



## Choosing Life with God

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### What it means down here to live with God

The first word of God to the first man concerns a *mitzvah*. Indeed the text uses the verb *tsavah* (to command), from which comes the word *mitzvah*, to describe God's address: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17).

#### 1. The Choice of Life

First God made the gift of all the trees in the garden. Man could eat from all of them. Before being a requirement, a demand, the first *mitzvah* is then a gift, the grace of freedom. Man is free to choose among thousands of trees in the garden. Only one tree remains outside the borders of this grace, "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." The consequence of choosing this tree is death, the opposite of life. It is significant in-

deed that at the end, as a result of man's eating of this tree the text tells us that "the way to the tree of life" is now forever shut to humans (Genesis 3:24).

The story of this first human failure contains two lessons. First, man is not free to choose evil, he is not free to choose to ignore God's will. This observation tells us something about the biblical understanding of freedom. Free is only the one who stays within God's parameters. Free is only the one who chooses to walk according to God's guidelines. To choose God is to choose freedom. One can even argue further that the one who chooses evil loses his or her freedom to choose. For the one who chooses evil ends up being a slave to something else, and in the process loses his or her identity. Only with God, the Creator, who knows the formula of ourselves we may be able to find ourselves and fulfill our identity. For as the rabbis used to say:

“Only he is master of himself who lives with God” (*Abodah Zorah*, 5b).

The second lesson confirms the first. Outside of God, the Creator, the Provider of life, man is bound to die. Choosing evil leads to the loss of one’s life. And if we lose our life we cannot be ourselves anymore, we cannot fulfill ourselves, we cannot choose, we cannot be free—simply because we do not exist anymore. The two lessons are therefore related; they are both concerned with life. The text of Deuteronomy that contains the last speech of Moses to Israel seems to be a commentary on this first page of Genesis. As Israel prepares to enter the promised land, Moses, who is about to leave this world forever, feels it necessary to remind them of the same great lesson about life: “See, I have put before you today life and good, and death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15). In this passage Moses equals life with good and death with evil. A few verses further he gets more explicit and clearly identifies what good and life are: “that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for this is your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:20).

The biblical truth is now well spelled out: loving God and obeying His voice amount to “life and length of days.” To choose God means then to choose life. A Psalm of David elaborates on the same thought: “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9). The very fact that life is associated with light is an indication of how the ancient Hebrews understood the meaning of life. It was not just something to enjoy, it was not a passive state. Instead it was a dynamic *way* of life, a walk, a path. Light was then associated with

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the presence of God and more precisely with His directions on the path of existence: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

In the Hebrew perspective life was found only in the light of God; outside of God we would be in darkness and in death. In fact, life with God was understood as a biological necessity. It is significant indeed that the very word that is used to express the idea of spiritual life is the word *ruah*, which means “spirit” but also means “breath” that is for the Hebrew the very principle of life: “You send forth Your spirit (*ruah*), they are created; and You renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30).

Thus, the very fact that every human being has the *ruah*—we breathe, we are alive—qualifies him or her to be a spiritual being. This linguistic observation not only means that man owes his life to God. God gave man the *ruah*, the breath; God is his creator. It also implies a philosophy of existence. Humans exist only in relationship with God. Humans are religious, or they do not exist. The religious dimension, life with God, is not simply a response to spiritual needs, it is a biological necessity.

### **2. Choices in Life**

Insofar as we decide to live with God, our life is henceforth conducted and nourished by the awareness of God’s presence.

*Prayers.* Since God is alive and since He is the one on whom my life, my breathing, my biological survival depends, I am in great need to be in relation with Him, to be in some mode of communication, whereby He speaks to me and I speak to Him. This phenomenon is called prayer (see our special issue of

*Shabbat Shalom* on “prayer,” Winter 1998-99/5758).

