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THE THRESHOLD OF CHOICE

*Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*

Viktor E. Frankl

CONDEMNED TO CHOOSE

Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that we are “condemned to freedom.” By this, he meant that I am not free because I *must* make choices, all the time, even when I think I have no choice to make.¹

Is this so? We don’t get to choose birth, our first language, intelligence, basic personality—our whole genetic make-up. No one gets to choose who their parents are or whether their family would be nurturing and balanced, or rough and dysfunctional. These were God’s choices, not my own, and since God chose them, I am not responsible.²

The prophet Jeremiah exhorted us: “Let not the wise person glory in his wisdom, nor the mighty man in his might, [and] let not the rich man glory in his riches,”³ since these are all determined before a baby

1 William Egginton.

2 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 5:4.

3 Jeremiah 9:22.

is born.⁴ “But let he who glories, glory in this: that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord that exercises on earth loving-kindness, justice and righteousness; for on these things I delight, says God.” Just because God delights in these values, He gave us complete moral autonomy over them. “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for awe of God,” i.e., moral behavior, which is in the hands of man.⁵

God tells me what He wants my potential to be. Amongst other things, he chooses that potential based on my allotted contribution to the general fixing of the world. This potential determines my particular range of choices. But the choices I make within my range of choice define me. God chooses and I choose. My choices are critical in determining who I am as a moral and spiritual being.⁶ And here lies the interesting thing. We all have a different *range* of choice; but the *amount* of choice we all have is the same.

GENERAL, PARTICULAR, AND IRRELEVANT CHOICES

Animals get to choose whether they are going to hunt or sleep, to play or lie in the sun. This is not what we mean by choice. Choice is only meaningful when it is a choice between good over evil, when it involves the choice between the inner spirituality of a situation and its outer superficiality, between being truly human and not allowing ourselves to become a commodity. As the Torah states: “Man,” uniquely amongst all the animals, “has become like one of us knowing good and evil.” Empowered with knowledge, man is able to act. He can choose.⁷

Some of our choices will be life-changing—what career we choose, whom we marry, where we decide to live, and how observant we are going to be. So too, there are times of the year—Rosh Hashanah in particular—when we don’t look at the details of our lives but rather at the big picture of who we are and where we are going.⁸

4 Talmud, Tractate *Niddah* 16b.

5 Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 33b.

6 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 5:1-3.

7 Genesis 22:3, as interpreted by Maimonides, *ibid.* 5:1.

8 Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, vol. 2, pp. 67-68; Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Kook, *Orot Hateshuvah*, p. 33.

If real choices are judged by their moral value, then this changes our perspective on what choosing a marriage partner should be based on. My personal experience is that those couples whose primary criteria is shared values and a vision for themselves and their family have the happiest marriages overall. Indeed, these choices express the essence of the human condition.

Mostly, our choices involve seemingly smaller decisions. Their cumulative impact, however, is just as central in defining our lives. We either rise up beyond the angels or down into the abyss we go. There is no human default position—a human in neutral, so to speak. Neutrality is a choice to deny our essential humanness. It is to be less than human.

THE THRESHOLD OF CHOICE

The choices that we have—those that are actually within our reach—are considered to be within our threshold of choice. Deuteronomy states: “I have placed before you life and death; blessing

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and curse; [therefore] choose life.”⁹ Choice is a necessity for man’s moral integrity. Perforce we are then also free to choose poorly. Thus empowered, we are held accountable for our conduct, be it good or evil.¹⁰

Some things, however, are above my threshold of choice. I may love the idea that I would never get angry, or always pray to God with perfect love, or never over-eat. But it may be that these ideals are so elevated above my current spiritual level that I cannot seriously engage them. They may be a part of my long-term spiritual vision, but they are not a part of my immediate choice-reality. In other words, they are *above* my current threshold of choice.¹¹

There are other good and worthy aspirations that are *below* my threshold of choice. They are choices that are such an integral part of

9 Deuteronomy 30:19.

10 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 5:1.

11 Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. 1, *Kuntres Habechirah*, chap. 2.

me that I do not really choose to do them either. I may never be tempted to shop-lift, even if I am short of money, and I certainly may never be tempted to kill, even if I am super-angry with someone. These acts may be so integrated into my moral conscience that it is simply unthinkable for me to do something like that. Theoretically I could choose to do these things, but in practice, they are no longer within my range of choice.¹²

In the middle of these two categories—those that are above my threshold of choice and those that are below—lie my real struggles. These are the decisions that I struggle with that are within my threshold of choice. I may choose correctly or I may not, but the struggle itself has value. The struggle itself acts to purify me, even where I might fail.¹³

For example, I may decide that I don't want to gossip about others in pursuit of observing the laws of *lashon hara*.¹⁴ I may sometimes succeed, and I may sometimes fail, but it is a part of my struggle. It is within my threshold of choice.

No two people have the same threshold of choice. What is important is not where our threshold of choice lies but how much growth we move through from our starting point. If our momentum is toward goodness, we have shown that our primary resonance is with righteousness over evil. This aspect of our lives is totally in our hands.¹⁵

The implications of this are tantalizing. It means that it is not the destination but rather the journey that we need to focus on. God says to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your home, and go to the land that I will show you."¹⁶ Don't worry about which "land" now; to begin the process, begin the journey.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 The words mean literally "bad language" or "evil speech." In Judaism, there is a prohibition not to speak negatively of your fellow man unless it is information that is of practical benefit to the person.

15 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 5:3, based on Deuteronomy 30:15.

16 Genesis 12:1.

MOVING THE THRESHOLD

As we grow, we begin to master certain areas of our moral commitment. Over time, they become a part of us. We then automatically act according to our commitments. We move that aspect of our life from within our threshold of choice—a struggle—to below our threshold of choice.¹⁷ This frees us to take on new challenges. We are now able to take things that we previously thought were out of range—i.e., above our threshold of choice because they were too high—and move them into our threshold of choice. We remain with the same amount of choice. But we have now moved our threshold of choice upwards. The issues that we are dealing with are more sublime, more subtle, and more holy than before.

The measure of greatness is how much we move the needle. It is how much we take the challenges of yesterday that were within our threshold of choice and make them a part of our natural fiber, and how much of the things that were so above us yesterday we bring into our threshold of choice.

As a simple example to illustrate the point, two people may appear to have radically different lives:

- The first may come from an abusive family, be naturally anxious, not be very intelligent and have grown up without an exposure to Judaism. He seems to have everything stacked against him—so many challenges.
- A second person may seem to be blessed with all the advantages of life. He may have a loving, warm and balanced family; be naturally calm and highly intelligent; and have lots of access to Judaism.

Let us say that Person One is born at Level 2 on an artificial scale of 1 to 20, whereas Person Two is born on Level 12. Both grow during their lives. Person One achieves a level of 10 at the end of his life, while Person Two achieves a level of 16. Person One did not even achieve the starting point of Person Two, and yet, in heaven, he will be regarded

17 *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, vol. 1, *Kuntres Habechirah*, chap. 5.

as the greater person because he moved through eight points on the growth scale, when Person Two only moved through four points. In this world, Person Two may have become a great rabbi and Person One a tailor, but that has nothing to do with how God judges us.

God decides our starting point. We decide our response. Every inch of growth counts, making us greater and putting us closer to fulfilling the unique potential that is within us. Our choices define us. But they aren't simply intellectual, for there is another important ingredient to growth...