

פרשת נצבים

September 24, 2022

I would like to acknowledge two of my teachers for their help in today's drash: Rabbi Tuvia Kaplan, of Jerusalem, and Rabbi David Derovan, from Beit Shemesh.

I was in my mid 20s, living on a kibbutz. My mother-in-law asked me if I could round up a few guys because she wanted to move her kitchen stove within the apartment. I looked at the stove and figured I could get my arms around enough of it. I squatted down, picked it up, and asked her "Where do you want it?" "My, you're useful," she said, while pointing out where she wanted me to set it down.

About 40 years later, I'm in that same kitchen and I look at that same stove, and remember this incident from my past. "I wonder if I could still pick it up?" I ask myself. I tentatively gave it a shove. It didn't budge. I leaned into it and could barely tip it up an inch. Lifting it up off the ground by myself was so out of the realm of possibility that I wondered if I had confabulated the original memory. I think it happened, but it really seems impossible that it did.

In today's parasha we read: ראה נתתי לכם היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע. "See, I have set before you today life and good and death and evil." It seems like a pretty clear choice, doesn't it? I mean, who exactly is going to say "Hmm, death and evil sound like the better option." So clearly there's more to this line than the need to make such an obvious choice. A lot of different commentators make interesting points by parsing this line in many different ways. But it is a comment I read by the Rebbe Rashab which stimulated me to give this drash.

The Rebbe Rashab, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson, was the head of

Chabad Hassidut two generations before the last rebbe, Menachem Schneerson. He did most of his teaching in the early 1900s and the material I'll be using comes from *בשעה שהקדימו*, a three volume mystical commentary on the Torah.

One of the first things we should notice in this sentence from the Torah is that we have four separate words to pay attention to here, and they are each highlighted by the use of the word *את*. So we have *את החיים ואת הטוב* “**life**” and “**goodness**” and we have *את המות ואת הרע* “**death**” and “**evil.**”

The Rashab says that life corresponds to the life of the spirit, whereas death corresponds to the life of the physical, of the body. This might seem puzzling initially: why would the physical be connected with death? Aren't our bodies alive? Well, yes they are, but on the other hand we start dying the moment we are born, as does every physical thing in existence.

This is the point of my opening anecdote. At the peak of my physicality in my 20s, I thought nothing of lifting a kitchen stove by myself. Now, it seems like a dream that I could ever do such a thing. Further, there is a longing for that youth and physicality, when we could look gorgeous in *schmatas* and could work and party and take our bodies for granted. No matter how much I try to appreciate whatever wisdom I have acquired, the depth and integration that comes with life of the spirit, when someone young and gorgeous walks in the room there is something so compelling in that vitality that all that wisdom goes out the window and one's attention gets easily diverted.

This, I think, is one of the points the Rashab is making. He alerts us to the seduction of the physical, of the material, of the sensual. A new kitchen, a new car, a new anything grabs our attention with a kind of religious, all encompassing fervor. The problem is these physical things are fickle gods because they are temporal rather than eternal, and only go downhill from the moment of their inception. But the spiritual within us, the soul, is timeless and ageless. If you tune in right now to your sense of “you” inside — that unique you that is you, my guess is that you feel the same now as you have felt at any time in your life. That is the ageless part of you, that is your soul, which feels constant throughout the lifespan.

Rabbi Chai, in her instructions on how to write a drash, asks the question: what is the one point you want your audience to remember in one year? For me, the main point I want to get across is this: **we need to learn to discern between our soul, which is life and which is good, and the false gods of the physical, which are death and which are evil.**

It seems like it should be as obvious as this passage in the Torah, but in real life it's not. To further complicate things, it's not just the physically physical that colonizes our consciousness, determining that only the physical is real and only the physical is important. Ideas, concepts and beliefs also can become solid entities in our awareness, crowding out the subtler inner experiences of our soul we can have sometimes in moments of stillness.

