a fine portion of my estate,” and then directs him to the best portion, saying to him, “This [is the portion which] you should choose for yourself!” And regarding this, the verse says,² “The L-rd is my allotted portion and my cup; You guide my destiny.” [The last clause, *atah tomich gorali*, literally means “You laid upon my lot.” That is to say:] “You laid my hand upon the good lot, saying, ‘Take this for yourself!’ ”

Why does Rashi elaborate so on a verse that seems straightforward? If a landowner were to approach you and say, “Here is my field. Choose for yourself the best portion in it,” you might be perplexed. You may not have the expertise to know which part of the field is best. But if the owner himself points out the best part of the field, you trust his judgment. Furthermore, Rashi uses a parable of a man speaking to his son—so you can be certain that his advice will be in his child’s best interest.

And the same is true when G-d tells us, “Choose life.” As the Creator of the world, surely we can trust His word as to what is valuable in life. And as our Father, surely He wants us to make the right choice and will assist us to do so. And just in case we still didn’t get the point, G-d will go so far as to lay our hand on the right choice, to say, “Choose this!”

**Surely He wants us to
make the right choice**

This section of the Torah is especially pertinent this week, the final Shabbat of the year, when we prepare for Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah, we choose G-d as our King, and we request that He choose us as His people. We beseech Him to elevate us to a perspective where we can see the good—where the choice to do good is as straightforward and natural as the choice to live. Moreover, we ask G-d to allow us to experience the goodness not only on a cosmic spiritual level, but on a physical level as well, and grant us a *shana tovah u’metukah*, a good and sweet year.³

FOOTNOTES

1. Deuteronomy 30:19.

2. Psalms 16:5.

3. Partially based on Likkutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 274.

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