Choose Life
What Are We Actually Choosing?

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I Can Choose

Tonight we are beginning a series about bechirah, free will. I want to begin with a very simple question. Why is it so important that I have the ability to choose?

Most of us would give a sensible answer. If I have a choice, I can be held responsible for what I do. If I do something good, I deserve credit. If I do something wrong, I can be held accountable. Reward and punishment depend on my having a choice.

That is true. The Rambam himself explains that connection. But tonight I want us to appreciate how much Hashem has given us through this ability. What can I accomplish through choosing? What can I become? And why does the Torah tell me to choose life?

We are going to build this step by step. We will begin with the Rambam's words, then look at what this ability makes possible, and then understand the mitzvah of using it.

The Rambam's opening statement

Open the Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah, chapter five, halachah one. Let's read his whole opening halachah.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:1 - complete halachah

רשות לכל אדם נתונה: אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק - הרשות בידו, ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע - הרשות בידו.

> Every person is granted the freedom to choose. If he wishes to direct himself toward a good path and become righteous, the choice is his. If he wishes to direct himself toward an evil path and become wicked, the choice is his.

הוא שכתוב בתורה: "הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע", כלומר: הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין מין שני דומה לו בזה הענין,

> This is what is written in the Torah: "Behold, man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." This means that this species, the human being, is unique in the world, with no other species resembling it in this respect:

שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ, ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע. וכיון שכן הוא "פן ישלח ידו".

> of his own accord, through his understanding and thought, he knows good and evil and does whatever he wishes, with no one preventing him from doing good or evil. Since this is so, the verse continues, "Lest he stretch out his hand."

The Torah passage quoted by the Rambam is Bereishis 3:22.

Suppose you were opening the Rambam to look up the laws of bechirah for the first time. Which section would you turn to? Why would you look there?

The Rambam puts this halachah in Hilchos Teshuvah, chapter five. Why do you think it belongs there? What does having a choice have to do with doing teshuvah?

You might say, "I had a choice. I could have done the right thing. If I chose to do the wrong thing, I'm responsible for it. I can be punished for that choice, so of course I want to do teshuvah."

That's correct. But as an answer to why the Rambam puts bechirah here, it's too simple. We've explained why I'm responsible for what I did. What else does my ability to choose make possible? Let's keep that question in mind as we look at one ordinary conversation.

One ordinary conversation

Let's take one example and carry it with us through the class.

You are having a conversation with somebody close to you. Perhaps it is a family member. You are tired. You have had a long day. The person says something that you experience as unfair. And you have a response ready.

You know exactly what you could say. It would make your point. It might also hurt. And for a moment, you want to say it.

But you pause. Do I have to answer this way? Can I make my point respectfully? Do I understand what the other person means?

That pause is a place where we can recognize the opportunity to choose. I can think about my next words. I can decide what I am trying to accomplish. I can choose to answer with patience and respect.

I may still have to address the issue. Patience can include a firm, clear response. The choice concerns how I handle the situation and how I treat the person in front of me.

We might ordinarily describe that moment by saying, "I controlled myself." That is a real accomplishment. But by the end of tonight I hope we will have a fuller appreciation of what happened in that moment.

What does the Rambam prove from the pasuk?

Before we go further, we have to understand why the Rambam brings this pasuk. The Torah describes Adam as knowing good and evil. The Rambam explains the particular human distinction expressed here: a person can recognize good and evil through his own understanding and thought, and act according to what he chooses.

That is the connection to his opening statement. The ability to direct myself rests on my ability to understand, consider, and choose. I can recognize that one response is right and another is wrong. I can think about the direction I want to take, and I can act on that recognition.

Return to the difficult conversation. I feel the irritation, but I can also recognize that my proposed answer would hurt. I can consider another response. Then I can choose it. That is a practical illustration of the capacity the Rambam describes through this pasuk.

What about his last words, “lest he stretch out his hand”? Those words introduce the concern that Adam might take from the Tree of Life. In the continuation of the Torah's account, Hashem removes him from the garden and guards the way to that tree.

Notice how the Rambam introduces those words: “Since this is so.” He is drawing a consequence from the freedom he has just described. Adam can decide to act, so the possibility of his reaching for the tree must be addressed. The Torah describes restricting his access to it.

Let’s go back to the beginning of the Rambam and see what he is saying. Read those first four words again: רשות לכל אדם נתונה. Every person is given the freedom to choose. Whom does לכל אדם include? It includes the fellow who tells me, “Rabbi, you know me. When somebody speaks to me that way, I have no choice. That’s just how I answer.” He may feel he has no choice. The Rambam says that he, too, has bechirah. Even now, he can decide what to say next.

With that in mind, let’s look at the next few words.

Now read the next words of the Rambam.

> אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה
>
> If he wishes to direct himself toward a good path.

What am I directing? Myself. There is a way for me to go, and I can turn myself toward it. I can consider the response I am about to give, the thing I am about to do, and the direction I want to take.

Someone says something that upsets me. I can answer sharply. I can also pause, consider what Hashem asks of me, and answer respectfully. I have directed my conduct toward a good path.

That choice matters even while it is difficult. I may still feel the irritation. I may have to work hard to choose my words. The Rambam tells me that I have the ability to direct myself.

Listen to the two expressions together. אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה — if he wishes to direct himself toward a good path. ולהיות צדיק — and to become righteous.

Why does the Rambam need both? If he has already told me I can direct myself toward a good path, what do the words ולהיות צדיק add? Let’s sit with that question for a moment.

Rav Yisrael Yosef HaKohen Rappaport asks us to hear two things in the Rambam’s words. A person chooses the deed he will do. And he can turn his heart, his nefesh, in a particular direction. What did I actually do? And where do I want my heart to go? Those are two different questions. That helps us hear why the Rambam speaks both of directing oneself toward a good path and of becoming a tzaddik.

