

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi Jonathan Rietti

No Options

In Hebrew, the word “To decide” is “le’hachlit, which on a more literal level means, “To cut off.” In truth then, since all Hebrew root words point to the essential meaning of a concept, this teaches us that true decision making comes down to cutting off all options, making obsolete all choices, and thus leaving us with one path and one path only: that of our decision.

There is another word, more associated with legal terminology and decision making, and that is “p’sak halacha,” which refers to a clear-cut decision in halacha. There is not room for other options once the final decision has been rendered.

When you stay with something and don’t visit any other option, you are living through with a true goal. This is the mechanism towards great decision making and achieving a goal, and ultimately, the greatest method in successful avodat Hashem, service of G-d.

To this end, serving Hashem entails one very simple principle: you decide that nothing else is negotiable.

In Biblical Hebrew, how do you say, “I will”? You place the letter aleph before the verb at hand. In example, “Eilech,” I will go. Naomi used this language when she said she would follow Ruth, no matter what. There was no room for negotiation or renegeing. But how can a person ever say, “I will”? There are

so many barriers and hiccups that come in between the person and accomplishing that goal, arriving at the destination or whatever other attempt is being set towards. Delays, traffic, cancellations, unexpected news.

But that is where the aleph comes into focus. The underlying meaning of the letter aleph is two-fold. Besides turning a word into a first-person verb, it refers to the “Alufo shel Olam,” Master of the world, a reference to G-d. Aleph is the first letter of G-d’s name. It refers to G-d in His name of Elokim, referring to G-d in charge of all powers in the world, and in His Ineffable name too.

What we are really saying then is that we are able to do nothing without Hashem. It is with the aleph, with Hashem, and only Hashem that we are able to succeed. In reality then, when it comes to our own focus and where we put our efforts when setting out on a goal (given than so many things can potentially get in the way) it is that we will continue to try, again and again, until we get to where we desire. “I will” means that we will keep trying until we succeed.

Who better to teach this to us than Dovid Hamelech, who for the first twenty-eight years of his life, lived as a simple shepherd. Dovid wrote 150 love songs to Hashem, which have gained world renown. Dovid Hamelech writes, “Azamra l’Elokai b’odi,”

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I will sing to G-d, the ruler of all powers, with myself, with whatever I have. Dovid Hamelech sang this throughout his life, no matter what the circumstances were.

How was Dovid Hamelech able to sing this, irrespective of the situation he found himself in?

Because he made a decision, early on in his life, that no matter what life throws him, he will not sever his relationship with Hashem. No matter what he goes through, he committed to always continue singing to G-d.

There are people walking among us who live this way and understand these above mechanics. They know the seriousness of “I will.” They know that there is no arrogance in saying “I will,” because what it truly means is that left to our own devices, we cannot do anything. It is only with G-d that we can do anything and everything – and we will.

There’s another important point to this, as I heard from R’ Schlesinger shlita.

There are three degrees to bechira, free choice. One is “I want.” It reflects a minimal degree of self-control and exertion of effort. I want to not eat this-and-that if I’m not tempted to do so. I want to be more loving and patient, if I’m not disturbed and an-

noyed. All these are put up with little resistance. The wants are dependent upon circumstances not sabotaging us and getting in our way.

The next level is “I need.” With these words, a great desire is reflected, and a higher degree of commitment and depth is conveyed. “I need to become kinder,” “I need to complete this project.” It conveys a seriousness and fortitude of dedication to the task and goal at hand.

Yet, there is an even greater degree of self-expression, and that is conveyed and encompassed within the word ratzon, will. It comes from the two-letter root word, ratz, run. When you walk somewhere, you want to get there. However, when you are running, and jump over, bend under or go around an obstacle, it means that you don’t simply want to get there or need to get there – you must get there. You have to. You made a decision, and no matter what the obstacles in your way throw at you, you will continue trying. Another way, another way, over and around.

Real decision making is when you cut off all other options. Nothing else exists and it no longer is something you want to do, or need to do, but you must do. You have to do.

There is no option. You will.

