



The Chinese Shortcut

This week, two Chinese workers made a shortcut through the Great Wall of China. This raises the question: do shortcuts actually work?

Shortcuts

This week, two construction workers in China were trying to find a way to shorten their commute to work. They noticed a hole in the Great Wall of China and decided to dig through it to create a shortcut, making their journey faster. They used a tractor they had access to and managed to create a gap in the massive Chinese wall.

The Great Wall of China was built over nearly two thousand years, stretching for more than 13,000 miles. Over the years, large parts of it have collapsed or disappeared, but since it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, there are laws in China to protect the wall. These two workers who were just looking for a shortcut have been arrested—and are now in for a very long haul...

This story reminded me of a famous tale from the Talmud.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah was once traveling, when he reached a crossroads and didn't know which way to go.

He encountered a young boy and asked him, "Which way leads to the city?"

The boy replied, "There are two paths, one is short and long, and the other is long and short."

Which path do you think Rabbi Yehoshua chose? Advertisers often claim that the first word you hear has the most influence. In every advertisement, they try to make sure that the first word is the name of a successful company, so it makes you associate that advertisement with success.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania first heard the word “short,” so he didn’t pay attention to the rest. Off he went on the short path, thinking that he was making a wise choice.

When he reached the outskirts of the city, he found it surrounded by gardens and orchards; rocks and stones blocked his way through, and he was forced to turn back. When he reached the fork in the road, he met the same boy again and asked, “Didn’t you tell me this was the short way?”

The boy replied, “Did I not also say it was long?” (Eruvin 53b).

This story brings us to the weekly Torah portion.

It’s Very ‘Easy’

The Tanya is the foundational text of Chabad Chasidism, written by the Alter Rebbe. Just last week (on the 18th of Elul), we celebrated his birthday. On the title page of the book, the Alter Rebbe defines his mission using a verse from this week’s Torah portion, Nitzavim. He writes, “It is founded on the verse ‘For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off... But the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it’ (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14).”

In Nitzavim, Moses tells us in the name of G-d that the Torah is not distant from us: “It is not in the heavens... nor is it beyond the sea,” but it is very close to us, “in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.” “In your mouth” means through speech, “in your heart” means through thought, and “that you may do it” means to fulfill the Torah in action. It’s very easy; we just need to control our powers of speech, thought, and action, and then it is quite easy to observe the Torah and its commandments.

This might sound nice on paper, but is it really reasonable to expect an ordinary person to conduct every action, word, and thought according to the guidance of the Torah?

Actions are relatively easy to control, but speech is a bit more complicated. Quiet people might find it easier to control what they say, but for big talkers, it’s very challenging to exercise self-control and say only positive things. Thoughts are even more difficult; you can’t just turn off your thoughts, they just keep on coming, and controlling them seems impossible. So, how can you say that it’s easy to control your thoughts?

When The Choice is Yours

The answer is this: it's true that thoughts work 24/7, but the question is, what do you do with the thought that comes into your mind? Do you dwell on it, or do you dismiss it?

For example, some people are naturally worriers. They are always anxious, and any worry that comes into their minds tends to stick with them. In such cases, the right thing to do is to push the negative thought and refuse to dwell on it. However, that is easier said than done.

The Rebbe always used to say, "Think good, and it will be good." Once, I heard the Rebbe say it this way: "Think good, and it will *definitely* be good." Superficially, it sounds very simple, but for a person who's naturally a worrier, it's a challenging task.

Therefore, the Alter Rebbe wrote the Tanya—to clarify how this demand from the Torah is practical, and how the "regular" person can achieve it. But then he adds three words, "in a long and short way." In Judaism, too, there's a short and long way, and there's a long and short way.

The short way is through emotions. I remember once a renowned doctor gave a lecture on how a person can live a healthy life. He explained that with the right diet, a person can live beyond a hundred years, and if they also do some exercise, they can be sure to live up to a hundred and twenty years.

He was a very motivational speaker, and people who left his lecture were ready to follow all the instructions he gave; after all, who doesn't want a long life? But after a few days, the enthusiasm waned, and within two weeks, there was nothing left of it. This is the "short and long way."

In other words, the Alter Rebbe tells us that in Judaism, there are no "shortcuts." If you really want to change, it's a long journey, but in the end, we will get there.

The G-dly vs. the Animalistic

The Tanya teaches us that a battle rages within every person. It's not necessarily a battle between good and evil but rather between two fundamental aspects of the human soul: the "animal soul" and the "divine soul."

The animal soul is the biological aspect of a person, just like any other

biological creature. It seeks to eat, drink, and live – nothing inherently wrong with that. It's how we're wired, and it's natural to want these things. Just like an animal cares only for itself; they don't volunteer, they are not involved in Tikkun Olam; they are only there for themselves. So too, is the animal soul in every human being.

What sets humans apart from other creatures is the “divine soul” within us. Within every person, there's a magnetic force pulling them towards something greater than life itself. Deep in their hearts, they're not content with merely caring for and worrying about themselves; they want to do something more significant. They're willing to sacrifice themselves and their needs for something higher. This driving force, urging them to connect and identify with the Divine Light, is the divine soul.

For example, parents might perform a circumcision ceremony for their son, even if they don't understand why it's necessary or may not even believe in it intellectually. From a logical perspective, they might think it's unnecessary, but nonetheless, the majority of Jewish parents go through with it. Why? Because it's the divine soul – the spiritual magnet within them – that compels them to do something that connects them with the Infinite.

Likewise, people rush to the synagogue on Yom Kippur, even though, on the surface, their bodies might not want to fast. Biologically, we're designed to eat, so there is nothing wrong with the desire, but the spiritual magnet within us contradicts our biological reality and makes us understand that some things are worth sacrificing for.

The Alter Rebbe, in the Tanya, equips us with the tools to persuade our biological selves, our “animal soul,” that it's in our best interest to fulfill the will of God. Getting to that point might be a long journey, but it's a sure one because, slowly but surely, we will get there...