Picture a woman at the counter. She notices the shopkeeper gave her too much change and hands it back. We can see the deed. Now imagine what she might be saying to herself: “It’s his money, and I want to be someone to be trusted even if he wouldn’t know the difference.” That’s the inward direction Rav Rappaport helps us notice.

Rav Yisrael Yosef HaKohen Rappaport, LaTeshuvat HaShanah, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:1, comment א, p. (285) רפ”ה. The shop example illustrates his distinction.

Let's make that real. I answer patiently today. Tomorrow, another difficult conversation presents itself, and I work on patience again.

Or picture a man in the supermarket. His cart is full. There are fifteen people ahead of him. At the register, one person is counting out change and another is still packing his bag. Does he sigh loudly enough for them to hear? Or does he give them the time they need?

Through repeated, thoughtful choices, I can develop patience as a quality within me. I am working toward becoming someone who listens, gives another person room, and responds with respect.

At first I might say, I managed to respond patiently. Over time I can work toward saying, I am becoming a more patient person.

That is why we should pause over the Rambam's two clauses. To direct myself toward a good path. And to become righteous. We are taking from his wording both the immediate choice and the larger work of shaping ourselves. We will see the Ramchal develop why acquiring that spiritual perfection matters so much.

The Rambam uses the corresponding two clauses about the opposite direction as well: directing oneself toward an evil path and becoming wicked. Our choices have significance for the person we become. We need to appreciate that responsibility, and the tremendous opportunity it gives us.

Hashem gives me a choice in how to act, and through my choices I can work on who I am. Keep those two aspects in mind. They will accompany us throughout the class.

Listen to the Rambam's words once more: שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ. Of his own accord, through his understanding and thought, a person recognizes good and evil and acts as he wishes.

Notice the order. First, בדעתו ובמחשבתו: I can consider what is in front of me. I can ask what is right. Then, ועושה: I can direct my response.

We all have circumstances we did not choose. We will deal in a later class with the inclinations and starting points Hashem gives different people. Tonight we are establishing that Hashem has given us a meaningful ability to direct ourselves toward good.

Our first point is established. Hashem has given me the ability to direct my actions, and through those actions to work on the person I become.

Why Choice Is a Foundation

Now we can ask why the Rambam calls this a foundation of the entire Torah.

Let's go directly to halachah three. We are leaving the discussion in halachah two for another occasion. Here are the Rambam's words in full.

Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3 - complete halachah

> ודבר זה עיקר גדול הוא, והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה, שנאמר: "ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים", וכתיב: "ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום", כלומר שהרשות בידכם, וכל שיחפוץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה - בין טובים בין רעים.
>
> This matter is a great fundamental principle, and it is the pillar of the Torah and the commandments, as it says, "See, I have placed life before you today," and it is written, "See, I place before you today." This means that the choice is in your hands, and whatever a person wishes to do among human actions, he does, whether good or evil.

ומפני זה הענין נאמר: "מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם", כלומר שאין הבורא כופה בני האדם ולא גוזר עליהן לעשות טובה או רעה, אלא הכל מסור להם.

> Because of this principle, it says, "If only they would have this heart." This means that the Creator does not compel human beings or decree upon them to do good or evil. Rather, it is all entrusted to them.

A great fundamental principle. The pillar of Torah and mitzvos. Those are the Rambam's words. We should give them their full weight.

Here are the complete pesukim he draws upon. The first is in Devarim, chapter thirty, pasuk fifteen.

Devarim 30:15

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע.

> See, I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil.

Devarim 11:26

רְאֵה אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לִפְנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה.

> See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse.

Devarim 5:26 - Hebrew verse numbering

מִי יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְבָבָם זֶה לָהֶם לְיִרְאָה אֹתִי וְלִשְׁמֹר אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי כָּל הַיָּמִים לְמַעַן יִיטַב לָהֶם וְלִבְנֵיהֶם לְעֹלָם.

> If only they would always have this heart, to fear Me and keep all My commandments, so that it would be good for them and for their children forever.

Notice who takes us to Moshe Rabbeinu's words. The Rambam himself does. These are his sources for the freedom he is describing.

Torah speaks to a person who can respond. When Hashem commands me to be honest, to give, or to protect another person's dignity, He addresses me as someone who can make a meaningful choice.

The Rambam develops the implication for responsibility and reward in halachah four. If a person's conduct were completely forced, how could he be commanded and then judged for it? That is the familiar explanation with which we began.

Let's return to our conversation. If I can choose what to say, then I am responsible for my words. My tiredness helps explain why patience is difficult. I still have to consider the response I give.

Our second point is established. Torah and mitzvos address me as a responsible person who can respond to Hashem's instruction.

The next step is to understand what I gain, and what I become, through that response.

But now I want to ask something further. Why did Hashem create a life in which this choice is mine? What good does He want me to acquire through it?

The Rambam establishes the foundation on which Torah and mitzvos stand. To understand the purpose Hashem gives this arrangement, we will turn to the Ramchal.

What I Acquire Through Choosing

The Ramchal explains this in Derech Hashem, part one, chapter two. In paragraph one, he explains that Hashem's purpose in creation is to bestow good, and that the deepest good available to a created being is attachment to Him. In paragraph two, he explains why our own choices belong in that picture. Let's read the full paragraph.

Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:2:2 - complete paragraph

ואולם גזרה חכמתו, שלהיות הטוב שלם, ראוי שיהיה הנהנה בו בעל הטוב ההוא; פירוש - מי שיקנה הטוב בעצמו, ולא מי שיתלוה לו הטוב בדרך מקרה.

