

STUDENT GUIDED-LEARNING HANDOUT

When Heaven Calls, Who Chooses?

A Guided Investigation of Pirkei Avos 3:15

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

THE INVESTIGATION Two passages in the same Torah portion seem to predict opposite futures. We will resist solving the tension too quickly. First, let each source sharpen the question.

I. Two Futures

Source 1. Vayelech: A Future of Wandering (Devarim 31:16-18)

Hashem said to Moshe: You are about to lie with your fathers, and this people will rise and stray after the foreign gods of the land into which it is coming. It will forsake Me and violate My covenant that I made with it. My anger will flare against it on that day; I will forsake them and hide My face from them... It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have found me?' But I will surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil it did, for it turned to other gods.

ויאמר ה' אל משה הנך שכב עם אבותיך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ אשר בא שמה בקרבו ועזבני והפר את בריתי אשר כרתי אתו. וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים והסתרתני פני מהם והיה לאכל ומצאהו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הלא על כי אין אלהי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה. ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא על כל הרעה אשר עשה כי פנה אל אלהים אחרים.

Source 2. Nitzavim: A Future of Choosing Life (Devarim 30:15, 19-20)

See, I have placed before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live—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.

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע... העדתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך. לאהבה את ה' אלהיך לשמע בקלו ולדבקה בו כי הוא חייך וארך ימייך.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

1. What exactly is foretold in Vayelech? What exactly is placed in our hands in Nitzavim?
2. If Hashem already knows the nation's future, in what sense is the choice still real?
3. Why might the Torah place these two passages so close together?

GUIDED LEARNING Do not reconcile the passages yet. State the tension as strongly as possible: Hashem foretells what Israel will do, while commanding Israel to choose.

II. The Mishnah Refuses to Choose One Side

Source 3. The Four Clauses (Pirkei Avos 3:15)

Everything is foreseen, yet freedom is granted; the world is judged with goodness, and everything is according to the abundance of action.

הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה, ובטוב העולם נדון, והכל לפי רוב המעשה.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

4. Why does the Mishnah say 'yet freedom is granted' instead of weakening either side?
5. Which two clauses speak most directly to Nitzavim-Vayelech?
6. Could the final two clauses explain how Divine knowledge and human choice operate in an actual life?

FIRST FOUNDATION The Mishnah does not eliminate the contradiction. It teaches us to live faithfully inside both truths: Hashem knows, and the human decision matters.

III. Classical Grounding: Responsibility Is Real**Source 4. The Domain Entrusted to Us** (*Berachos 33b*)

Everything is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven, as it says: 'And now, Israel, what does Hashem your God ask of you except to fear Hashem your God?'

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים, שנאמר: ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה.

Source 5. The Foundation of Teshuvah (*Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:1*)

Permission is granted to every person. If one wishes to incline himself toward the good path and be righteous, the choice is in his hand. If he wishes to incline himself toward the evil path and be wicked, the choice is in his hand.

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

GUIDED QUESTIONS

7. Why is free choice not merely an interesting belief, but the foundation of teshuvah?
8. What would collapse religiously if our decisions were only appearances?

Source 5b. Knowing Without Coercing (*Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 5:5, selected*)

You may ask: Does the Holy One know everything before it occurs, including whether a person will be righteous or wicked? Know that the answer is longer than the earth and broader than the sea... Just as a human being cannot grasp the Creator's essence, so he cannot grasp the Creator's knowledge. Yet we know without doubt that a person's deeds are in his own hands; the Holy One does not pull him or decree that he act this way.

שמה תאמר והלא הקדוש ברוך הוא יודע כל מה שיהיה... דע שתשובת שאלה זו ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים... וכשם שאין כח באדם להשיג ולמצא אמתת הבורא, כך אין כח באדם להשיג ולמצא דעתו של בורא. אבל נדע בלא ספק שמעשה האדם ביד האדם, ואין הקדוש ברוך הוא מושכו ולא גוזר עליו לעשות כך.

