"*Re'ei* : Good and evil, reward and punishment"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The sidrah Re'ei opens with the theme of 'choice': *Re'eh anochi notein lifneichem ha-yom b'racha uk'lalah*, 'Behold I am setting before you today a [way to acquire] blessing or a curse.' Commentators ask why the verb appears in the form *notein*, the present continuous tense, 'I *am setting* before you,' instead of, as expected, the past tense, *natati*, 'I *have set* before you.'

The great Vilna Gaon explained that the Torah employs the present continuous tense to teach us that the choice between good and evil that God gave Israel was not a one-off challenge, but rather a dilemma that is truly 'continuous,' that faces us every single day of our lives as we confront temptation in every area of our activity. Every day we read in the papers or hear on the news of famous, wealthy, and influential people making the wrong choices, risking their reputations and livelihood, and thinking that they would not be found out. And all for some temporary advantage or benefit.

We hear of sportsmen taking drugs to enhance their performance; taking bribes to fix matches; of politicians being paid to raise questions in parliament to benefit a specific interest-group; of government Ministers awarding contracts to particular firms in return for money or trips abroad; of people cheating in exams or pretending to possess qualifications that they have not acquired. At every turn in life, we are beset by the need to choose between doing good when no personal advantage beckons or succumbing to wrong-doing for personal gain.

Those temptations are so great that Hillel advised, *Al ta'amin b'atzm'cha ad yom motcha*, 'Do not believe in yourself - in your capacity to resist – until your last day on earth' (Avot 2:5).

But that is precisely what makes life such a challenge. And that is what makes Jewish values so important, urgent, and rewarding. Without our Torah, without the *do*'s and *don't*s, we would all be sucked into the whirlpool of temptation and sin. And in such an environment no one would be safe from violence and fraud. There would be no sense of holiness, of righteousness, of goodness and charitableness, no conscience and no sense of duty and integrity. Life would be a jungle, and we would all be at the mercy of forces and passions that we could not control or protect ourselves against.

So, it is well worth remembering the Vilna Gaon's observation on the present continuous tense of the verb *notein*, namely that every single day of our life *continuous* choices between right and wrong present themselves: blessing and curse, actions that will elicit praise and those that will incur censure. The corollary is that every day we are also given the opportunity of responding to God's will and amassing an abundance of blessing when we make the right and noble choices.

Reward and punishment are inevitably bound up with the issue of choice, and the belief in a God who rewards man's righteous choice and punishes his wicked machinations. According to the Talmud a person's state of mind is so significant that it, of itself, is included in the divine consideration of man's subsequent action:

> *Machshavah Tovah m'tzorfah l'ma'aseh* – 'a good intention is accounted together with the deed,' for it is said: *Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another. The Lord heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance was written at His instruction concerning those who revere the Lord and reflect upon His name* (Mal. 3:16).

The implication of the last phrase is that merely reflecting on God's name – entertaining righteous thoughts – brings reward in its wake (Tal. *Kid*. 40a). Rav Assi exemplifies this by suggesting that 'if a man intended to perform a mitzvah but was prevented by circumstances from doing so, it is nevertheless accounted to him as if he had performed it.' The rationale is that, by that worthy and spiritually-energizing thought and intention, he has brought himself closer to God – or fellow-man if the mitzvah was directed at him or her. And that is precisely the objective of mitzvot: to train the mind in spirituality.

The power of thought to achieve character-refinement, moral strength and courage, self-belief, and an enhancement of one's innate capabilities, was the subject of a book by James Allen (1864-1912), widely regarded as the pioneer of the self-help movement. He called his book, *As a Man Thinketh*, which, not surprisingly, is a quote from the book of Proverbs: *As a man thinks in his heart, so he is* (23:7).

The corollary of the belief that noble and generous thoughts generate an enhanced moral and spiritual perspective on life is the inference that it is not necessarily what we succeed in achieving, but what our minds condition us to *wish* to achieve.

