



## איזוהי דרך ישראל Choosing the Straight Path

### ■ The Straight and Good

Parashat Nitzavim opens as Bnei Yisrael stand before G-d on the eve of their entry into the Land of Israel, about to forge a Divine covenant with Him. The portion ends with the concepts of Free Will and the choice between good and evil.

As their forty years in the desert come to a close, the entire nation stands before Hashem:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם...

*You are hereby standing, all of you,  
before Hashem your G-d... (D'varim 29,9)*

Israel finds itself in a similarly momentous situation every year when we read this weekly Parashah, just before Rosh HaShanah. It is on Rosh HaShanah when Jews the world over stand before the Creator of the world, the G-d of Israel – just as they did in the desert – and prepare for the universal day of judgment.

This is a time when, presumably, we each ask ourselves: “Am I walking the right path? Are my deeds upright in G-d’s eyes?”

This is precisely the question Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai asks, in the Mishnayot of Pirkei Avot, of his five great students. The Mishna tells us:

**Rabban Yochanan said to them, “Go out and see: What is the straight path to which one should adhere?” (Avot 2,9)**



A strange question! Is it not obvious that the path G-d deems straight and correct for a Jew is that of meticulous observance of the Torah's commandments?

The Mishna goes on to enumerate the answers provided by the students – and it is these responses that teach us what Rabban Yochanan was really asking. His question was: “What is the gate via which we can reach an understanding of the mitzvot and their fulfillment? What is the life path that will lead to the mitzvot?”

The common denominator of all five answers that Rabban Yochanan received is the understanding that G-d is good and that He created the world specifically in order to bestow His goodness upon it. This is the ultimate purpose of creation. As King David summed up:

טוֹב אַתָּה וּמְטִיב לְמִדְּוֵי חֻקֶיךָ.  
*Good You are, and beneficent;*  
*teach me Your statutes.* (Tehillim 119,68)

Still, the five answers are diverse and dissimilar, and their differences focus on the branches of this fundamental concept of “being good.” That is to say, the five great students differ as to how can we best come to fulfill that which is written in the Torah several times:

וַעֲשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' ...  
*Do that which is straight and good in G-d's eyes ...* (D'varim 6,18)

Let us analyze each of the answers given by the Mishnaic sages. First to respond was R. Eliezer ben Hurkenos, whose teacher praised him by comparing him to a “pit whose walls are hermetically sealed and does not lose a drop.” That is to say, R. Eliezer was blessed with a phenomenal memory. His answer to his teacher’s question was that the proper way to live was to adopt an *ayin tovah*, a “good eye” and a generous spirit. It means the opposite of jealousy: to be happy when your friend succeeds, to feel good when others are happy, to want the best for everyone. R. Eliezer focuses on the last of the Ten Commandments, “*Do not covet*,” as the gateway by which to enter the world of all the other mitzvot in the Torah.

But how is this done? How might we go about neutralizing our feelings of jealousy?

The answer is: By instilling oneself with the clear recognition that every person in the world is totally unique. Our fingerprints and our DNA are unlike those



of any other human being. Every single cell in one's body is different and unique, and every hair on our heads is unlike that of anyone else.

Once we understand our uniqueness, we realize that it cannot be that our creation was accidental or purposeless. G-d created each one of us in a specific manner, and even granted us different traits, talents, circumstances – and missions – that no one else in the world shares. Clearly, then, it makes no sense for anyone to covet what someone else has, or to be jealous of him.

Once we understand that we are not in the center, we gradually come to realize that G-d *is* in the center. We thus ascend from the last of the Ten Commandments to the first: *"I am the Lord your G-d."*

#### ■ The Next Answers

R. Yehoshua ben Chananya gave the second response to the question in the Mishna. His teacher R. Yochanan ben Zakkai had said about him, "How fortunate is the woman who gave birth to him" – for the Gemara relates that when R. Yehoshua was a baby, his mother would bring him in his cradle to the Beit Medrash, so that he could absorb the study of Torah even then.