The people of the Bible and all their followers have found in prayer a vital necessity. Prayer is not a mere psychological or even a mere spiritual experience that is supposed to meet the spiritual soul within us. Prayer is vital and concerns my life, even my physical life, because it brings me in touch with “the God of my Life” (Psalm 42:9, English verse 8). The rabbis of the Talmud recommended to pray “to the Master of life” who “will hear you in every trouble” (*Y. Berakot* 9). This is why in biblical tradition

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prayers accompany every moment of life: “Prayer also will be made . . . continually, and daily He shall be praised” (Psalm 72:15). Thus, prayer has been compared to the act of breathing. It is always there like breathing, like life.

Yet prayer is not natural. We don’t always do it spontaneously. Therefore precisely because it is a dimension of life, it is not just something which should be operated only in some specific circumstances, on the occasion of crisis or in a moment of trouble. Prayer should also be monitored and organized. Alongside these spontaneous prayers that follow the accidents and the needs of the believers, the Bible witnesses to a regular program of prayer exercises. The prophet Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10, 13). Prayer is also a discipline which submits the individual at any time. Even if we do not feel the need to pray we should pray. In fact, this exer-

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cise will create and develop a familiarity with God that will have an effect on our daily lives and inspire our choices that ultimately fashion our existence.

*Study the Scriptures.* The study of the Holy Scriptures (see our special issue of *Shabbat Shalom* on “the Bible,” December 1995/Kislev 5756) that tell the story of the God of Israel at work in the Universe, in the world, in Israel, and in the individual is also an important part of life with God. Exposed to these texts we will learn about the God of life and we will also learn about the mechanism, the nerve of our lives. This lesson is given by Moses in the conclusion of his speech, as he completed the words of the Torah

be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing to you, because it is *your life* [emphasis supplied]. And by this word you shall prolong your days . . .” (Deuteronomy 32:45-47). This lesson is taught by the wise man to his disciple: “My son, give attention to my words . . . for they are life to those who find them” (Proverbs 4:20-22).

It may sound strange that the study of a text, a mere intellectual process, may bring life to its reader. Yet there is no charm in it. It is not because we read these words and pronounce the right formula that magically we shall become healthy and more alive. It is not the sound of these words that will have an effect on us,



entrusted to him by God: “Moses finished speaking all these words to all Israel, and he said to them, ‘Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to

but what they mean for us. Indeed these texts, the words of God, contain important instructions for our very lives. Therefore they require our utmost attention. The ancient Jews were acutely aware of this demand

since they called the exercise of studying the Scriptures a *Derash*, which means “demand.” The text is under high demand. It’s investigated, it’s squeezed until it gives its juice, it’s searched, and its words will ultimately challenge us, shape us, and make us alive. For it is not enough to hear the words, to study them intellectually we must bring them into our lives. It is noteworthy that the verb *shama*, which means “hear” and introduces the great prayer of Israel “Shema Israel,” means also understand and

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obey. We have not heard as long as we have not understood, we have not understood as long as we have not obeyed. This principle shines through the Israelite response to God’s giving of the Torah: *naaseh venishma*, “we shall do and then we shall obey” (or hear or understand, Exodus 24:7). Here the intellectual, spiritual operation of hearing, understanding, proceeds from the doing. It is the bringing of the words into our lives that will help us understand the impact and even the meaning of the Scriptures. The best way, the only efficient way to study and to understand the Scriptures is to run the risk of applying its words in our lives. To study the word means then to live by the word.

*Ethics.* To choose life implies to choose a way of life that is in conformity with God’s law (see our special issue of *Shabbat Shalom* on “the law,” April 1996/Nisan 5756), as the book of Proverbs states: “the road of righteousness leads to life” (Proverbs 12:28). The biblical religion is therefore not just a beautiful mystique, or even a profound

wisdom, or a well-developed system of doctrines; it is not made of an extraordinary spiritual or emotional experience or an intellectual satisfaction. It is made essentially of concrete choices in the flesh of our existence. Thus, the requirement of holiness that is supposed to elevate us to a supreme state is not a call for leaving this world or this body or the other people. On the contrary, it is an appeal that involves us *with* this world, this body and the others. It concerns our way of being, of living, our eating, our drinking, our thinking, but also our way of behaving in society, of relating to our neighbor. Religious life is first of all an ethical life. From the biblical perspective, it is inconceivable to claim to be religious if one entertains unethical acts. Moral acts are a part of religion. As the Talmud points out: "He who does a moral act associates himself with God in His creative work" (*Shabbat* 10a). Inversely, immoral acts take us away from God and from religion.