Not surprisingly, in biblical Hebrew the word for the mind is *lev*, which is also the word for the heart. Hence the terms *chacham lev*, 'a wise mind' (Ex. 31:6, 35:10), *sim lev*, 'to set one's mind on; to consider' (Ex. 9:21; I Sam. 9:20; 25:25; Is. 41:22), and *chachmat lev*, 'a woman possessed of a wise mind' (Ex. 35:25-36) – a term I borrowed for my

Stanmore Congregation when we pioneered that annual award for outstanding women in 1990, and which is now widely adopted within United Synagogue congregations.

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We referred above to reward and punishment as being inevitably bound up with the issue of choice, and the belief in a God who rewards man's righteous choice and punishes his wicked machinations.

One of the major difficulties with this doctrine is that it doesn't seem to be borne out by life's experience, or, as the rabbis expressed it, *tzaddik v'ra lo; rasha v'tov lo* – 'the adversity suffered by the righteous, and the prosperity enjoyed by the wicked.' Ironically, we, as 'the chosen people' seem to have been the classical exemplars of the former situation, echoing Tevye's cri de coeur: "I know we are your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't you choose someone else?" Perhaps Sholom Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovich, 1859–1916) put his finger on precisely how we managed to survive and thrive through over twenty centuries of persecution and adversity: Because of our wit and good-humour; our ability to accept the rough with the smooth; and our natural astuteness and skill in turning adversity to advantage.

But that stiff-necked determination to outwit adversity did not come without a price, and there were those in the pre-Talmudic period who could not come to terms with the conflict between Israel's morally- and spiritually- superior life-style and the suffering she had endured under Babylonian and Greek rule. Hence, when Antigonos of Socho (3rd

cent. BCE) - the earliest-quoted Pharisaic teacher – taught that 'one should not be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving a reward' (Avot 1:3), his two senior disciples – Boethus and Zadok - understood him to be implying that there was indeed no such thing as reward for righteousness or punishment for wickedness in the hereafter. Their resultant crisis of faith prompted them to abandon the Pharisaic tradition and found their own movements of Boethusians and Sadducees, rooted in non-traditional theologies.

It may indeed be wondered why there are so few references in the entire *TaNaCh* that refer unambiguously to an afterlife (but see Psalm 49:9, 12, 20; Dan. 12:1-3; Is. 26:19; Job 19: 25-27)! To explain this, we believe that account must be taken of the all-pervasive religion of the dead that saturated Egyptian culture, art and architecture, and to which the Israelites were exposed for several centuries before coming under the influence of the Torah. That, coupled with the part they played in the construction of Rameses II's Pyramids, would have ensured that they would have similarly absorbed the notion of the hereafter. And it was precisely because the Torah laid total emphasis on the spiritualisation of our lives in this world, and at the same time wished to ween the Israelites away from worship of the dead, that it regarded any reference to that concept as harmful to Torah's belief-system. It became a developed idea within Judaism only in the post-biblical period, after the Israelites had shed every vestige of their Egyptian orientation.

From my correspondence:

When reading Sidra Balak a thought occurred to me: The Israelite army was the most feared in the Middle East (much like today!) but where did they acquire their arms? They left Egypt as slaves with a bit of jewellery donated by the Egyptians, but who supplied the arms and equipment?

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Netanya

Thank you for your good question, Michael, but don't forget that the Israelites were highly skilled masons. They made, and had access to, all the axes and other sharp tools required for building the Pyramids for Rameses II.

Also, according to most scholars, in the phrase, 'And the Children of Israel went out *chamushim*,' (Ex. 13:28), the latter word means 'armed.' See Hertz's note to the effect that it is derived from the Egyptian word, *chams*, meaning 'a lance'.

It also states that they despoiled Egypt' (Ex. 12:36), so most obviously they would have taken with them the means of defence that they knew they'd need. Also note their skills at construction of the Sanctuary which would have required adaptation of sharp cutting instruments.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Jeffrey