

JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES



THE PATH TO GREATNESS

(THE SECRET POWER OF FREE WILL)

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PROJECT
INSPIRE.
A PROGRAM OF aish HaTorah

MODULE I

To be great must begin with an understanding of who we are. Every manufacturer labels its products with a product description: washing machine, toaster, flat screen tv etc. If you had to pick a label for a human being to describe what it does and who it is, what would it be?

Consider the following options. Which is the best?

- Thinker
- Survivor
- Chooser
- Speaker

It was Descartes who famously said “ I think, therefore I am”, in describing the essence of a person. Thought is certainly an essential aspect of who we are but let’s consider a source from the Torah which reaches a little deeper.

SOURCE 1: *T(Genesis) 2:7. The Creation of Adam and Eve. / Source 1a. Onkelos on the end of the verse – “living being”.*

The Lord God (Hashem) formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a **living being**.

He blew into his nostrils a living soul, and it was for a **speaking spirit** in man.

וַיִּצַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה
וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֹפֶשׁ חַיָּה

וַנִּפַח בְּאַפּוֹהִי נְשֵׁמַת דְּחַיִּי וְהוּת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ
מְמַלְלָא

The Biblical translator Onkelos tells us that the essence of our souls, that which makes us a “living being” is the power of speech.

Q: In what way(s) do you think speech defines what it means to be alive?

SOURCE 2: *Bereishis (Genesis) 1:2 Man Created in G-d's Image*

G-d said let’s make man in our **image** and likeness...G-d created **man in his image**. In the image of G-d He created Him, male and female he created them.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ
וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם
אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

Let’s take a look at one of the most famous verses in the Torah describing the soul of man.

Q: What do you suppose it means to be created in the “image of G-d”? It must be something even deeper than the power of speech.

SOURCE 3: *Meshech Chochma (Meir Simcha from Dvinsk) Commentary on Genesis 1:2 –*

Each person is free to decide his own path in life.

The Torah says **“let’s make man in our image”**. The image of G-d is **free will**, without being compelled by his nature, but from his own will and free thought. G-d’s knowledge does not curtail this free will. We are not able to understand this, for if we did, we would be G-d. Just know that for free will to exist G-d had to constrict Himself to give us a place to act freely according to our will.

נעשה אדם בצלמנו הצלם האלקי הוא
הבחירה החפשית בלי טבע מכריח רק
מרצון ושכל חפשי. והנה ידיעתו יתברך אינה
מכרעת הבחירה... אין ביכולת בנו להבין
איך היא כי אילו ידעתיו הייתי רק זאת אנו
יודעים שלהבחירה החפשית הוא מצמצום
האלקות שהשיית מניח מקום לברואיו
לעשות כפי מה שיבחרו

Just as G-d is a Creator and chooses freely, He formed man as a being who could similarly choose and create, and in so doing author his own destiny. **Free will is the hidden power of man. How we use it is the key to greatness.**

SOURCE 4: *Maimonidies, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) 5:1 – Man is unique among the entire Creation in his ability to choose between good and evil.*

Permission is given to every individual to direct himself to follow a good path and become righteous or to follow a bad path and become evil. This is what is written in the Torah, “And now man is like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Bereishit 3:22).

This means that a human being is unique in creation in the respect that through his intelligence **he can distinguish between good and evil, and can choose to do either;** and there is no one who will prevent him from doing so.

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו
לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו ואם רצה
להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות
בידו הוא שכתוב בתורה הן האדם היה כאחד
ממנו לדעת טוב ורע

כלומר הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין
מין שני דומה לו בזה העניין שיהא הוא מעצמו
בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל
מה שהוא חפץ ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות
הטוב או הרע

Q: How does Maimonidies define free will?

Q: You would think that the power which drives man is operable 24/7. Are choices of good and evil constantly in front of us minute to minute?

Perhaps there is an additional dichotomy that defines free will at its core:

SOURCE 5: *Devarim (Deuteronomy) 30:15-19 Choose Life*

See, I set before you today life and goodness, death and evil. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess ... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you, that I have set **before you life and death**, blessing and curse. **Now choose life, so that you and your children will live.**

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב
ואת המות ואת הרע: אשר אנכי מצוך היום
לאהבה את ה' אלהיך וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר
מצותיו וחקתיו ומשפטיו וחיית ורביית וברכת
ה' אלהיך בארץ אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה

העדתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ
החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה
ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך

The Torah is defining free will here as a choice between life and death. It also exhorts us to “choose life” so that we will live.

Q: Why do I have to choose life, in order to live? Don't I just have to not choose death? Is life a choice, or just something you do? What do you think, and what does this indicate about Judaism's view of life?

Q. Also, is the choice of life and death constantly operative in our lives as we would expect the power of free will to be? How so?

SOURCE 6: *Rabbi Noach Weinberg explaining “choose life” in 30:19*

The Torah defines free will as a battle between life and death, which is always in front of us. But how do we see this, since very few of us actively choose death over life? Well, though its true that we don't opt for the final exit, almost all of us choose “death in installments” by killing time, zoning out, and choosing comfort rather than exerting effort. In short, we choose death by not putting in the effort required to be great and truly alive. **The battle of free will is practically defined as the choice between what you truly want (life) and what you feel like doing in the moment. (death).** The more you do what you want and not what you feel like, the more alive you will be and the greater person you will become.

As Rabbi Weinberg describes, true living is choosing effort over comfort and achieving our deepest ambitions instead of our momentary desires.

Q: What are the three main characteristics that are associated with “wants” and the three associated with “feel like's”?

- **“Wants”** typically involve 1) a spiritual/intellectual goal, 2) deferred gratification and ultimately, 3) deeper pleasure.
- **“Feel Likes”** typically are more 1) physically oriented, 2) involve immediate gratification, and 3) afford more superficial pleasure.

Each of us have several key free will battles (e.g. eating, anger, listening, patience) which we can understand more deeply by seeing how we struggle **between choosing what we “want to do” and what we “feel like doing” in these areas.**

Q: What are your key free will struggles, and how do they manifest in choosing between wants and feelings?

The path to greatness is both simple and profound: choose what “you truly want” to do in life more often than what you “feel like doing”. It's not a zero-sum game, it's a constant test and opportunity through which we build great lives, one choice at a time.