> His wisdom decreed that, for the good to be complete, the one enjoying it should possess that good. This means that he acquires the good himself, rather than having it accompany him incidentally.

ותראה שזה נקרא קצת התדמות, בשיעור שאפשר, אל שלימותו יתברך. כי הנה הוא יתברך שמו שלם בעצמו, ולא במקרה, אלא מצד אמיתת ענינו מוכרח בו השלימות, ומשוללים ממנו החסרונות בהכרח.

> You will see that this constitutes a certain resemblance, to the extent possible, to His perfection. For He, blessed be His name, is perfect in Himself. His perfection is not incidental. Rather, His true being necessarily entails perfection and necessarily excludes deficiencies.

ואולם זה אי אפשר שימצא בזולתו, שיהיה אמיתת ענינו מכרחת לו השלימות ומעדרת ממנו החסרונות. אך להתדמות לזה במקצת, צריך שלפחות יהיה הוא הקונה השלימות שאין אמיתת ענינו מכריח לו, ויהיה הוא מעדיר מעצמו החסרונות שהיו אפשריים בו.

> This cannot exist in anyone other than Him: that the truth of his being should necessarily entail perfection and exclude deficiencies. But to resemble this in some measure, a person must at least acquire for himself the perfection that his essential being does not necessarily give him, and remove from himself the deficiencies that were possible for him.

ועל כן גזר וסידר שיבראו עניני שלימות ועניני חסרון, ותברא בריה שיהיה בה האפשרות לשני העניינים בשוה,

> He therefore decreed and arranged that there should be aspects of perfection and aspects of deficiency, and that a creature should be created with the possibility of both, equally available to it.

ויותנו לבריה הזאת אמצעיים שעל ידם תקנה לעצמה את השלימיות ותעדיר ממנה את החסרונות. ואז יקרא שנתדמית במה שהיה אפשר לה לבוראה, ותהיה ראויה לידבק בו וליהנות בטובו.

> This creature would receive the means through which it could acquire perfections and remove deficiencies. It could then be said to resemble its Creator to the extent possible for it, and it would be fit to cling to Him and enjoy His goodness.

Let's make that understandable. Hashem is perfect inherently. Nobody created Him. Nobody gave Him His perfection. We are created beings, and everything we have comes from Him.

But He gives us an extraordinary opportunity. Within the life and ability He gives us, we can acquire spiritual qualities through our own choices. We can develop honesty, generosity, patience, and faithfulness. We become responsible participants in our own spiritual development.

That is the resemblance the Ramchal describes. He is very precise. A created being can resemble its Creator only to the extent possible for a created being. We always depend on Hashem. And within that dependence, Hashem gives us the work of acquiring our own spiritual perfection.

Think about someone learning to play an instrument. A teacher gives instruction. Someone else may provide the instrument and pay for the lessons. But the student has to practice. Through that practice, the ability becomes his. We recognize the difference between receiving something and acquiring a capacity within ourselves.

In our spiritual lives, the Ramchal is describing something far greater. Hashem gives us the means to develop the person who can receive His ultimate good.

The conversation, one step deeper

Return to the conversation we described. I choose to answer respectfully when I am irritated. What have I accomplished?

I have protected the other person from a hurtful response. I have also practiced patience. When I choose this response again, and again, I develop that quality within myself.

A child spills a glass of water. The father feels the sharp words coming: “How many times have I told you?” He sees his son’s worried face, takes a breath, and hands him a towel. “Here. Let’s get it together.” The water still has to be cleaned up. What the child hears is his father offering to help.

It may be difficult at first. I may still feel very annoyed. The work is real precisely because I have to direct myself. Over time, I can become a more patient person.

My choice has an effect on who I become. That is why the Rambam's opening words are so important. He speaks of directing oneself toward a good path and becoming righteous.

Walking in Hashem's ways

There is also an explicit mitzvah to develop the ways through which we resemble Hashem. The Torah says in Devarim, chapter twenty-eight, pasuk nine:

Devarim 28:9 - complete pasuk

יְקִימְךָ ה׳ לוֹ לְעַם קָדוֹשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָךְ כִּי תִשְׁמֹר אֶת מִצְוֹת ה׳ אֱלֹקֶיךָ וְהָלַכְתָּ בִּדְרָכָיו.

> Hashem will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, when you keep the commandments of Hashem your God and walk in His ways.

Listen to the words וְהָלַכְתָּ בִּדְרָכָיו, “and you shall walk in His ways.” How does a person do that? Let’s hear how the Rambam explains it.

The Rambam explains this in Hilchos De'os, chapter one, halachah six.

Rambam, Hilchos De'os 1:6 - complete halachah

כך למדו בפירוש מצוה זו: מה הוא נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון, מה הוא נקרא רחום אף אתה היה רחום, מה הוא נקרא קדוש אף אתה היה קדוש.

> This is how they taught the meaning of this commandment: just as He is called gracious, you should be gracious; just as He is called merciful, you should be merciful; just as He is called holy, you should be holy.

ועל דרך זו קראו הנביאים לאל בכל אותן הכנויין ארך אפים ורב חסד צדיק וישר תמים גבור וחזק וכיוצא בהן, להודיע שהן דרכים טובים וישרים וחייב אדם להנהיג עצמו בהן ולהדמות אליו כפי כחו.

In this manner, the prophets described God with all these designations: slow to anger, abundant in kindness, righteous, upright, perfect, mighty, strong, and the like. They did so to teach that these are good and upright ways, and that a person is obligated to conduct himself in them and resemble Him according to his ability.

Here is a halachic expression of the growth we are discussing. I am commanded to develop these ways. When I practice patience in that conversation, I have an opportunity to practice a way that the Rambam includes among Hashem's ways: being slow to anger.

