

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Sanford *ben Avrohom a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Perspective on Life

This week's *parshah* presents us with a clear life-message: רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע... וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים “See that I have placed before you this day life and goodness, and death and evil... and you shall choose life” (*Devarim 30:15, 19*).

The choice of wording of the *passuk* is noteworthy. Seemingly, it would have been more appropriate to make “goodness” the focal point of the choosing – “and you shall choose *good*.” It would then follow that “life” would be the happy result of this choice. Why does the Torah emphasize, instead, that “you shall choose *life*”?

The *passuk*'s intent may be to convey the true extent to which Torah is associated with life. R' Yeruchem Olshin related a reaction of the legendary R' Baruch Ber Lebovitz to a particular *derashah* (discourse). The lecturer was expounding on the centrality of Torah and its supreme importance in the life of a Jew. “It is so crucial to our lives,” the speaker was saying, “that it is like the very air we breathe; we simply could not exist without it.”

R' Baruch Ber took issue with this characterization. While agreeing, of course, with the notion of its essentiality, he was uncomfortable with the comparison. “Air,” he explained, “is a necessity of life, but it is still a separate entity, a means to preserve life. Torah *is* life.”

The aforementioned *passuk* may be reflective of this idea. In exhorting us to choose the Torah path, it clearly spells out the true essence of what Torah is: life itself. Hence – “choose *life*.”

The Best Medicine

A full elaboration on the profundity of this notion would fill many volumes; indeed, there are many volumes that expound on this very theme. In this forum, we must suffice with a relatively brief exposition of the all-encompassing nature of Torah as a life-force.

Beginning with a focus on the individual, it is worthwhile to cite the words of Rabbeinu Yonah (*Avos 2:7*), who speaks of Torah's life-giving properties. An overindulgence in material matters can be detrimental to one's health. By contrast, the more one toils over Torah, the more of a salutary effect it will have, contributing to a long and healthy life.

In a most interesting way, this concept is borne out in the following Mishnah (*Avos 6:7*):

גְּדוּלַת תּוֹרָה שֶׁהִיא נּוֹתֶנֶת חַיִּים לַעֲשִׂיהָ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּבְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי חַיִּים הֵם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם וּלְכֹל בְּשָׂרוֹ מִרְפָּא... וְאֹמֵר דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרָכֵי נֹעַם וְכֹל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם.

“Great is Torah, for it grants life to its followers in This World and in the World to Come. As it states (*Mishlei 4:22*): ‘For it is life to those who find it and healing to all of his flesh...’ And it states (*ibid. 3:17*): ‘Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its pathways are peace.’”

The *Chassid Ya'avetz* explains these verses cited by the Mishnah as comparing and contrasting the beneficial effects of Torah and medicinal means. While there are many wonderful remedies proffered by the medical world, we are all familiar with the fact that they often come with side-effects. A certain pill may alleviate pain over here but cause discomfort or queasiness elsewhere. Such a phenomenon is absent when it comes to Torah, which provides healing, simultaneously, to “all of his flesh.” Furthermore, it is often the case that the administration of medicines and procedures can be a less than enjoyable experience. For example, a certain pill may provide a wonderful cure, but it simply tastes terrible. But of the Torah it states that “all its ways are pleasantness.”

The Universal Gift of Life

Nor are these wholesome effects limited to the student alone. R' Chaim Volozhiner famously relates the incident of a desperate mother who approached the Taz about her son who was deathly ill. The Taz responded by dedicating the learning he was conducting with his disciples to the merit of the child. Instantly, the fever broke, and the boy was saved (*Ruach Chaim 1:1*).

It is not only particular individuals who reap the benefits of the power of Torah; it serves as the life-force of the entirety of Creation. It was for this reason that R' Chaim Volozhiner established the well-known practice in his yeshivah of learning shifts, ensuring that Torah was being studied at every moment of the day or night. The idea was based on what he himself so eloquently writes in *Nefesh Hachaim* (4:11): “The principal life, illumination and continued existence – in optimal condition – of all (physical and spiritual) worlds is only when we are properly engaged in Torah study... through the breath of our mouths and our contemplation as we study. The truth – beyond the shadow of any doubt – is that *if, G-d forbid, there would arrive even one moment wherein the world would be bereft for that instant of our active engagement in Torah study, then all the worlds of both the upper and lower spheres would be instantaneously destroyed*, reverting to absolute nothingness, *chas v'shalom*... As such... one who learns Torah properly... is upholding the existence of the entirety of the universe, which would return (in the absence of such efforts) to become null and void.”

Of course, the fact that Torah is life manifests itself not only in this world. At some length (mentioned here, by necessity, in truncated form), the Chofetz Chaim (*Chomas Hadas, ch. 10*) demonstrates how Torah provides for one's well-being in all phases of existence: safeguarding the purity of the body as it reposes in the grave; delivering the individual from the judgments of Gehinom; facilitating the attainment of the blissful existence in the afterlife; ensuring continuous ascension to ever-higher levels even after the soul has entered Gan Eden; and, of course, providing the basis for the eventual *Techiyas Hameisim* (Resurrection of the Dead).

The shofar – as characterized by the Rambam – has the capacity to “awaken those who slumber” and is directed toward “you who forget the *emes* (truth) amidst the prevailing, current vanities” (*Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4*). It is particularly fitting, then, at this time, to hearken to the shofar's exhortation that we re-orient our thinking and recall what is true and what is real. Particularly in this area, we may come to appreciate and fully internalize the true perspective of what Torah really is. As the *parshah* reveals to us, it is our life – in unlimited ways.