All these requirements and calls for difficult choices, that sometimes run against our natural inclinations, do not sound like nice music to our ears. They give the impression that religion is full of interdictions, full of "thou shalt not," full of negatives. The God of the Bible appears then to be a demanding and severe Judge who enjoins His servants to obey Him and is ready to punish them if they don't. Indeed, religious people have often pointed to this God. Emphasizing the negative over the positive, they have given the testimony of a God who was closer to death and sadness than to life and happiness.

It is in fact the opposite. The God of the Bible is the God of life. To choose to live with Him should then not lead to sadness and to death, but on the con-

trary to life and joy and eventually to the joy of life. All the trees stand before our eyes. It is our duty to pick from them all and to taste from them and fully enjoy them. For they are the Creator's gifts to us. Yet God's big yes is accompanied by a very

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small no; just one tree over against the thousand trees is kept from our hand. The full enjoyment goes along with some reservation. This tension is described by the book of Ecclesiastes: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes. Yet know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9). It is also interesting that the next verse associates the duty to enjoy life and to keep sorrow far from one's heart with the duty to resist evil: "Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh" (Ecclesiastes 11:10).

### 3. A New Life

This is in fact God's dream for mankind: a holy people, a people that chooses to live with God. Yet the question remains, How are we going to become holy and put away evil? How are we going to make it? The answer is simple: Choose life with God, choose "to walk in His ways always" (Deuteronomy 19:9) or

in Jeremiah's words, to walk "in the old paths, where the good way is" (Jeremiah 6:16). The outcome of this choice is God's promise: "I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Leviticus 26:12). Ultimately, by walking among us God will provide us with the means to become His people. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said in the Talmud, "If a man chooses evil, the opportunity is given to him, but God will not help him to do it; if a man chooses God, God will help to do it" (*Shabbat* 104a). The Bible describes this life with God as a "new" life, a life that is ensured by God Himself. Choose to walk with Him, and He will walk with you. This reciprocal process of the biblical covenant transpires in the whole Bible. One of the most eloquent illustrations of this principle is the case of the four Hebrews in the book of Daniel who choose to remain faithful to their God, choose to eat and drink, to live with God (Daniel 1). They followed the divine diet for ten days and as a result they became ten times healthier and wiser than the others. There is a connection between their work and their reward. Yet a few verses further we learn that this wisdom and this health were also a free grace from above. "God gave them knowledge and intelligence in all literature and wisdom" (Daniel 1:17).

David goes through the same experience. After he chooses to repent and to walk with God, he pleads: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). The Midrash comments on the Psalm, "Repentance makes man a new creation; although dead through sin he is fashioned afresh" (*Midrash Tehillim* 18).

This miracle is still repeated every morning when we wake up and bless God for resurrecting us

from the darkness of the night and the unconsciousness of sleep. The lesson of this miracle is particularly present in the symbolic custom of the *miqveh* whereby the repenting believer plunges into the water, symbol of death and darkness (Genesis 1:2), to signify his or her decision to come out of the water as

a clean and a new creature. As Maimonides comments, "One who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body" (Maimonides, *Yad Miqvat*, 11:12). It is interesting that the same ideas are associated with baptism, as Paul explained:

"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ [the Messiah] was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). It is then ultimately God who will give us this new life. For only the Creator can do it.

## A Smile from God

- *Noah!*
- *Yes, what do you want?*
- *Take out one of the hippopotamuses and bring in another one.*
- *But why?*
- *Because you brought two males and you should have brought a male and a female!*
- *No! I do not bring anything else. Do it yourself!*
- *Come on, Noah. You know that I do not work like this.*
- *Yes, but I am sick of it. I am exhausted. I worked all day long, for weeks. It is always the same thing. I do not want to work with, to work for you anymore . . .*
- *Noah!*
- *Yees . . .*
- *How long can you float on the water?*