What was R. Yehoshua's answer? He said that one must be a *chaver tov*, a good friend – something that is more demanding than being nice to "everyone." One must work on building relationships. Close friends sometimes argue, and are sometimes jealous of each other, and sometimes hurt each other - and therefore to be a good friend over time requires even more work than being "nice" in general. So said R. Yehoshua.

The next student to respond was R. Yosi HaCohen, whom his teacher called a *hasid*, a pious man. His approach demands even more of one who wants to find the right path in life: One must be a *shakhen tov*, a good neighbor. Everyone knows that neighbors have much to argue about - especially if they live in the same apartment building: they can argue about building rights, and noise in the halls, and joint payments, and hanging laundry, and so much more. Such disputes are common, and therefore to remain a "good neighbor" means an even higher level of self-restraint and desire to be good to others than to be a "good friend."

Next to respond to Rabban Yochanan's challenge was R. Shimon ben Netanel, described by his teacher as "fearful of sin." R. Shimon is even more demanding, and says that one must choose the path of *roeh et hanolad*, that is, looking in advance and seeking out ways to help others. It's great to help

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2. See "Ascending the Ten Commandments" to Parashat Yitro in this series.



someone in trouble, but it's even more important to help him before the trouble comes. Someone who is truly concerned about his friend knows how to help him *before* he falls.

Finally, it was the turn of the last student: R. Elazar ben Arakh, held by his teacher in the highest regard of all. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said about him:

**If all the Sages of Israel were on one side of the scales, including R. Eliezer ben Hurkenos, and R. Elazar [ben Arakh] on the other side, R. Elazar would prevail over them.** (Avot 2,8)

What was R. Elazar's answer to Rabban Yochanan's question regarding the right path one must choose in life? He said one must have a *lev tov*, a good heart. This means simply to be good, without limits. The desire to perform kindnesses and to be helpful must be implanted deep in one's soul. It includes all of the other traits: a good eye, a good friend, a good neighbor, etc.

And in fact, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai informed his students that he accepts and prefers R. Elazar's words above all the others: "That which each of you said is included in what R. Elazar said."

### ■ Gradual Ascent, or One-Time Leap?

On the face of it, it definitely appears that R. Elazar ben Arakh's answer is the best one. Why should one concentrate on a specific aspect, such as "generous spirit" or "seeking out good in advance," when it is possible to simply strive for a "good heart" that will lead him to be good all around?

And yet, despite the logic here, and despite their teacher's endorsement of this opinion, the other students did not accept R. Elazar's opinion. How do we know this? Because the Mishna continues:

**[Rabban Yochanan] then told them, "Go out and see: What is the evil path from which one should distance himself?"**

We might have thought that now all the students would answer as one the flip side of R. Elazar's previous answer: "An evil heart!" But that is not what happened. Instead, each of the students simply repeated the opposite of his own previous response:

**R. Eliezer said, a bad eye is the worst trait.  
R. Yehoshua said, a bad friend.**



**R. Yosi said, a bad neighbor...**

**And R. Elazar ben Arakh concluded, a bad heart.**

The same argument continued! Here as well, Rabban Yochanan accepted R. Elazar's opinion. Why, then, was this second part written, if it merely contains the same principles again, albeit in reverse? The repetition teaches that each of these great rabbis saw in his position an important principle, something to which we should adhere with all our strength.

What is actually the heart of the dispute between Rabban Yochanan and R. Elazar, and the other Sages? Why do the latter not agree that one should work on his "heart," i.e., on his general character and outlook, and that everything will then follow from that?

The answer is rooted in the basic difference between two approaches: The *one-jump* approach, and that of the *gradual ascent*.

The first Sages hold that it is impossible to jump all at once to the level of a "good heart." In order to attain such a height, one must progress by stages. One must first take care not to covet, then to love his neighbor, and so on.

But R. Elazar and his teacher Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai feel that one who takes the slow, step-by-step approach risks falling or tripping along the way. It is better, in their opinion, to jump up at once, that is, to make a one-time, courageous and comprehensive decision, than to try to reach the goal in small, measured steps.

For our purposes, the issue is: Do we first deal with the small details, which we will then combine together to form a unified whole? Or should we jump immediately to the entirety of the matter, from which we will derive and actualize the various details thereof?

