

Choose life. These are the two most important last words that Moses says to Israel just before they are to enter the land. But what do they mean? Arguably, the plainest meaning of this text is that every person has life and death set before them at all times, and that at any given moment, a person could either **choose life** by doing everything possible to survive, or a person could **choose death** by ceasing to eat or drink, or by, God forbid, committing suicide. But despite the simplicity of that interpretation, there is so much more to these words. The commentary and conversation about them throughout the generations, fills volumes. Take Rashi for example:

ובחרת בחיים. אני מורה לכם שתבחרו בחלק החיים באדם האומר לבנו בחר לך חלק יפה בנחלתי ומעמידו על חלק היפה ואומר לו את זה בחר לך...

Choose life. I, (Moses), am teaching you that you should choose the portion of life, the way a man says to his son, "Choose a nice portion of my estate," and then he sets his son up on the nicest portion and says to him, "This one. Choose (this one) for yourself..."

This is a classic Rashi move. He takes a very difficult, almost abstract idea, and offers us a way to understand it by providing a concrete analogy. The man in the analogy is like Moses before the people. He tells his son: **Soon I will pass away, and you will inherit my entire estate. You're going to get everything. Meaning, all the good areas and all the bad areas. Your job is to choose where you want to live. Are you going to want to live in the good areas or the bad areas? Here, let me help you make that choice. Let me take you to the best part of my estate. This, son, is what you should choose, the good part. This is where you will have the best life. This is where you will be happy and fulfilled. But the choice is yours. You must make this choice for yourself. And everything in your future will depend on this choice.** By analogizing **choose life** to a choice of good or bad real estate, Rashi is giving us another plain sense of the text: **Choose life** means choose the good. Choose a life of goodness. (And how do we do that? By following the Torah. Thus, **Choose life** = **Choose Torah**.)

The Root .ב.ח.ר. - Choose: .ב.ח.ר. in occurs 31 times in the book of Deuteronomy and only 8 times in the rest of the Torah. **In all but our case,** ובחרת בחיים, God is the one who chooses. God chooses Israel (5x); God chooses the Levites (2x); God chooses the King (1x); and God chooses the place for his name to dwell (22x!). Only in this text do human beings choose. And only here is "life" (not a person, or persons, or a place), the object of a choice. One would think that if freedom were so important to God, and that God so deeply values the ability of human beings to choose freely, (as is evident from the very first story in the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve!) that God would want human beings to **choose** God freely. After all, there are plenty of instances in the Torah where a person is commanded to love God. Why wouldn't the Torah ever command us to **choose**

God? If God so values human freedom, wouldn't God want us to choose him, freely? The obvious answer is that if a person were to **choose** God, it would mean that there were other gods to choose from. But since there is only one God, as Moses makes abundantly clear in the statement, שמע ישראל - **Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One** (Deut. 6:4), and that, **there are no other gods beside God,** אין עוד מלבדו - as Moses also makes abundantly clear elsewhere (Deut. 4:35, 39), it would be absurd to suggest that a person could **choose** God. And yet, when we get to the book of Joshua, that's precisely what we see. In Joshua's final address to the people, he gives a review of their history, and then he implores them to revere God exclusively:

ועתה יראו את ה' ועבדו אותו בתמים ובאמת והסירו את אלהים אשר עבדו אבותיכם בעבר הנגר ובמצרים ועבדו את ה'.

Now, therefore, revere GOD and render service with undivided loyalty; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve GOD. (Josh. 24:14)

But then, in a tone that is caustic and almost sarcastic he says to them:

ואם רע בעיניכם לעבד את ה' בחרו לכם היום את מי תעבדון אם את אלהים אשר עבדו אבותיכם אשר מעבר הנגר ואם את אלהי האמורי אשר אתם יושבים בארצם ואנכי וביתי ועבד את ה'.

Or, if you are loath to serve GOD, choose this day which ones you are going to serve—the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or those of the Amorites in whose land you are settled; but I and my household will serve GOD. (Josh. 24:15)

In other words: **God has done all of this for you. Revere God exclusively. And if you don't want to, go ahead, choose another god!** To which the assembly replies:

חלילה לנו מעזב את ה'.
Far be it from us to forsake God. (24:16)

Whereby they formally pledge their fidelity to God, after which Joshua replies:

עדים אתם בככם כי אתם בחרתם לכם את ה' לעבד אותו ויאמרו עדים.
"You are witnesses against yourselves that you have by your own act chosen to serve God." (24:22)

To which they respond:

עדים.
"Yes, we are!" (24:22)