We should distinguish the two sources. The Ramchal explains acquiring perfection as a limited resemblance to the Creator. The Rambam explains the mitzvah of walking in Hashem's ways through the qualities we are commanded to practice. Together, they help us understand the significance of our moral choices.

From growth to attachment

Now listen to the next step in Derech Hashem, paragraph three. These are two passages from that paragraph.

Derech Hashem 1:2:3 - opening and concluding passages

ואמנם מלבד היות הבריה הזאת שקנתה השלימות ראויה לידבק בבוראה יתברך מצד התדמותה לו, הנה על ידי קנותה השלימות לה נמצאת מתדבקת והולכת בו, עד שסוף קנותה השלימות והמצאה מתדבקת בו יהיה הכל ענין אחד.

Besides the fact that the creature that acquires perfection becomes fit to cling to its Creator through its resemblance to Him, through acquiring that perfection it actually becomes increasingly attached to Him. Ultimately, acquiring perfection and becoming attached to Him are one matter.

וכפי מה שירבה בשלימיות, כך הוא מרבה האחיזה וההתדבקות בו, עד שבהגיעו אל תכלית קנית השלימות, הנה הוא מגיע אל תכלית האחיזה וההתדבקות בו יתברך, ונמצא מתדבק בו יתברך ונהנה בטובו ומשתלם בו, והוא עצמו בעל טובו ושלימותו.

To the extent that it increases its perfections, it increases its hold upon and attachment to Him. When it reaches the culmination of acquiring perfection, it reaches the culmination of attachment to Him. It thus clings to Him, enjoys His goodness, and attains perfection through Him, while itself possessing its goodness and perfection.

That is a tremendous idea. Developing these qualities brings me closer to Hashem. Through my choices, I acquire the spiritual perfection through which I can cleave to Him and attain enduring good.

Yaakov in this week's parsha

We can see an example of faithfulness under pressure in Parshas Vayeitzei. Yaakov is speaking to Rachel and Leah about their father, Lavan. Look at Bereishis, chapter thirty-one, pesukim six and seven.

Bereishis 31:6-7 - complete pesukim

וְאַתֶּנָה יְדַעְתֶּן כִּי בְּכָל כֹּחִי עָבַדְתִּי אֶת אֲבִיכֶן.

You yourselves know that I served your father with all my strength.

וַאֲבִיכֶן הֵתֶל בִּי וְהֶחֱלֵף אֶת מַשְׂכֻּרְתִּי עֲשֶׂרֶת מֹנִים וְלֹא נְתָנוֹ אֱלֹקִים לְהָרַע עִמָּדִי.

Your father deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to harm me.

Put those two statements together. Your father deceived me. And I worked for him with all my strength.

We understand how difficult that can be. Someone is mistreated at work. The arrangement keeps changing. He begins to think, Why should I put myself out for somebody who treats me this way?

Yaakov could say that he worked with all his strength. The Rambam brings that into halachah.

Rambam, Hilchos Sechirus 13:7 - passage concerning wholehearted work

וכן חייב לעבוד בכל כחו, שהרי יעקב הצדיק אמר: "כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכן".

An employee is also obligated to work with all his strength, for Yaakov the righteous said, "I served your father with all my strength."

Picture the cost of what Yaakov tells Rachel and Leah. Lavan has changed his wages again and again. Now imagine a wet evening, a lamb still outside the fold. It would be easy for a shepherd to say, “After the way he’s treated me, I’ve done enough.” Imagine him bending down in the rain and bringing the lamb to shelter. That scene illustrates Yaakov’s own words: “I served your father with all my strength.”

We can apply tonight's framework to this example. A difficult working relationship presents opportunities to practice integrity. The person can ask, What does Hashem ask of me? What kind of person am I becoming through my response?

That question also belongs in our difficult conversation at home. Another person's behavior can make the situation challenging. My response is an opportunity to develop my own faithfulness to what is right.

Our third point is established. Through my choices, I acquire spiritual qualities, and through that growth I draw closer to Hashem.

The Command to Choose Life

Now we can understand why the Torah commands us to use this ability. We have spoken about the ability to choose. First, look again at the pasuk the Rambam quotes in Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3. Moshe says, ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע. See what I have set before you today: life and good, death and evil. Both paths are before you. Listen for the difference when we read the next pasuk.

Devarim 30:19 - complete pasuk

הַעִידֹתִי בָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ.

I call heaven and earth to bear witness against you today. I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.

Notice the words ובחרת בחיים. Now Moshe tells me what to do with the choice in front of me: choose life.

Now we can hear Rav Yisrael Yosef HaKohen Rappaport's question. The Rambam is explaining bechirah. He could have quoted a pasuk that actually says "choose": ובחרת בחיים. Why does he quote ראה נתתי לפניך, "See, I have placed before you"? What does that wording establish that the command alone leaves unstated?

Rav Rappaport explains that the Rambam is establishing that the choice is genuinely in our hands. Listen to what each pasuk is doing. When Moshe says, "I have placed before you," he tells me something about my situation: two paths lie open to me, and I can take either one. That is the point the Rambam needs here. Then Moshe says, "You shall choose life." Now he tells me what Hashem asks me to do with that freedom.

Think of the conversation at home. Can I hold back the sharp remark? Yes. That is the ability. What does Hashem ask me to do with it? Choose the response that protects the other person. That is the command. Now we can ask what it means to grow in the mitzvah of choosing life.

LaTeshuvat HaShanah, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3, comment א, p. (294) רצ"ד.

We have just seen the difference between having the freedom to choose and hearing the Torah ask us to choose life. What kind of person does that mitzvah help me become? Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona, who lived from about 1200 to 1263, addresses that question in his sefer Shaarei Teshuvah. Listen for the first quality he names.