R. Elazar ben Arakh was described as an "overflowing well." This precisely fits his approach of one general source from which emanates a constant flow of details. It is no wonder that he emphasizes the "good heart" – for the heart is the well from which everything bursts strongly forth, becoming little rivulets on its way towards the body's other organs.

## ■ A Place of Torah

The Mishna we have just learned provides no clue as to the dramatic developments that occurred later on. But we find a hint further on in Tractate Avot, where the Mishna teaches:



**R. Nehorai says: Exile yourself to a place of Torah; do not say that it will come after you and that your friends will establish it for you; do not rely on your own wisdom. (Avot 4,14)**

Behind this teaching of R. Nehorai lies a sad story – the story of the life of the same R. Elazar ben Arakh about whom we have been learning, whose teacher considered him greater than all the other Sages put together.

First of all, let us note that the Gemara tells us that the author of this story, R. Nehorai, might actually be R. Elazar ben Arakh himself:

**It was learned: His name is not R. Nehorai, but rather R. Nechemiah; and some say his name was R. Elazar ben Arakh. And why was he called Nehorai [stemming from the root meaning “to illuminate”]? Because he illuminated the Sages’ eyes with his teachings of Jewish Law. (Shabbat 147b)**

The sad story of which we speak appears in Avot D’Rabbe Natan, a supplement to Pirkei Avot according to Rabbe Natan. It tells that R. Elazar decided to build his life in a place called Maos (Dyomsit, according to the Talmud), known for its fresh water, high-quality vegetables, and tranquil, garden-like atmosphere. But many of the other Tannaim, his Torah scholar colleagues, decided otherwise. They went to the small town of Yavneh, known for its many Torah scholars and for the sound of Torah study heard there night and day.

The above Gemara fills in additional sad details. It says that at one point, R. Elazar forgot all the Torah that he had learned, and even reached the point that when he came to visit his friends and went to read the Torah, he made grave mistakes: Instead of reading the words **לכם הזה חודש**, “*This month for you [will be the first]*” (Sh’mot 12,2), he misread one letter in each word so that it came out **לכם היה לבם חרש**, which means “their hearts were deaf.” He mistook the *dalet* of **HaChodesh** and read it as the similar-looking *resh*, the *zayin* of **hazeh** he saw as *yod*, and the *khaf* of **lakhem** as *bet*.

The Sages were greatly saddened by what had happened to their esteemed friend R. Elazar, and they prayed for him – and in fact his wisdom was restored to him. But R. Nehorai wished to teach us not to make the same mistake that R. Elazar ben Arakh – R. Nehorai himself? – made: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah, and do not say that it will come after you and that your friends will establish it for you”. One should not be arrogant and think that everyone needs him and will follow after him. In addition, “on your



own wisdom do not rely” – don’t count only on your own understanding of Torah matters without discussing them and analyzing them with your comrades.

### ■ The Heart and Source

The story above is truly an enigma. Is it really possible that the great Sage R. Elazar ben Arakh - and we have seen how highly Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai regarded him - should make such a gross error when reading the Torah? Even young schoolchildren know how to read the words of the first mitzvah given to Israel!

Rather, the verse that R. Elazar misread, and the way he misread it, come to teach us an important lesson. Note that the verse discusses the first month of the year, the month of Nissan in which Bnei Yisrael made their historic Exodus from Egypt. This was Israel’s national starting-point, the birth of the nation; we are bidden to remember it all the days of our lives.

The dramatic Exodus, in which G-d miraculously led us from bondage to freedom, is the foundation of all our mitzvot. It is like the historic “heart” – the very source from which all emanates, the place from which oxygen-rich blood is sent throughout the body, the spring that grants life, warmth, and movement to every organ. As we read in the Book of Proverbs:

מִכָּל מִשְׁמֶר נֶצַר לִבָּךְ כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תוֹצְאוֹת חַיִּים.

*Protect your heart from every sin,  
for it is the source of life’s consequences.* (Mishlei 4,23)

As we saw, R. Elazar emphasized the heart over everything else. He himself was like a heart among the Sages of Israel - an overflowing well, quenching his colleagues’ thirst for Torah with his scholarship and wisdom. He erred, however, in believing that he was like a “root,” that he could sprout branches in every place and in every situation.