How would we explain the difference? The easiest way is to say that this is a demonstration of the qualitative difference between Moses and Joshua. Moses was closer to God than Joshua, but Joshua was closer to the people than Moses. **Moses was attuned to God, while Joshua was attuned to the people.** Moses could clarify and articulate God's oneness and uniqueness unlike anyone else, and then say to the people: **Take all the spiritual resources that you have in exercising choice, take your God-given moral and spiritual freedom, take all of that energy, and channel it**

to life. **Choose life, in order that you shall live and serve God and be a blessing to humanity.** That is hard to understand even for us! Joshua made it easier. He is effectively saying, **Choose God.** While Moses offers us an abstract choice that is very confusing and requires a lot of meditation, Joshua offers us a concrete choice, one that is clear and understandable: our God or their gods. The only problem with Joshua is that he validates the existence of other gods and concedes that they have the power to capture the people's devotion. He understands, better than Moses, that the people are constantly drawn to other gods, so he has to make the choice simpler: choose them or choose God. Moses could not have said that. In the end though, Joshua was probably right. Despite Moses' eloquence and depth, the people of Israel indeed kept choosing other gods for their first few hundred years in the land. To put it in another way: Moses couldn't say to the people **Choose God** - because that would have gone against everything he stood for, as it would have implied the existence of other gods; but Joshua couldn't say to the people **Choose life** - because he knew that they simply would not have understood what he meant. And frankly, the words are difficult for us too!

Today these words have become part of Israeli and Jewish culture in fascinating ways. Here is a poster from the 1960s for a safe driving campaign:



Translation:

Labor Party - Central Region.
DIV. OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS-
THE RELIGIOUS WORKER.
"YOU SHALL CHOOSE LIFE"
 In order to live-walk carefully.
 In order to live-drive alertly.
 In order to live-drive carefully,
 In order to live-walk alertly.
I have placed before you life and death,
blessing and curse. You shall choose
life. (Deut. 30/19).
 Join our telephone campaign to
 increase awareness for road safety. . .

At a very basic level, this is also biblical commentary! This is saying you can preserve your life through the practice of safe driving and increased pedestrian awareness. **Choose life by saving life and by taking all the precautions necessary when you get behind the wheel or go for a walk on the street.**

Another example is a film about the late Israeli film director, Nir Toib, and his battle with lung cancer. The film documents his decision to live as fully as possible, with his wife and family, while pursuing every medical avenue for a cure. While he did not survive, the research that he fought for has led to important breakthroughs in the treatment of lung cancer that will possibly save other lives. **Choose life** then is a kind of mantra for persevering in the face of adversity and helping others to live. It is not one decision, but a string of



decisions that any patient or any family must go through in the face of catastrophic illness. The ethical dimensions of these situations are deeply vexing: do you choose "quantity" of life despite the certainty of terrible pain and suffering, or do you choose "quality" of life despite the certainty that your time is limited? What does "choosing" life mean in those circumstances?



And lastly, Michal Uziyahu, a community leader in the Western Negev Eshkol region narrates this incredibly moving video from Jewish National Fund-USA:

Our beloved region was 95% heaven before that fateful day. Jewish National Fund - USA worked together with us investing in new neigh-

borhoods, youth centers, resilience training, and much more. But it wasn't only buildings that we built together. We built communities. We built tomorrow. And together we chose life. Then in one piercing, moment horror and darkness took over our lives. Hundreds of our community members were murdered. We lost our beloved friends. We lost our laughter, and we lost our innocence. We will never be the same like before October 7th.

But we are determined to be better and stronger. JNF was here with us from day one helping us to collect our pieces together, immediately evacuating our communities, supporting the local agriculture, supporting emergency teams, therapy in the resilience centers, and much, much, more. They may have crushed our houses, they may have hurt us physically, but they did not break our spirit. Look around us. This place that we built together is worth fighting for. We choose life, and we will continue to choose life! We will continue to choose hope, tikvah, our children, to invest in their future, in our future, because we are the people of the light, and we will continue always, to choose life together. facebook.com/jewishnationalfund.

Choose life has become the tagline of JNF-USA, and it's obvious why. By continuing to plan, to raise money and to build, they are **choosing life** for the thousands of people whose lives have been upended and shattered by October 7th. So, what does **choose life** mean to us today? It means to never give up. Never despair. That would be to choose death. Choosing life means choosing to renew, to replenish, and to re-build dreams of a future in the land. Choosing life means choosing hope. **SHABBAT SHALOM!**

TODAY IS DAY 358. WE PRAY FOR THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES. MAY GOD PROTECT AND SHIELD ISRAEL FROM THE TERROR OUT OF LEBANON IN THIS NEW PHASE OF THE WAR.

שבת שלום!