Rabbeinu Yonah places choosing life among the positive commandments through which a person reaches the highest spiritual attainments. This is in Shaarei Teshuvah, shaar three, paragraph seventeen. Let's read the entire paragraph, in manageable portions.

ודע כי המעלות העליונות נמסרו במצות עשה, כמו מעלת הבחירה שנאמר: "ובחרת בחיים", ומעלות תלמוד תורה שנאמר: "ודברת בם", ומעלות לכת בדרכי ה' שנאמר: "והלכת בדרכיו".

> Know that the highest spiritual attainments have been entrusted to us through positive commandments. These include the attainment of choosing, as it says, "You shall choose life"; the attainments of Torah study, as it says, "You shall speak of them"; and the attainments of walking in Hashem's ways, as it says, "You shall walk in His ways."

References: Devarim 30:19; 6:7; 28:9.

ומעלות התבונן בגדולת ה' שנאמר: "וידעת היום והשבות אל לבבך כי ה' הוא האלהים", ודוד אמר: "ה' משמים השקיף על בני אדם לראות היש משכיל דורש את אלהים".

> And the attainments of contemplating Hashem's greatness, as it says, "You shall know today and bring it into your heart that Hashem is God." And David said, "Hashem looked down from heaven upon mankind, to see whether there was anyone of understanding who seeks God."

References: Devarim 4:39; Tehillim 14:2.

ומעלות זכרון חסדיו והתבונן בהם שנאמר: "וזכרת את כל הדרך", ונאמר: "וידעת עם לבבך כי כאשר ייסר איש את בנו ה' אלהיך מיסרך", ודוד אמר: "ויתבוננו חסדי ה'", ונאמר: "כי חסדך לנגד עיניי".

And the attainments of remembering His kindnesses and contemplating them, as it says, "You shall remember the entire journey"; and, "You shall know in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, Hashem your God disciplines you." And David said, "Let them contemplate Hashem's kindnesses"; and, "For Your kindness is before my eyes."

References: Devarim 8:2, 8:5; Tehillim 107:43, 26:3.

ומעלות הקדושה שנאמר: "והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים", ומעלות העבודה שנאמר: "אותו תעבוד", ומעלות היראה שנאמר: "את ה' אלהיך תירא", ומעלות האהבה שנאמר: "ואהבת את ה' אלהיך", ומעלות הדביקות שנאמר: "ובו תדבק".

And the attainments of holiness, as it says, "Sanctify yourselves and be holy"; the attainments of serving Hashem, as it says, "You shall serve Him"; the attainments of reverence, as it says, "You shall fear Hashem your God"; the attainments of love, as it says, "You shall love Hashem your God"; and the attainments of cleaving to Him, as it says, "You shall cling to Him."

References: Vayikra 11:44; Devarim 10:20; 6:5.

לכל אחת מהנה כמה מדרגות כאשר יתבאר בעזרת ה'. ובעבור המעלות האלה נברא האדם, שנאמר: "כל הנקרא בשמי ולכבודי בראתיו". ומה תקות הנברא אם לא ישים עמל נפשו ועיקר עסקו בדברים שנברא בעבורם.

Each of these has several levels, as will be explained with Hashem's help. For the sake of these attainments, a person was created, as it says, "Everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory." What hope does a created person have if he does not devote the labor of his soul and his principal occupation to the things for which he was created?

The final pasuk quoted is Yeshayahu 43:7.

What is Rabbeinu Yonah saying? Listen to the first example on his list: ובחרת בחיים. He places choosing life alongside learning Torah, walking in Hashem's ways, recognizing His kindness, loving Him and cleaving to Him. He calls these מעלות — qualities a person can acquire through positive mitzvos.

Then he tells us two things about that list. First, each quality has levels. I may hold my tongue today because I know Hashem asks it of me. In time I may also come to value the patience, kindness and closeness to Him in that very response. That is one way to picture growth. Second, Rabbeinu Yonah says this growth is what we were created for. What deserves the work of my soul? The very qualities Hashem gave me a lifetime to acquire.

Now we can hear a further question: what does the command to choose life add to the particular mitzvos I already keep?

What does this mitzvah add?

But we still have to ask a question. We already have mitzvos. We must learn Torah, give tzedakah, act honestly, and guard our speech. What does choosing life add?

The commentary, on page 294, comment beis, asks exactly that.

LaTeshuvat HaShanah, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3, comment ב, p. רצ"ד

מה נתחדש בהאי ציווי ד"ובחרת בחיים" טפי ממה שנתחייבנו לקיים מצוות התורה מצד עצמם?

> What is added by this command, "You shall choose life," beyond the obligation we already have to fulfill the commandments of the Torah?

He first suggests a general obligation to hold firmly to the good path and the fulfillment of mitzvos. Each particular command tells me what to do. Choosing life concerns my commitment to that way of living.

Then he offers a further explanation, drawing attention to Rabbeinu Yonah's word "attainment."

LaTeshuvat HaShanah, same comment - explanation of recognizing Torah as life

ויסוד מצוותו, שצריך להרגיש בעת קיום התורה לא כמו דבר שהוא מוכרח לעשות, אלא שזה הוא ה"חיים" שלו כפשוטו וכמשמעו, והיינו ובחרת בחיים.

> The foundation of this mitzvah is that, when fulfilling the Torah, a person should experience it as more than something he is compelled to do. He should recognize that this is his life, in the plain and full meaning of the word. That is "You shall choose life."

That is his proposed explanation. It gives us a quality to develop within our observance. We work toward recognizing what the mitzvah means for our lives.

What does Rav Rappaport mean by “his life”? When I choose the good that Hashem asks of me, I am already living in closeness to Him. The mitzvah has value in this very moment. I can learn to recognize it as my life while I am doing it.

Picture someone helping an older man cross the street. The man still needs his arm. They are still in the middle of the crosswalk. And already he feels it: I am doing what Hashem wants from me right now. That is what it can mean to feel alive in a mitzvah.