TEXTUAL ANCHOR Whatever the Chassidic sources add, they cannot be read as erasing responsibility. Their question is subtler: Where does the desire to return—and the help to carry it through—come from?

IV. Choice, Awakening, and the Unheard Voice**Source 6. From Choice to Hearing** (*Milta Chadta, pp. 761-762, presenting Ohr LaShamayim and the Baal Shem Tov*) — *English: complete main text of the discussion, omitting footnotes; Hebrew: faithful rendering*

On the matter of bechirah (free will), the sefarim hakedoshim elaborate deeply to explain and clarify what is within man's control. As Rav Meir of Apta writes in Or LaShamayim (Introduction), the Rishonim have already delved into the question: What 'free will'

actually refers to, if his choice itself is also ultimately granted by Hashem?

He explains that free will lies in a person's awareness that even his choice is ultimately from Hashem. In other words, nothing occurs in this world unless Hashem wills it to. Yet, man is granted the choice to internalize the understanding that everything is a manifestation of Hashem's will—even the inclination toward choosing good came to him solely from the Creator, who implants this desire within him. When a person firmly establishes this recognition in his heart, he merits Divine assistance to indeed choose the path of goodness.

If we reflect, we can discern Hashem's goodness in that all of man's desire and choice of ruchniyus stems solely from the Heavenly inspiration that awakens him to serve Hashem and seek what is good. The Baal Shem Tov (Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Vayikra, Tzav) famously explains the words of Rabi Yehoshua ben Levi in Avos (6:2): 'Each day, a bas kol goes forth from Har Chorev and proclaims: Woe to the creations for the insult to the Torah,' as well as the Zohar's similar teaching (Naso 126a) that 'each day, a bas kol goes forth, declaring: Return, wayward children.'

The Baal Shem Tov questioned the purpose of this bas kol, as no one is known to have ever physically heard it. If so, what benefit is there in its daily proclamation? He explains that the thoughts of teshuvah that a Jew experiences each day are drawn from this bas kol. Though it cannot be heard with physical ears, it resonates in the hearts of people. The bas kol and its message exist in the realm of thought, where 'there is neither speech nor words' (Tehillim 19:4). It is felt only by the heart, and from this feeling, a person is stirred to repentance.

בענין הבחירה האריכו הספרים הקדושים לבאר מה נתון ביד האדם. רבי מאיר מאפסא כותב באור לשמים (הקדמה) שכבר נתקשו הראשונים: מהי בחירה, אם גם עצם הבחירה ניתנת בסופו של דבר מאת השם יתברך?

הוא מבאר שעיקר הבחירה הוא שהאדם יכיר שגם בחירתו באה מאת השם. אין דבר נעשה בעולם אלא ברצונו, ואף הנטייה לבחור בטוב ניטעת באדם על ידי הבורא. כאשר האדם קובע הכרה זו בלבו, הוא זוכה לסיוע מן השמים לבחור בדרך הטוב.

ואם נתבונן נראה חסדו של השם: כל רצון ובחירה בענייני רוחניות נובעים מן ההתעוררות העליונה המעוררת את האדם לעבוד את השם ולבקש את הטוב. הבעל שם טוב הקשה מה תועלת בבת קול היוצאת בכל יום אם אין איש שומע אותה באוזניו. וביאר שהרהורי התשובה הבאים ליהודי בכל יום נמשכים מאותה בת קול. היא אינה נשמעת באוזן הגשמית, אלא מהדהדת בלב ובעולם המחשבה; משם מתעורר האדם לתשובה.

Source 7. Beyond the Limit of Human Perception (Mei HaShiloach, Vayeira)

The statement 'Everything is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven' applies within the boundary of human understanding. In truth, everything is in the hands of Heaven—even fear of Heaven; only in this world has Hashem concealed His way.

