



Torah Bytes

A weekly Dvar Torah on the Parsha by Rabbi Dovid Horwitz
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Parshat Vayeilach Shabbat Shuva 5786



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This Shabbat is a special one. We refer to this day as Shabbat Shuva or some call it Shabbat Teshuva. In truth they are both correct.

Those who refer to it as Shabbat Shuva are making reference to the first words of the special haftara which is always read on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It begins with the words, "Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha...", return Israel to the Lord your G-d! How do we return to Hashem? Through the process of teshuva of course. So both titles given to this special day are correct and appropriate.

The parsha that we read this year is parshat Vayeilach. Moshe opens by telling the people, "I am one hundred and twenty years old today. I can no longer come and go and Hashem has told me not to cross the Jordan."

What message is Moshe trying to impart to the people with these words? Rashi explains that although Moshe could no longer "go out and come in", it was not because he was weak and infirm due to his exceptionally old age. For, when describing Moshe's death at the end of the Torah, the passuk states that Moshe's vital signs were healthy and intact! He did not die due to system failures or disease. He died only because Hashem decreed that he could not cross over the Jordan. Healthwise he could have lived for a long time more. But if Moshe's bodily functions were intact, why could he no longer move about, going to and fro whenever he wanted? Rashi explains that Moshe was stating that he could no longer come and go as a leader, a communicator and transmitter of the Torah, because the job was taken from him and given to Yehoshua.

What does this mean? If Moshe was physically healthy, then he theoretically **could** come and go, continuing to lead the people. Even if Hashem took the job away from him and gave it to Yehoshua, Moshe could have disregarded Hashem's will. To be more accurate then, Moshe should have said to them, "I **choose** to no longer come and go since that is Hashem's will and I do not want to disobey him." Why did he use the words, "I **can't** lead you anymore"? The answer is that Moshe's body and soul worked in such amazing harmony, that he could not violate Hashem's will, even if he "tried" to. Moshe had perfected his body and soul to such a degree, that he no longer able to **choose** to go against Hashem! The fact that Moshe worked on himself to bring himself to this level of faithfulness and loyalty as a servant of Hashem, is why he is referred to numerous times in Tanach as the *eved Hashem*, the servant of Hashem! Sure, there were many other righteous leaders and prophets, but none were able to master their free choice to the degree that they were able to rise above it to the point that they were incapable of going against Hashem. That level of servitude was achieved only by Moshe, earning him the highest level of praise that any human being ever achieved.

We, of course, are not anywhere near those levels of servitude, but seeing that we are in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, now would be a good time to start making small steps to becoming better servants of Hashem!

Making even the smallest steps toward becoming better, can mean the difference between judgment and mercy. Hashem began Rosh Hashana sitting on His throne of judgment. We aroused Hashem by blowing the shofar. Chazal tell us that when we blow the shofar, we cause Hashem to arise from His throne of judgment, moving Him to His throne of mercy. This process continues until Yom Kippur when the entire day starts and begins with mercy!

How do we continue to inspire Hashem to deal with us mercifully? It is by using the power of our free choice, to choose good over evil, Hashem over false gods, a Torah life over that of a secular life. Moshe Rabbeinu, although at the age of 120 was incapable of acting against Hashem, did not start out that way. At first, he also had the power of choice, to choose evil over good. But with every correct choice he made, he purified himself ever so slightly so that eventually, after a lifetime of correct choices, he became the man he was, the ultimate servant of G-d!

How are we meant to choose the correct path in life? Decisions can be very difficult to make. Let me share a story I heard from my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Moshe Meiselman, nephew of Rav Soloveitchik. A boy who he never met before, rang his doorbell one day and asked if he could speak to him. He showed the Rosh Yeshiva an acceptance letter to a fellowship program in a prestigious institution. He asked the Rosh Yeshiva how to decide between taking the fellowship, eventually becoming a big professor, or staying in Yeshiva to continue his Torah studies. Rav Meiselman, not knowing this person or what his struggles or ambitions were, asked him one simple question. "Will taking the fellowship bring you more Olam Haba or less?" After hearing this, the boy immediately ran out of Rav Meiselman's house. Years later, not knowing what happened to this boy or what he had decided, the Rosh Yeshiva was at a speaking engagement in England when a man came up to him and thanked him for saving his life. Embarrassed that he did not recall this person, Rav Meiselman apologized that he doesn't recall saving this man's life! The man divulged that **he** was the boy who had almost taken the fellowship and now he is a big talmid chacham teaching Torah in England. He came to say thank you.

This simple yet profound question should be our guiding light as we tackle difficult decisions throughout our life. **Will this opportunity bring me more Olam Haba or less?** By charting a course of servitude to Hashem, with this question always lurking in our minds, we will see Hashem's ultimate mercy come Yom Kippur!