Think again about our conversation. I can hold back because I know I must be careful about hurting someone. That is meaningful. I can also begin to appreciate what I am choosing. I am protecting a relationship. I am practicing respect. I am becoming more patient. I am doing what Hashem asks of me.

This is something I want to hold on to. This belongs to the life I want to build.

Picture a husband listening to his wife. He has a sharp answer ready. He lets her finish. He can think to himself, “This is really chaim. Right here, at my own kitchen table, I’m choosing the way Hashem wants me to live.”

We will not always feel that immediately. Rabbeinu Yonah speaks of levels. There is room for growth in our understanding and our feelings. The mitzvah I do with commitment today can help develop the recognition that will deepen tomorrow.

Our fourth point is established. The Torah commands us to choose life, and these sources teach us to develop a commitment to the good and a recognition of Torah as our life.

What the Torah Calls Life

We now have to define that life clearly.

Everyone wants life. So what does the Torah mean when it tells us to choose it?

Moshe Rabbeinu gives us the connection in Parshas Va'eschanan, Devarim, chapter four, pasuk four.

Devarim 4:4 - complete pasuk

וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבֵקִים בַּה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם חַיִּים כֻּלְּכֶם הַיּוֹם.

And you who cling to Hashem your God are all alive today.

Listen to the word **הַדְּבֵקִים**, "those who cling." Moshe says of those who cling to Hashem: you are alive today.

Clinging to Hashem is life. That is the connection we have been building toward.

And immediately after commanding us to choose life, the Torah itself continues with this explanation, in Devarim, chapter thirty, pasuk twenty.

Devarim 30:20 - complete pasuk

לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקֹלוֹ וּלְדָבְקָה בוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיֶּיךָ וְאֹרֶךְ יָמֶיךָ לָשֶׁבֶת עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לָתֵת לָהֶם.

To love Hashem your God, to listen to His voice, and to cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days, so that you may dwell on the land that Hashem swore to your forefathers - to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov - to give them.

Now hear the same root again in **וּלְדָבְקָה בוֹ**, "to cling to Him." Why cling to Him? The pasuk itself answers: כִּי הוּא חַיֶּיךָ — for He is your life.

Love Him. Listen to Him. Cling to Him. For He is your life.

Now we can understand what Hashem is directing us toward. When I choose a mitzvah, when I choose to walk in His ways, I am using the opportunity to draw closer to Him. I am choosing something that belongs to the enduring good for which I was created.

For our benefit

This is for our benefit. Hashem wants to give us the greatest good we can receive. The ability to acquire our own spiritual perfection is part of that goodness.

The Mesillas Yesharim, chapter one, expresses our purpose in these words.

Ramchal, Mesillas Yesharim, chapter 1 - purpose and preparation

שהאדם לא נברא אלא להתענג על ה' ולהנות מזיו שכינתו, שזהו התענוג האמיתי והעידון הגדול מכל העידונים שיכולים להמצא. ומקום העידון הזה באמת הוא העולם הבא, כי הוא הנברא בהכנה המצטרכת לדבר הזה. אך הדרך כדי להגיע אל מחוז חפצנו זה, הוא זה העולם.

A person was created to delight in Hashem and enjoy the radiance of His Presence, for this is the true pleasure and the greatest delight of all the delights that can exist. The true place of this delight is the World to Come, for it was created with the preparation required for this purpose. But the way to reach this desired destination is through this world.

He locates the fullness of that delight in Olam Haba. Our preparation takes place here. And the relationship itself begins here.

We can already experience meaning in learning Torah, joy in doing a mitzvah, and comfort in turning to Hashem in tefillah. Those experiences vary from person to person and from one day to another. We can develop the relationship even when the feeling is quiet.

A person can have a difficult day and still turn to Hashem. A person can find a mitzvah challenging and still choose it. Closeness to Hashem is something we build through those choices as well.

A child has spilled water and is waiting to see what his mother will do. She is tired. She puts an arm around him and helps him clean it up. The toys are still on the floor when she opens her siddur.

Now return to our conversation. When I answer with patience because this is the way Hashem asks me to live, I can recognize an opportunity for closeness to Him in a very ordinary setting.

I do not have to wait for an extraordinary moment. I am standing in my kitchen, or speaking on the telephone, or sitting with someone after shul. There is a person in front of me. There is a response for me to choose. And there is a way to serve Hashem within it.

Stay with the same mother for one more moment. What is she thinking? “What an opportunity to get close to Hashem!” She could tell that to herself even before the kitchen is quiet.

That is why this ability matters so much. Through my choices, I can acquire the qualities through which I draw close to Hashem and attain eternal good.

The Rambam calls choice a pillar of Torah and mitzvos. The Ramchal helps us appreciate what this whole life of Torah and mitzvos allows us to acquire. And the pesukim tell us what that good is: attachment to Hashem, who is our life.

The children have settled down. She looks out of her own kitchen window, holds her siddur close, and speaks to Hashem in her own words. The patience she chose earlier has become part of the way she relates to Him.

Our fifth point is established. The life we are commanded to choose is life bound to Hashem.

Choosing Life Today

The final step is to recognize a concrete opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah in an ordinary day.

The Sefer HaChareidim brings this into a very practical setting. This is chapter one, paragraph twenty.

First, notice the category in which he places it: positive Torah commandments that depend on the heart and can be fulfilled every day. That heading is important. This is an opportunity that can recur in our daily lives.

Sefer HaChareidim, chapter 1, §20 - passage defining the practical mitzvah

וכן כתב רבינו יונה, מעלות רבות נמסרו לנו במצות עשה; מעלת הבחירה אחת, שנאמר ”ובחרת בחיים”. ובכל עת שמזדמן לפני האדם איסור או ספק איסור והוא פורש, מקיים מצות עשה זו.

