

# Life in Three Dimensions

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

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*How fortunate are we! How good is our portion, how pleasant is our lot, and how beautiful our inheritance.*

From the morning prayers

"Portion", "lot" and "inheritance" — these three words in their various forms appear repeatedly in the Torah's account of how the Promised Land was given to the people of Israel. It was **apportioned** to them in accordance with the population numbers and particular needs of each tribe and family. But there was also a **casting of lots** to determine who should get which part of the land. (The commentaries offer various explanations as to how these two different — indeed, contradictory — methods were applied). And finally, the land is repeatedly described as the people's **inheritance**.

Thus we have three dimensions to the people's relationship with the land:

- 1) A rational relationship, in which logistic considerations such as population size and vocation determine the relationship. The territory allotted to the seafaring merchants of Zebulun would be different than that given to the vintners of Judah; Dan's 64,400 soldiers have different needs than Menasseh's 52,700 shepherds.
- 2) A supra-rational "casting of lots" in which the person surrenders to a dynamic which, to him, is completely arbitrary.
- 3) Intrinsic connection. Inheritance is anything but logical — a shepherd can inherit a shipping empire; an estate coming into the possession of a day-old infant through inheritance is no less his than that inherited by an adult heir, regardless of the fact that he doesn't know what to do with it and is not even aware that he owns it. On the other hand, inheritance is certainly not arbitrary. On the contrary: it is the heir's "birthright", something that he received *because of who and what he is*. (In fact, according to Torah law, inheritance is not considered a "transfer of ownership"; rather, the son's ownership is a continuation of the father's ownership, the son being of one essence with the father).

The Chassidic masters explain that these three elements of our relationship with the Land reflect a similar complexity in all our relationships. Apportionment and allotment is the daily fare of life: every day, nay every minute, we pick and select from the options that are (or which we perceive to be) presented to us, resulting in choices we make in our relationships with each other and the world we inhabit. In each of these choices dwell the three elements of rational "portion", supra-rational "lottery" and quintessential "inheritance". Furthermore, this is so because it reflects — and evolves from — these selfsame elements in G-d's relationship with us.

## Dimensions of Choice

There are three levels of choice:

### a) ***Compelled choice***

This level of choice relates to the conventional, everyday usage of the term. Coffee or tea? Shall we paint the picket fence white or green? Should I take the job in New York or the one in Seattle?

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 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 crime statistics.

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 choose "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 one's 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 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 one's, etc. On the other hand we have its burdens and heartaches. We decide that its 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 that cosmic lottery which throws things our way and makes things the way they are.

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 word 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 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.

### **The Third Level**

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 —

on the first level, we could have opted for the advantages of evil; on the second level, we could have failed to make the leap of faith that this 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**

The Chassidic masters repeatedly quoted the verse (Job 19:26): "From my own flesh, I perceive G-d". Maimonides describes G-d as the ultimate singularity (*achdut ha-peshutah*) — G-d 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 (*tzimtzum*) discussed in the teaching of Kabbalah: G-d's projection of His infinite and featureless self via the relatively finite and anthropomorphous 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 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. In the words of the prophet: "'Is not Esau a brother to Jacob?,' says G-d. '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 had saved his life and commands Haman to lead Mordechai in a heros 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 Nebuchadnezzar's image and in 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 regaining 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'll cast it to the blind workings of fate. I'll focus on that aspect of reality that transcends the laws of merit and deficiency. I'll 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. This is why 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 most freest and elemental 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."

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Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson; adapted by Yanki Tauber.

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