On Pesach, when we consider the personal transformation we want to undergo and freedom we need to obtain, we come to a stark realization – we must divest ourselves of all options. The true definition of a commitment is having no options. We are free when we are restricted to a course, unable to move outside the path we have set on. The freedom we have as Jews is that we are bound and contained by Jewish law and practice. Our servitude to G-d is what liberates us, because it leaves us no choice. It removes any subtle deliberation to diverge from the road towards successful living.

When we have that guiding our lives, we have true freedom. We have the best life we possibly could have. That is what Pesach affords us. The opportunity to commit to a road of freedom, of deciding that there are no other choices for us but service of G-d and commitment to His Torah principles. And with that, we leave our personal bondage, our stifling Egypt, and march onward as free people.

Rabbi Joey Haber

The True Achievement

We’ve all heard of Pepsi. Its soda has gained international acclaim, aside of which its other products have found a stable place in the global consumer market. But this is not about Pepsi or its \$18.8 billion value. This is about Indra Nooyi, Pepsi’s CEO of 12 years. She has been inducted into the National Woman’s Hall of Fame

and consistently ranked as one of the world’s 100 most powerful women.

But all these honorary accolades and all these monumental titles didn’t mean much when her mother ran out of milk.

It was the night when she found out. Nooyi had just been informed that she’d been named the CEO of

PepsiCo, a billion dollar industry, after having been the President and Chief Financial Officer for the company. It was 9:30 at night and she was thrilled. Beyond thrilled. Anyone would feel that way, you’d imagine.

She wanted to share the news, and who better with than her own mother. Her mother who loved her so dearly and wanted the best for

her. So she headed over to do exactly that.

Except her mother had something else in mind.

Milk.

Nooyi entered her mother's home, when her mother, before any real conversation ensued, asked Indra if she could do her a favor. "I'm out of milk; would you be so kind to do me a small favor and run over to the store and pick some up for me?" Indra was dying to tell her mother. "Mom, I have something I really want to tell you." "Let's talk soon, sweetie. As soon as you come back from the store, let's sit down."

So Indra went, just minutes after finding out that she'd been promoted to the highest rank as the CEO of Pepsi, to the store to pick up milk for her mother. Imagine the scene and what was going through Indra's mind.

When Indra returned, milk carton in hand, she placed it before her mother. And then she asked, "Can I tell you now the news?" "Yes, dear, go ahead." "I just was announced the CEO of Pepsi." Her mother took in her words and smiled, congratulat-

ing her. But she had her own words of wisdom that Indra has never since forgotten.

"Keep your crown in the garage."

Indra went on to explain what her mother told her. "In this house, you are a daughter, you are a wife, you are a mother. You are the woman who cares about her children. I don't care about the crown. Keep all of your ego, all of your honor, outside and in your office. When you step into this home, you are a mother of your children. Don't bring the world and your ego into this home."

In our lives, we can be tempted to bring our egos into our homes. We can be inclined to wear our crowns proudly on our heads as we sit around our table, exacting that our requests are carried out and our expectations are met. And when they're not, we feel crossed and disrespected.

Remember the advice of Indra's mother: "Keep your crown in the garage." Your ego that makes you feel number one doesn't care about the health of your relationships, or the care and compassion that your spouse and children deserve. All it cares about is about winning and be-

coming superior and honored. But keep that at bay and sideline that for the right time. Relegate and channel that ambition to healthfully drive you to succeed at work and in the office, but when at home, turn it off.

At home, be like matzah. Carry yourself with humility, with the realization that you are not a businessman, you are not a real estate agent, you are not an administrator. You are a father, you are a mother, you are a brother, a sister, a friend.

You are the person who would bring their mother a carton of milk when you just found out you are the CEO of Pepsi.

And you are the son or daughter who would smile as you place the carton down on the table, awaiting the pleasure on your mother's face as she relaxes and enjoys the simple pleasure of some cold milk.