מה דאיתא בגמרא הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים הוא רק לפי גבול תפיסת שכל האדם; אבל באמת הכל בידי שמים ואף יראת שמים, ורק בעולם הזה הסתיר השם יתברך דרכו.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

9. How can a choice be fully ours and still be a gift from Hashem?
10. Is Mei HaShiloach speaking from the human plane of responsibility, or from the deeper Divine plane—or both?
11. What spiritual danger is corrected by remembering that even our strength to choose is received?

GUIDED LEARNING We are moving from a philosophical question to an avodah question. Instead of asking only, 'How can Hashem know?' ask, 'How does Hashem help a person return without forcing him?'

V. The Daily Voice of Return

Source 8. A Voice From Chorev *(Pirkei Avos 6:2, selected)*

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Every day a heavenly voice goes forth from Mount Chorev and proclaims: 'Woe to humanity for the insult to the Torah.'

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בכל יום ויום בת קול יוצאת מהר חורב ומכרזת ואומרת: אוי להם לבריות מעלבונה של תורה.

Source 9. When an Answer Brings Further Assistance *(Milta Chadta, pp. 762-763, developing Toldos Yaakov Yosef) — English: direct excerpt and close condensation; Hebrew: faithful rendering*

There is no end to this process. Through the awakening from Above that comes with the proclamation 'Return, wayward children,' a person is stirred to serve Hashem. The more he responds to this awakening, the more he merits to hear the herald further, in an ever-deepening cycle. As a person becomes inspired and yearns for more spirituality, this arouses an awakening from Above that provides him with even greater influences of kedushah. If he understands that these thoughts are the voice of the herald, actively listens, and takes them as guidance for action, then Hashem will continue to speak with him and guide him in His ways.

אין סוף לתהליך זה. על ידי ההתעוררות מלמעלה הבאה מן הכרוז 'שובו בנים שובבים', האדם מתעורר לעבוד את השם. ככל שהוא משיב להתעוררות זו, כך הוא זוכה לשמוע את הכרוז עוד ועוד. וכשהוא מבין שמחשבות אלו הן קול הכרוז, מקשיב להן ומקבלן כהדרכה למעשה, השם יתברך ממשיך להדריך בדרכיו.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

12. *If we do not hear an audible voice, where does the bas kol appear in ordinary life?*
13. *When a thought of teshuvah enters the mind, which part is from Heaven and which part remains ours?*
14. *According to Source 9, how can one response prepare the way for further assistance?*

SECOND FOUNDATION Hashem's foreknowledge is not passive observation. The first assistance often arrives as a thought of teshuvah. The awakening may be Heaven's, but recognizing it and answering it remain ours—and that answer can open the person to further assistance.

VI. Three Different Places in the Avodah

Source 10. Waiting for a Word Not Yet Heard (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Re'eh; cited in Milta Chadta, p. 764*) — *English: close rendering of the full paragraph in Milta Chadta; Hebrew: faithful rendering*

'Guard—and you will hear.' The word 'guard' implies waiting and anticipation. If a person waits and yearns to hear Hashem's word, carefully weighs his steps, and seeks Hashem's path—standing in hopeful anticipation for the moment he will feel an awakening—he will merit hearing the thoughts of teshuvah brought by the daily heavenly voice.

שמור ושמעת... שמור לשון המתנה וציפייה. אם האדם ממתין ומשתוקק לשמוע דבר ה', שוקל את צעדיו ומבקש את דרך ה', ועומד בציפייה לרגע שבו ירגיש התעוררות—יזכה לשמוע את הרהורי התשובה הבאים מן הבת קול שבכל יום.

Source 11. Place It Upon the Heart (*A teaching attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe; cited in Milta Chadta, p. 764*) — *Traditional formulation with Milta Chadta's application; Hebrew is a faithful rendering*

The Torah says to place its words 'upon your heart.' Even when the words do not penetrate immediately, place them upon the heart. When the opportune moment arrives, they can enter. Milta Chadta adds that when a person leaves the words there and yearns for them to find a path inward, the awakening of teshuvah can enable those words finally to penetrate.

