

Choosing Truth: An Essential Jewish Practice Based on the Teachings of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler

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The Choice Point

Everyone has free choice –at the point where truth meets falsehood. In other words Behira takes place at that point where the truth as the person sees it confronts the illusion produced in him by the power of falsehood. But the majority of a person's actions are undertaken without any clash between truth and falsehood taking place. Many of a person's actions may happen to coincide with what is objectively right because he has been brought up that way and it does not occur to him to do otherwise, and many bad and false decisions may be taken simply because the person does not realize that they are bad. In such cases no valid Behira, or choice, has been made... (Strive for Truth, vol.2, p. 53)

Speak Truth in His Heart

Talmud Bavli Baba Batra 88a and Rashbam Commentary

רַב סַפְרָא דְקַיִים בְּנַפְשִׁיהּ וְדִבֵּר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ:

Rav Safra, who **himself fulfilled** the verse: “**And speaks truth in his heart**” (Psalms 15:2).

רַב סַפְרָא - הוּוּהוּ קַרִי קַרִיאת שְׁמַע וְאָמַר לִיהּ הָהוּא גְבֵרָא הֵב לִי עֶסְקָךְ בְּכַךְ
וּכְךָ מַעוֹת וּסְבַר דְּמִשּׁוּם מִיעוֹט דְּמִים הוּוּהוּ שְׁתִּיק וְהַעֲלָה לוֹ דְּמִים מְרוּבִים
וְלֵאחֵר תְּפִלְתּוֹ לֹא רִצָּה לְקַבֵּל אֲלֵא בְּמִיעוֹט מַעוֹת הִרְאִישׁוֹנוֹת מִשּׁוּם דְּגַמַר
בְּלִבּוֹ לְהַקְנוֹתוֹ בְּכַךְ

Rav Safra - He was saying Shema when a customer said to him, “give me that merchandise for such and such a price.” [Rav Safra didn't respond because he was still saying Shema]. The customer assumed he didn't respond because he had offered such a low price. He raised his offer to a much higher level. After Rav Safra finished his prayer he only wanted to accept the lower, original offer because he had made up his mind at the time to accept that offer. (Rashbam)

When one fixes in his mind that that only the truth is reality and falsehood is nothing, one will not be able to take one mind off the truth. (Miktav M'Eliyahu, vol. 4, p. 239)

Motivated/Biased Reasoning example 1:

Talmud Bavli Ketubot 105b

רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעְיָאל בְּרַבִּי יוֹסֵי הָוָה רָגִיל אֲרִיסִיָּה דְהָוָה מִיִּתִּי לִיָּה כָּל מַעְלֵי
שְׁבֻתָּא כְּנִתָּא דְפִירֵי יוֹמָא חַד אֲיִתִּי לִיָּה בְּחַמְשָׁה

בְּשֻׁבְתָּא אָמַר לִיָּה מָאִי שְׁנָא הָאִידְנָא אָמַר לִיָּה דִינָא אִית לִי וְאִמִּנָּא אָגַב
אוֹרְחֵי אֲיִתִּי לִיָּה לְמָר לָא קָבִיל מִינֵיהּ אָמַר לִיָּה פְּסִילָנָא לָךְ לְדִינָא

The Gemara cites another incident. The **sharecropper of Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yosei, was accustomed to bringing him a basket [kanta] full of fruits every Shabbat eve. One day, he brought him the basket on a Thursday.** Rabbi Yishmael said to him: **What is different** that you came early **now**, this week? The sharecropper said to him: **I have a case** to present before you, **and I said** to myself that **along my way I will bring to the Master** the basket of fruits, as in any case I am coming on Thursday, the day the courts are in session. Rabbi Yishmael **did not accept** the basket of fruits **from him**, and he **said to him: I am disqualified from presiding over your case.**

אוֹתִיב זֹוּזָא דְרַבִּינָן וְקַדְיִינָן לִיָּה בְּהַדִּי דְקָאֲזִיל וְאִתִּי אָמַר אִי בְּעֵי טַעִין
הָכִי וְאִי בְּעֵי טַעִין הָכִי אָמַר תִּיפַח נַפְשָׁם שְׁלֵ מְקַבְּלֵי שׁוֹחֵד וּמָה אָנִי שְׁלֵא
נְטִלְתִּי וְאִם נְטִלְתִּי שְׁלֵי נְטִלְתִּי כֹּךְ מְקַבְּלֵי שׁוֹחֵד עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה

Rabbi Yishmael **seated a pair of rabbinic scholars and they judged** the sharecropper's case. **As Rabbi Yishmael was coming and going, he said** to himself: **If he wants, he could claim this, and if he wants, he could claim that**, i.e., he kept thinking of all the ways in which the litigant who brought him the fruits could win his case. **He said** to himself: **Blast the souls of those who accept bribes. If I, who did not accept** anything, **and if I had accepted**, I would have **accepted my own** property, as it is my sharecropper and the fruits legally belong to me, am nevertheless in **this** state of mind due to the proposed gift, **all the more so** are **those who** actually **accept bribes** inevitably biased in favor of the one who bribed them.

