

# Being a Jew by Choice

*Did G-d ask our permission before “choosing us”?*

## **Membership—Up to You!**

I remember an article published in *The New York Times* about ten years ago covered a new trend in the American Jewish world: Synagogues in which members don't have to pay membership fees.

Instead, these synagogues ask people to make limited donations, and every attendee gives according to his or her economic ability. They don't have to apologize if they give relatively little—because donations are voluntary, not mandatory.

The reason for this change is rooted in perception: The new generation of young synagogue-goers doesn't like having prices for synagogue affiliations dictated to it. The smartphone generation wants to decide on its own when and how much to pay; it's a generation that wants to do everything out of what Judaism calls *bechira chofshis*, which translates roughly to free will.

Three non-Orthodox synagogues mentioned by the *Times* took the “dramatic” step of deciding to try this new approach. The head of the Reform movement even said, “Synagogue membership is not something you buy with money.”

But an investigation published later looked into the results of

this dramatic new approach—and concluded that not only did the houses of worship not lose anything with the new approach, but on the contrary, saw their memberships grow, along with the scope of donations.

For some reason, though, the article “forgot” to mention the fact that this philosophy was invented by Chabad.

In a farbrengen on Yud Shvat, 5726 (1966), the Rebbe spoke about how Chabad needed to be different from all other organizations. Those entities, upon meeting a new face, first invest their energies into getting that person to join their organization. And only after that person has become a “member of the club,” do they give him or her all the rights and privileges due to members of the organization.

Chabad, on the other hand, has the opposite approach, the Rebbe said: When we meet a Jew, we first give him everything we can give, materially and spiritually. And only after that do we inform him or her that there is an organization whose mission is to give to others everything that others gave to you, with the request to help us in that mission (Toras Menachem, Vol. 46, pg. 59.)

And as was the case with all the Rebbe’s other activities, everyone eventually came around to the vindicated philosophy of Chabad.

## **G-d’s Choice**

But there is one more thing that is clear: Jews don’t like being told what to do; rather, they prefer doing things of their own

free choice.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

This week's Parsha centers around one of the most pivotal moments in Jewish history—*Matan Torah*, the Giving of the Torah. But before the Torah is given, something fascinating happens: Hashem turns to Moshe with a proposal.

He tells Moshe to go to the Jewish people and say: *"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians... Now, if you listen to My voice and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured nation, a kingdom of princes and a holy people"* (Shemos 19:3-6).

In other words, Hashem doesn't *command* the Jewish people to accept the Torah—He *offers* it to them. He tells Moshe to present this idea and wait for their response.

So Moshe relays the message, laying out Hashem's words before the people. And their response is immediate and unified: *"Everything that Hashem has spoken—we will do!"* Moshe takes their enthusiastic reply and brings it back to Hashem (Shemos 19:8-9).

This is the first time in history that G-d Himself approaches Man with a charge, and asks Man to agree! We've never seen anything like it before that!

But this raises the question: Why did G-d suddenly change His customary behavior and ask people, who live in this material world, if they are prepared to accept His Words?

## Speak to the Women

When G-d tells Moshe to present the Torah to the Jewish people and ask for their agreement, He gives a very specific instruction: *“So shall you say to the House of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel.”*

Rashi explains that “House of Jacob” refers to the women, and “sons of Israel” refers to the men. In other words, Moshe was told to speak to the women first.

This raises an obvious question: Why did the women take precedence over the men?

The Rebbe answers this based on a Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 28:2), which takes us all the way back to the very first time G-d ever gave a command to a human being—when He told Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (Bereishis 2:17).

We all know how that story ends. Adam relayed the command to Chava, but since she hadn’t heard it directly from G-d, she added her own detail—that even touching the tree was forbidden. Later, when she touched it and nothing happened, she assumed eating from it wouldn’t be so bad either. And as the verse says, *“She gave also to her husband, and he ate”* (Bereishis 3:6).

The Midrash makes a striking observation: If G-d had spoken directly to Chava, not only would she have listened, but she would have made sure Adam didn’t make a mistake either.