> Rabbeinu Yonah likewise wrote that many spiritual attainments have been entrusted to us through positive commandments. The attainment of choosing is one of them, as it says, "You shall choose life." Whenever a person encounters something forbidden, or something possibly forbidden, and refrains from it, he fulfills this positive commandment.

Think about what this means. A person encounters something he should hold back from, and he holds back. The Chareidim says that he fulfills a positive mitzvah.

We have to know what the halachah requires in any particular situation, including how to handle a doubt. The point for tonight is the positive significance of choosing to refrain when we should refrain.

The commentary on page 295 draws attention to this application.

A man is learning when his phone vibrates. He reaches for it, pauses, turns it over and pushes it away. He can go back to the word where his finger stopped. That pause illustrates a decision to refrain. The Chareidim's teaching applies when the particular action is forbidden or possibly forbidden.

LaTeshuvat HaShanah, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3, comment ב continued, p. רצ"ה

ומבואר דהחרדים נקט בדעת רבינו יונה, דמצות הבחירה נוספת חובת הזהירות מ"ספיקא דאיסורא", והפורש מספק איסור מקיים עשה זה.

> It emerges that the Chareidim understands Rabbeinu Yonah as teaching that the mitzvah of choosing adds an obligation of care concerning a possible prohibition, and that someone who refrains from a possible prohibition fulfills this positive commandment.

The same conversation, seen fully

Let's go back one last time to the conversation with which we began. This time, suppose the response you are tempted to give would embarrass the other person in a way the Torah forbids. You recognize that and hold back.

At the beginning of the class, we could describe what happened by saying that you controlled your response. Now we can appreciate more.

You used the ability the Rambam describes. You took responsibility for your words. You practiced a good quality. You chose a way of living that draws you closer to Hashem. And in the situation the Chareidim describes, your restraint fulfills the positive mitzvah of choosing life.

To someone watching, very little may have happened. You simply answered respectfully. But an important choice took place within you.

That is why it belongs among mitzvos of the heart. What mattered was the choice you made within the situation. You recognized something you should refrain from, and you chose to refrain.

We should learn to appreciate these opportunities. Sometimes we finish a difficult conversation and say, "Well, I managed to keep my mouth shut." We can recognize the good we accomplished. I protected someone. I practiced a way Hashem asks me to live. I used an opportunity to choose life.

What We Take Home

So what have we learned tonight?

First, Hashem has given us a real ability to choose. The Rambam describes our ability to direct ourselves toward good and become righteous.

Imagine a person at a fork in the path. Both ways are open to him. Before he takes his first step, he can stop, think, and decide which way to go.

Second, that ability is a foundation of Torah and mitzvos. Hashem addresses us as people who can respond, and who are responsible for our actions.

Think of the boy giving tzedakah. The mitzvah addresses him as someone who can decide to put the coin in the box.

Third, our choices help shape who we become. The Ramchal explains that we acquire spiritual perfection through our own work, and through that perfection we draw close to Hashem.

Remember the violinist. Someone could give him the instrument; it took his own practice to make the skill his.

Fourth, the Torah commands us to choose life. Rabbeinu Yonah places choosing life among the great attainments for which we were created. We work toward recognizing Torah as our life.

Think of the woman giving back the extra change. That small act of honesty is part of the life she chooses to live.

Fifth, closeness to Hashem is life. "You who cling to Hashem your God are all alive today." Hashem is directing us toward our own greatest good.

Think of a person pausing in tefillah to speak to Hashem. That closeness is itself life.

Sixth, there are opportunities to fulfill this in daily life. The Chareidim teaches us to recognize the positive mitzvah in choosing to refrain from a prohibition.

At the kitchen table, the sharp remark could have embarrassed the other person. Holding it back was a positive choice.

For this week, take one recurring situation. Perhaps it is a particular conversation in which patience is difficult. Before it begins, give yourself a moment to prepare.

What does Hashem ask of me here? How can I answer in a way that helps me become the person I want to be?

When the moment comes, try to remember what is available to you. And afterward, appreciate the choice you made.

We will discuss our different starting points and inclinations in the next class. For tonight, we have established the value of this gift. Hashem gives me the opportunity to acquire spiritual good through my own choices, to draw close to Him, and to build a life whose value endures.

When I choose the good Hashem asks of me, I am choosing my own deepest good. I am choosing life.

What We Thank Hashem for Each Morning

Now I want to end with a question. If choosing life really is a mitzvah, should we make a bracha on it? We make a bracha before putting on tefillin or taking a lulav. Why is there no particular bracha before choosing life?

We can begin with a principle about mitzvos of the heart. The Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim, siman 432, asks why we do not make a separate bracha on the mental nullification of chametz. One explanation he gives is:

Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim 432, paragraph beginning "ומה שכתב רבינו שבדיקה"

משום דביטול הוי בלב ואין מברכין על דברים שבלב.

Because nullification takes place in the heart, and we do not recite blessings over matters of the heart.

The Beis Yosef is speaking about bittul chametz. Imagine someone sitting with his hands folded in his lap. The bread is right there on the table, and he leaves it untouched. The change is in how he regards the chametz he may still own: in his heart it is like the dust of the earth to him. That inward decision is what we mean by bittul. Can you see the decision from the outside? This is why the Beis Yosef's words, "bittul takes place in the heart," matter here.

That gives us a basis for understanding our case as well. The Chareidim places choosing life among mitzvos that depend on the heart. We can apply that principle here. This application is our explanation; the Beis Yosef is discussing chametz.

But now let me ask something further. Do we already thank Hashem each morning for the ability to discern and choose?