There's no greater honor you can achieve in life than that.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

The Worst Seder in the World

You've just finished putting the last touches to the Seder table. The house has been scrubbed from top to toe and no mercy has been shown to the smallest piece of chometz. In this war, there are no prisoners. Your husband has spent the last month reviewing all the halachos, the laws of Pe-

sach, and he's bought one of those new series of Haggadot that appear at this time of year. He's been looking for inspiring words of Torah to be devoured along with the matzah on the night of the Seder. You gather around the table and begin.

Jews have done this for nearly three and a half thousand years. You remember your grandparents.

They, no doubt, remember their own grandparents too. Your children are sitting, shining in their Yom Tov best and gaze up at the memories being made. Chains of love stretching across millennia. Here it is... the moment we've all waited for.

And yet, what is it? Something's lacking. The children don't want to listen to the Haggadah. They want to

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eat the matzah now. They have absolutely no interest whatsoever in why R' Elazar ben Azaria said he was like a man of 70 years old. You'd love to listen to the Haggadah, but at this crucial moment, the light has gone out under the chicken soup and panic stations have been declared. Why is it that every Pesach seems somehow, I don't know, disappointing?

You start off with such high hopes. This year, it's going to be different; this year, we're really going to experience what it means to come out of Egypt. It can't be this year in Jerusalem, but least it could be this year with the real Pesach feeling. Couldn't it?

The great tzaddik, Rabbi Shmuel Koriver, a student of the Chozeh of Lublin, was a poor man. He lived constantly on the breadline and was always in need of help. Pesach was rapidly approaching and in Reb Shmuel's house there was nothing. No matzah, no wine, no charoses, no food, no money, no nothing. And in spite of these dire circumstances, Reb Shmuel was convinced that Hashem wouldn't desert him, and everything would be fine. The Chozeh of Lublin heard of Reb Shmuel's plight, and he was worried about him. He dispatched one of his wealthy Chassidim, Reb Shlomo, to quietly provide for Rabbi Shmuel and his needs.

Erev Pesach, a wagon laden with

food and crockery, wine and matzos, arrived at Reb Shmuel's door. He was overjoyed. Here in the twinkling of an eye, it was Hashem's deliverance. That night, Reb Shmuel sat down and conducted his seder with a joy and a feeling of the coming out of Egypt, which was unparalleled in all his holy life. He imagined himself ascending the upper worlds, borne on the tremendous joy that Hashem had provided for him without having to ask for charity. His unbridled happiness made him feel that no one had ever experienced such a savior as this and that this was it. It couldn't go any higher, couldn't get any better.

Now, on the second night of the Seder, Reb Shmuel was tired from all the elevation of the previous night, and he decided to rest a little before beginning the second seder. He laid down on his bed for a couple of minutes, and he was thinking that he really ought to get up, when he drifted off to sleep.

Several hours later, he awoke with a startle. What's the time? He glanced at the clock and was horrified to see that it was nearly midnight. In just a short while, the last time to eat the Afikoman would pass. Reb Shmuel was broken. In tears, he rushed to fulfill the mitzvos of the Seder, reciting the Haggadah, the four cups, eating the matzah, the bitter herbs, the charoses, the festive meal and finally,

seconds before midnight, eating the Afikoman.

Reb Shmuel fell into a deep depression. It seemed to him that never in the entire history of the Jewish people had there been such a miserable seder. It had been a shambles.

After Pesach, Reb Shmuel traveled to visit his teacher, the Chozeh of Lublin, and immediately after he had arrived, the Chozeh said, "Come, let us examine the two sedarim of Reb Shmuel. The first seder was below par, considering who Reb Shmuel was. He imagined himself to be hovering in the worlds above. You thought there had never been a seder like this before. Well, that wasn't a great seder.

But the second seder? Now there was seder. Few have flown to the heights that Rabbi Shmuel reached on his second seder, broken and spirited and humble, wanting no more than to fulfill the will of the Master of the World, as it says, "The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit" (Tehillim 51:19).

So when you're sitting down at your seder table, and the kids are screaming, you have to get up from the table for the nth time, and you just manage to finish the last of the matzah right before the soup boils over and you start to feel frustrated and saddened and a long way from Pesach... Remember Reb Shmuel.

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