התורה אומרת לשים את הדברים 'על לבבך'. גם כאשר הדברים אינם חודרים מיד, הנח אותם על הלב; כשיגיע הזמן הראוי, הם יוכלו להיכנס. מילתא חדתא מוסיף שכאשר האדם משאירם שם ומשתוקק שימצאו מסילה פנימה, התעוררות התשובה יכולה לאפשר להם לחדור סוף-סוף אל הלב.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

15. What is the difference between not yet hearing a message and hearing one that you cannot yet accept?
16. At which stage is waiting an avodah, and at which stage would waiting become avoidance?
17. Which of the three descriptions below most accurately names where you are now?

MILESTONE ONE • SEEK I HAVE NOT YET HEARD. The Degel describes a person who genuinely wants direction but has not yet identified the particular message. Example: I enter Elul knowing that something needs attention, but I do not know what. I ask Hashem, make a quiet cheshbon hanefesh, and listen more carefully in davening and learning until a recurring issue becomes clear. Waiting here is not postponing a known duty; it is seeking the message.

MILESTONE TWO • PRESERVE I HEARD THE WORDS, BUT I CANNOT YET ACCEPT THEM. The Kotzker does not demand pretend agreement. Example: I disagreed with the rabbi's application of a Torah principle in last week's discussion about extravagant vorts. I may still think the application was mistaken. But instead of dismissing the underlying principle as foolish, I can say: 'I am not ready for this yet, but I will leave it upon my heart.'

MILESTONE THREE • ACT THIS IS SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO ME. The hisorerus has arrived and been recognized; now waiting is over. Example: while driving home, I suddenly realize that I owe someone an apology. Before the thought cools, I send: 'Can we speak tonight?' The avodah is to give the message an immediate vessel.

THE THREE-STEP DIAGNOSTIC Seek what you have not yet heard. Preserve what you have heard but cannot yet accept. Act upon what has entered your heart.

VII. Even From the Edge of Heaven

Source 12. Return and Gathering (Devarim 30:1-4)

It will be when all these things come upon you—the blessing and the curse that I have placed before you—and you take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you. You will return to Hashem your God and listen to His voice... Then Hashem your God will return your captivity and have mercy upon you; He will return and gather you from all the peoples... If your dispersed one will be at the edge of heaven, from there Hashem your God will gather you and from there He will take you.

והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך, והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלהיך שמה. ושבת עד ה' אלהיך ושמעת בקלו... ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך ורחמך ושב וקבצך מכל העמים... אם יהיה נדחך בקצה השמים משם יקבצך ה' אלהיך ומשם יקחך.

Source 13. The Smallest Point Can Be Gathered (Milta Chadta, p. 765, presenting a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov) — Faithful presentation; not a verbatim quotation

Even if a person's genuine awakening exists only at the 'edge of heaven'—a small and distant point—Hashem gathers from that point. A sincere first movement toward teshuvah creates the opening for Divine assistance.

גם אם ההתעוררות האמיתית של האדם נמצאת רק 'בקצה השמים', בנקודה קטנה ורחוקה, השם יתברך מקבץ מאותה נקודה. תנועה כנה ראשונה של תשובה פותחת פתח לסיוע מלמעלה.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

18. Who initiates in these verses: the person who 'takes it to heart,' or Hashem who gathers?
19. What is the minimum sincere movement that can become a beginning?
20. Why might the Torah emphasize 'from there' twice?

VIII. Every Person Has a Moment

Source 14. Do Not Dismiss Any Person (Pirkei Avos 4:3)

He used to say: Do not be contemptuous of any person, and do not reject anything, for there is no person who does not have his hour and no thing that does not have its place.

הוא היה אומר: אל תהי בז לכל אדם ואל תהי מפליג לכל דבר, שאין לך אדם שאין לו שעה ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום.

Source 15. Prepare a Place for the Moment (Milta Chadta, pp. 765-766; see its notes to Noam Elimelech and Chelkas Yehoshua) — Synthesis of the discussion in Milta Chadta

Every person receives a moment of awakening. The avodah is to prepare a place—a vessel—in which that moment can remain. A mitzvah, a prayer, a decision, or a practical safeguard turns the flash of inspiration into something that can live.