So this time, at the Giving of the Torah, G-d does things differently. To avoid a repeat of what happened with the Tree of

Knowledge, He tells Moshe to speak to the women first. Because when the women hear the message firsthand, they'll make sure it's followed—not just by themselves, but by the entire Jewish people (*Toras Menachem* Vol. 35, pg. 186).

## **The Answer**

We could say that G-d asked for the Jewish Nation's "approval" to receive the Torah for the very same reason.

The first time around—back at the Creation of the Universe—G-d didn't exactly ask Adam and Chava if they were on board with the whole arrangement. He didn't present them with a contract and a signature line. Instead, the Torah tells us straight up: "And G-d commanded Adam... from the Tree of Knowledge, you shall not eat." Not only that, but He even threw in a warning and a consequence: "For on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die." Pretty clear, right? And yet, on that very same day, Adam and Chava went ahead and did exactly what they weren't supposed to do.

So, when it came time for the Giving of the Torah—when G-d was about to hand over not just one commandment, but all 613—He took a different approach. Instead of simply imposing it as a Divine Decree, He first asked for their input, their buy-in.

As the Torah describes in Parshas Mishpatim (Shmos 23:3,7), "Moshe came and told the people all the words of the L-rd and all the ordinances." He laid everything out for them, leaving no surprises. He even publicly read the Sefer HaBris—the "Book of the Covenant"—which contained the Torah from Bereishis all the way up to the Giving of the Torah. And how did the Jewish

Nation respond? With full enthusiasm and total unity:

“All the words that the L-rd has spoken—we will do.”

In other words, they agreed—happily and wholeheartedly. And only after that was the Torah given.

(And what about the famous teaching that “G-d suspended the mountain over them like a barrel”? The Rebbe explains that this actually refers to the Oral Torah—Torah Sheba'al Peh. But the Written Torah—Torah Shebich'sav—was embraced willingly and joyfully. See the Sicha of Purim, 5732, and Sichos Kodesh 5732, Vol. I, pg. 529.)

## **Conversion**

And perhaps this idea also serves as the source for an interesting halachah regarding conversion to Judaism.

Maimonides explains that when the Jewish Nation entered the Covenant with G-d, it involved three key elements: circumcision, immersion, and a sacrificial offering. Circumcision was performed in Egypt, immersion took place in the desert, and the people brought sacrifices as part of the process. He then states that the same applies for all future generations—anyone who wishes to convert must undergo these same three steps.

This means that the process of conversion is directly linked to the Giving of the Torah.

Well, there's a fascinating law regarding a child who converts as part of a family: when that child reaches Bar Mitzvah, he has

the right to reject the conversion. In other words, becoming Jewish isn't something that can be permanently imposed upon a person when they're too young to choose—it requires their full acceptance when they come of age.

We can see a parallel to this in the Stand at Mount Sinai, where G-d asked the Jewish Nation if they wanted to accept the Torah rather than simply imposing it on them.

## **Marriage**

What's more, halachah also forbids marrying a woman against her will. This principle comes from the story of Rivkah. When her family was asked about her marriage to Yitzchak, they responded, "Let's call the maiden and ask her." Rashi comments that from here we learn that a woman cannot be married without her consent.

Now, the Sages compare the Giving of the Torah to a marriage between G-d and the Jewish Nation. If so, we might say that this is why G-d first sent Moshe—as the "groom's escort"—to ask the "bride," the Jewish Nation, if she approved of the match. Only after they gave their full agreement was the "wedding date" set, and the Torah was given.

In America today, converts are often referred to as "Jews by choice." But in truth, every Jew made that choice at Mount Sinai, freely embracing the Torah and mitzvos. And because it was a choice, not something imposed, the Jewish Nation has loved the Torah so deeply ever since. Throughout history, Jews have sacrificed everything for the Torah's survival—not because they were forced to, but because they willingly accepted G-d's

Kingship upon themselves. This love is what makes us celebrate the Torah with such joy.

And in our generation, this idea is more relevant than ever. Most Jews today are born into families that don't fully observe the Torah and mitzvos—at least, not yet. There is no outside force compelling them to keep mitzvos. And yet, many choose to do so, drawn by their beauty, meaning, and truth.

So in a very real sense, almost every Jew today is a Jew by choice.