Among the first brachos of the morning, we say:

Birchos HaShachar - the blessing of discernment

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַנּוֹתֵן לַשֶּׂכְוִי בִינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לָיְלָה.

Blessed are You, Hashem our God, King of the universe, who gives the sechvi understanding to distinguish between day and night.

Think of a rooster at first light. The night is giving way to day, and it crows. That is the first picture to hold in mind when we say this bracha. Now the Tur gives us another meaning of sechvi.

The bracha is associated with the rooster's recognition of daybreak. The Tur, Orach Chaim, siman 46, also explains that the word sechvi refers to the heart, the faculty of understanding.

Tur, Orach Chaim 46 - explanation of sechvi

הלב נקרא שכוי בלשון המקרא, דכתיב: "או מי נתן לשכוי בינה", והלב הוא המבין, ועל ידי הבינה אדם מבחין בין יום ובין לילה.

The heart is called sechvi in the language of Scripture, as it says, "Or who gave the sechvi understanding?" The heart is the faculty that understands, and through understanding a person distinguishes between day and night.

When he says "the heart understands," he is speaking of our inner capacity to discern. We can thank Hashem for that gift each morning.

Listen to the rooster while it is still dark. Standing there in the dark, would you know that morning is nearly here? The rooster is already announcing the dawn. It knows the light is coming.

Hold on to that image as we come back to the heart. What would it mean for a person to recognize a possibility while things still look dark?

The bills are still there. The water is still spreading across the table. When my child looks up at me, I have a choice about the first words he will hear. I can hand him a towel and help him begin again.

Even when the situation looks bleak, Hashem is giving me an opportunity to choose and to be mekayem the mitzvah of u'vacharta bachayim. That gives us a way into the Sfas Emes on Re'eh.

Now listen to the Sfas Emes, Parshas Re'eh, year 5631, the opening paragraph. He quotes his grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim.

Sfas Emes, Re'eh, (5631 תרל"א)**, opening paragraph - opening passage**

אא"ז מו"ר ז"ל הגיד פי' ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם. שנקבע בכל איש ישראל שיוכל להבחין ולבחור רק בהברכה. וע"ז מברכין בכל יום נותן לשכוי בינה כו'.

My grandfather and teacher, of blessed memory, explained "See, I place before you" as meaning that every Jew has been endowed with the ability to discern and choose the blessing. For this we bless every day, "Who gives the sechvi understanding," and so forth.

There is the connection explicitly. We thank Hashem for the ability to recognize and choose the blessing. This is gratitude for the capacity He gives us; it is distinct from a formal blessing before performing a particular mitzvah.

He sees the spill and the bills on the table. Before he says a word, he thinks, "Thank you Hashem for presenting me with an opportunity to choose life now." Then he decides how to answer his child.

And in the opening paragraph for Re'eh, year 5633, the Sfas Emes adds:

Sfas Emes, Re'eh, (5633 תרל"ג)**, opening paragraph - excerpt**

ונראה פי' היום שיש בכל יום בחירה חדשה.

It appears that "today" means that every day brings a new opportunity to choose.

So here is something very practical to take home. Tomorrow morning, when you say this bracha, remember what you are thanking Hashem for.

Hashem, You have given me understanding. You have given me the ability to recognize the good and choose it. Today I have another opportunity to develop myself and draw close to You.

The conversation may still be difficult. I may still have to work on my patience. But I can begin the day conscious of the gift I have received and the opportunity that lies ahead.

Imagine walking into your house at the end of a long day. The laundry has spilled out, the children are underfoot, and your first words are about to come out. There is a gift waiting here: you get to choose those first words.

What Did One Conversation Accomplish?

Let's go back a few seconds. You can hear the kettle whistling. The husband is boiling, too. Something his wife said upset him, and he knows exactly what he could say to sting her back. That sentence is still his to keep.

Let's look, finally, at what one conversation accomplishes. Picture the husband and wife at the kitchen table again. A difficult remark has just been made. He has an answer ready, but he pauses.

From the outside, all anyone sees is a husband answering his wife. What has happened inside him? Let's go back through the moment, one level at a time.

He is still angry. Think about what happens in the space between the answer he feels like giving and the one his wife actually hears.

First, I chose how to respond. I used the ability the Rambam describes. I considered my words and took responsibility for the answer I gave.

He feels the answer rising and pauses. Before a word leaves his mouth, he can choose the response he gives.

Second, I protected another person. I held back the embarrassing remark. The person in front of me received a respectful answer.

She can finish what she is saying without the sting of the remark he was ready to make. That is something real he has done for her.

Third, I worked on the person I am becoming. I practiced patience. Through repeated, thoughtful choices like this, I can develop that quality within myself.

“Go on. I’m listening.” The first time it takes effort. Doing it again gives him another chance to acquire patience.

Fourth, I practiced walking in Hashem's ways. Being slow to anger belongs to the good ways the Rambam tells us to develop. I used this conversation as an opportunity to serve Hashem.

He takes a moment over his cup of tea. When he turns back to her, he can speak gently even though he felt irritated.

Fifth, I chose life. In the case we described, where I refrained from a forbidden response, the Chareidim teaches that I fulfilled a positive mitzvah. I used a choice to draw closer to Hashem, who is my life.

From the outside, it looks like an ordinary conversation. Inside it was a choice to hold back words that would have been forbidden. That is where he chose life.

If you had walked through that kitchen, all you would have heard was a husband letting his wife finish. Imagine what that same moment looks like from Shamayim. What do the malachim see that a bystander would have missed? He knew exactly which words would embarrass her, and he let them go unsaid. His wife could keep speaking with her dignity intact.

The next time a sharp answer comes to your lips, remember him. In the time it takes to draw one breath, you too can choose life.

Thank You, Hashem, for giving me the ability to choose life. Help me use that gift today.