This was why he mistakenly felt that wherever he would go, and even if he was alone, he could cause Torah to grow and blossom, and that Torah scholars would congregate there. In reality, Torah is acquired only through humility and modesty, and chiefly via social cohesiveness with the Sages of the generation, in the form of learning and studying together.

Torah develops from out of “togetherness,” as we read in Parashat V’zot HaBracha:



... בְּהִתְאַסַּף רָאשֵׁי עַם יִחַד שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

... *when the heads of the nation gathered together,  
together the tribes of Israel.* (D'varim 33,5)

It was this mistaken approach that led R. Elazar to make simple errors in his reading of a Torah verse. He saw the word *hachodesh*, “this month,” which comes from the root meaning “new” (the moon renews itself each and every month), just like the overflowing well that R. Elazar represents. Yet he read it as if it meant “deaf,” that is, without the ability to absorb, process, and act on spiritual, character-improving messages.

Similarly, he read the word *lakhem* – meaning “to you [plural],” and symbolizing togetherness – as if it were *libam*, meaning “heart,” that is, the heart that became weak because it stopped overflowing and thought it could act alone.

In the final analysis, life experience shows us that the correct way of studying and developing is as expressed by the colleagues of R. Elazar: step by step, slowly and gradually. One-time jumps, bursts of spontaneity and flashy fireworks are not the proper way. One must rather work consistently and systematically, day in and day out. And above all, good friends and a supportive social environment are needed to help develop the spiritual and intellectual abilities and energies of each individual.

### ■ **G-d Takes Pride in Israel**

The Mishna with which we began is not the only one that deals with the question of the proper life path to take. Earlier in the same chapter, we learn:

**Rebbe [Rav Yehuda Hanasi] says: “What is the straight path one should choose for himself? That which is a credit to him, and earns the esteem of others.” (Avot 2,1)**

An interesting question raises itself: What made Rebbe, the redactor of the Mishna and the leader of the last generation of Mishnaic sages, ask and answer the same question that had occupied the great sages of previous generations, such as Rabban Yochanan, R. Elazar and R. Yehoshua?

The answer is that Rebbe was actually dealing with a different aspect of this question. The earlier sages had asked what trait could serve as a gateway by which to properly enter the world of mitzvot. But Rebbe was seeking a



standard with which we can measure ourselves and see if, utilizing the traits delineated by the earlier sages, we are progressing in the right direction.

In other words, whether one has decided to choose the path of a “good eye,” or to be a “good friend,” or a “good neighbor,” how can he know if he is implementing the chosen approach in the correct manner?

Rebbe provides the answer in one word: *tif'eret*, “glory” or “beauty.” He says that a person must choose a path that is a *tif'eret* both for him and for others towards him. A root of the same word is found in the following verse:

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי עַבְדִּי אַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר בָּךְ אֶתְפָּאֵר.

*He said to me, “You are My servant, Israel,  
in whom I will take pride [or, be glorified].”* (Yeshayahu 49,3)

In other words, the standard will be this: Does G-d take pride in the path that a person takes? If so, he can know that he has chosen correctly and is executing it properly. Everyone must ask themselves whether their deeds can be a source of pride for Hashem.

But there is more. In Proverbs we read:

וּמִצָּא חֵן וְשִׂכָּל טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי אֱ-לֹהִים וְאָדָם.

*Find grace and good understanding in  
the eyes of G-d and man.* (Mishlei 3,4)

Not only must one’s ways be a source of Divine pride, they must also be a source of pride vis-à-vis people. His friends and neighbors must be able to point to him and say, “How fortunate we are to have such a man in our midst.” Once a person begins to think in this direction, the very thought itself will direct him towards the right path of what is good and upright in the eyes of G-d and man.

Parashat Nitzavim concludes with the crown jewel of Free Choice and G-d’s counsel:

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע.  
... וּבַחֲרֹת בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה אֶתְּךָ וְזַרְעֶךָ.

*Behold, I have today set before you life and good,  
and death and evil. ... Choose life,  
so that you and your descendants will live.* (D’varim 30,15-19)