Motivated/Biased reasoning example 2:

שְׁמַע בֵּין־אֲחֵיכֶם וּשְׁפֹטֵתֶם צְדָק

“Listen as between your brothers and judge fairly” (Deuteronomy 1:16)

שְׁמוּעַ בֵּין אֲחֵיכֶם וּשְׁפֹטֵתֶם אָמַר רַבִּי חַנִּינָא אֲזַהְרָה לְבֵית דִּין שְׁלֵא יִשְׁמַע
דְּבָרֵי בַעַל דִּין קוֹדֵם שִׁיבָא בַעַל דִּין חֲבִירוֹ וְאֲזַהְרָה לְבַעַל דִּין שְׁלֵא יִטְעִים
דְּבָרֵי לְדִיין קוֹדֵם שִׁיבָא בַעַל דִּין חֲבִירוֹ קָרִי בִּיה נְמִי שְׁמַע בֵּין אֲחֵיכֶם

“Between your brothers” - this is a warning to the court not to hear the pleas of one party before the arrival of the other party. It is also a warning to each party not to clarify his case to the judge before the arrival of the other party.” (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 7b)

How Can We Discern Truth?

1. Tikkun Middot

How can a person ever come to this state of perfection? Only by constant work on improving his character. This is the only way: to destroy bias at its source. Many years of devoted and selfless labor are needed before one can hope to strengthen the yearning for truth to such an extent that one can free oneself from the bias of the middot (P. 170-1, Strive for Truth, Vol.1)

2. The Test

Does this mean that one who has not purified his heart has no prospect at all of arriving at true conclusions? Not quite. True, he can never be sure. But there is one test he can apply. If an opinion or a decision comes to him easily, without struggle, he should hold it in suspicion and search for the motive which led his middot-based bias to consent to it.

On the other hand, if one has arrived at an opinion or a decision only with difficulty, after making a serious effort to recognize the truth and after doing battle with one's ingrained bias - then there is at least a chance that it might be true. (p. 172, Strive for Truth, vol. 1)

3. We Always Have Access to Truth

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אַנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רַחֲקָה
הוּא :

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשְּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּךָ
: וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה

וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ
: וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּךָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה

בְּיַקְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְבָר מֵאֵד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: ס

For this commandment which I give you today is neither hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in the heavens, so that one might say, “who will ascend for us into the sky and bring it to us, and acquaint us with it, so that we may do it?” Nor is it on the other side of the ocean, so that one might say, “Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, and acquaint us with it, so that we may do it?” For the matter is very close to you: it is in your own mouth and your own heart to do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

“This commandment.. Is not hidden from you” refers to the fact that the point of pure truth can never be entirely hidden from man. “Neither is it far off... for the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and your heart to do it.” The distant path is the path of learning for the sake of mere knowledge which will never lead to betterment. The way which is very near to every individual is: “in your mouth” - this is Torah learning, which is always done aloud: “and in your heart” - this is application to your own heart; “to do it” - this is learning with the intention of doing.

... the gist of the answers to these questions is that by applying Torah to the heart all develops together. To sum up: only when he applies Torah to his heart is a person called “near” to Torah. Without this he is very afar away, as the Zohar says: “Whoever is far from the Torah is far from the holy One...” (p. 179-182, Strive for Truth, vol. 1)

The Stakes are High- The Three Gifts (Wisdom, Might and Wealth)

Commitment to Torah means the attempt to conquer one’s baser nature and pursue God’s purpose of holiness and love...So long as the three great gifts are misused, the result must be war, anxiety, trouble and disturbance on a world scale” (p. 202, Strive for Truth, Vol.1)

“The world was not created as an end in itself, but as a means to the realization of a great end - nothing less than the fullest development of the spiritual potential of man - the greatest possible expansion of the divine power of holiness in the world. Everything must participate in the great struggle for the realization of this goal until the ultimate end is achieved and the whole world with all its millions of beings becomes part of the revelation of God’s name and glory...(p. 200, Strive For Truth, vol. 1)