לכל אדם ניתנת שעת התעוררות. העבודה היא להכין לה מקום וכלי שבו תוכל להישאר. מצוה, תפילה, קבלה או גדר מעשי הופכים את הברק של ההתעוררות לדבר שיש לו קיום.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

21. What is the difference between receiving a moment and preparing a vessel for it?
22. Which is more decisive: the intensity of the inspiration, or the action that follows it?
23. How does this source illuminate 'everything is according to the abundance of action'?

THE VESSEL Once assistance arrives, it must acquire a vessel. The decisive question is not only whether inspiration came, but whether it became an action.

IX. 'You Will Choose Life': Command and Promise

Source 16. Hashem's Confidence in the Jew (Rav Baruch of Kosov, *Nechmad VeNa'im* §34, as presented in Milta Chadta, p. 767) — *Faithful summary; not a verbatim quotation*

The word 'uvacharta' is in the future form: 'you will choose.' It can therefore be heard not only as a command but also as Divine confidence and promise. Hashem commands us to choose life while lovingly assuring us that He will help His children reach that choice.

המלה 'ובחרת' היא בלשון עתיד: 'אתה תבחר'. אפשר לשמוע בה לא רק ציווי אלא גם בטחון והבטחה מלמעלה. השם יתברך מצוה לבחור בחיים, ובאהבתו מבטיח לסייע לבניו להגיע לבחירה זו.

GUIDED QUESTIONS

24. What changes when 'uvacharta' is heard as both demand and confidence?
25. How can assistance strengthen free choice without replacing it?
26. Does Nitzavim now answer Vayelech—or does it place Vayelech inside a larger story?

X. Return to the Mishnah

ATTRIBUTION NOTE Milta Chadta supplies the building blocks for the final two rows—Hashem's goodness in awakening us, increasing assistance after a response, and the need for a vessel. The exact mapping of those ideas onto the Mishnah's third and fourth clauses is this class's guided synthesis; Milta Chadta does not state that mapping explicitly.

THE MISHNAH	WHAT THE SOURCES HAVE TAUGHT US
הכל צפוי Everything is foreseen	Hashem sees the wandering, the hidden sparks, the daily awakenings, and the eventual return.
והרשות נתונה Freedom is granted	Each awakening still asks for a human response. The help is Divine; the answer is ours.
ובטוב העולם נדון The world is judged with goodness	Guided synthesis—not an explicit interpretation in Milta Chadta: Divine goodness appears in the repeated openings, assistance, patience, and confidence Hashem gives.
והכל לפי רוב המעשה According to abundant action	Guided synthesis—not an explicit interpretation in Milta Chadta: an awakening becomes durable through accumulated deeds; a feeling alone does not remake a life.

THE YESOD Vayelech tells us how far a Jew may wander. Nitzavim tells us where he will ultimately stand. Hashem foresees the wandering, but He never stops calling—and He promises that, in the end, we will choose life.

Elul Avodah: Diagnose the Stage

1 • SEEK I have not yet heard. Ask Hashem for direction, make a brief cheshbon hanefesh, and remain attentive to a recurring Torah-directed concern.

2 • PRESERVE I have heard, but cannot yet accept. Do not pretend agreement and do not discard the idea. Write: 'I am not ready for this yet, but I will leave it upon my heart.'

3 • ACT This is speaking directly to me. Stop waiting. Translate the hisorerus into one small, measurable action within twenty-four hours.

ONE-SENTENCE REVIEW If you have not yet heard, listen. If you have heard but cannot accept, do not discard. If the words have entered your heart, act.

Closing Reflection

What is one place in your life where 'everything is foreseen' has made you passive? How might 'freedom is granted' become your response—and how might 'you will choose life' allow you to hear Hashem's confidence in you?

Accuracy note: Source 6 gives Milta Chadta's complete main discussion; its Hebrew is a faithful rendering. The final two-clause mapping is our guided synthesis, not Milta Chadta's explicit interpretation.