One of my favorite words in the English language is "reify." For those of you not familiar with it, it means to take something abstract or fluid and make it solid and concrete. Think of a waterfall, or a river, or the ocean, or a bonfire. Each names something that comes to our mind as a solid concept, but the reality of each of these is that they are ever changing composites of infinite particles of matter. Heraclitus famously said "No man steps into the same river twice. For it's not the same river and he is not the same man."

Probably the two most problematic reifications we engage in are in our sense of ourselves and our beliefs about God. We think of ourselves as a "thing" — I'm a Republican, I'm a Democrat, I'm a man, I'm a woman, I'm an artist, I'm a lawyer — but these too are simply reifications of the ever changing river of who we are.

And God is...well, just fill in the blank, but even when we say we cannot know the ultimate nature of God that too becomes a concrete statement that often conceals more than it reveals. Meaning that rather than opening us up to ultimate and ever changing mystery, it closes us down, in the same way that reifying God as an old man with a long beard does.

As opposed to this, we have in this statement from the Torah the connection with life and the spiritual. Spirituality grows throughout our life, ripening into wisdom. As a psychologist I find that in many ways it's easier

to work with older people. Most are not so attached to their egos, to looking good and being right. They also don't have the energy to keep struggling and making the same stupid mistakes over and over again. Young couples have mind boggling stamina for fighting and chaos. Older couples know deep in their bones there is simply no point, so why bother?

There is something very beautiful in not needing to be right. The Chasidic concept of “ביטול” — self abnegation — describes this as the necessary, all important precursor to experiencing God. It is, of course, easier said than done. For one thing, we are still attached to our egos and to being right, and feel threatened when someone points out how we are wrong. Secondly, if you have ever suddenly been without your ego, whether through meditation, sudden shock, or psychedelics, you know it can be terrifying to be without the handhold of the familiar sense of “I.” But if we can develop a practice of letting go, of ביטול, than an entirely new world opens up to us. It is the goal of every spiritual practice I'm familiar with, however it's described: being present, in the moment, stopping the internal dialog, taking a step back from our thoughts and our thoughts about our thoughts, merging with the One —it all points to the need to let go of the temporal “I” in order to experience the eternal and ever changing “Thou.”

There is a story from the 60s that they gave an Indian spiritual master LSD to see how he would experience it. He couldn't feel the effects of it because apparently his inner reality was always plugged into the changing kaleidoscope of life. He didn't see the reification of the waterfall, but the moving molecules of the infinite. This is the “good”, the טוב, that goes with “חיים” with “life.” When something is alive in an ongoing way: את החיים ואת הטוב.

So what is the evil that is appended to “death and evil” — את המות ואת הרע? According to the Rashab, it is living a life of the physical while denying the role of the spirit, not just occasionally but as an ongoing practice. There is nothing inherently evil in living in our bodies. After all, it's God who put us here. But living in these bodies while denying the existence of the spirit, of our soul — living in the physical as if that's all there is, that is evil. If you think of examples of people who live their lives as if the physical

is all that matters, that there is no spiritual world and no overarching rightness and wrongness but all that matters is one's own pleasure — you can eventually see in their physical features a kind of rot, or evil, like they're the walking portraits of Dorian Gray.

Tomorrow night we begin Rosh HaShana, where we will be told the book of life and death are open and we ask to be sealed in the book of life. Like all metaphors we inevitably reify this one, imagining some hand up there writing us down in the book of life if we're good and the book of death if we're bad.

The shofar blasts us out of this *narishkeit*. I cannot think of any better medicine to loosen up our grip on our reifications. We can never predict how the shofar will sound: it is raw and undifferentiated and opens us up to direct contact with our deepest selves. For a moment it lets us drop our egos and our attachments and experience the moment, which is life. To be sealed in this moment, in this book of life, is to be connected in an ongoing way with the river of Spirit, which is life and which is good. May we all be sealed in the book of life. Shabbat shalom.