**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARSHAT NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH**

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**“Therefore Choose Life!” (*Devarim* 30:15-20)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

30:15: See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil,

16: in that I command you this day

to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances;

then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land where you go in to possess it.

17: But if your heart turn away, and you will not hear, but shall be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them;

18: I declare to you this day, that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days upon the land, where you pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it.

19: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day,

that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse;

therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed;

20: to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him;

for that is your life, and the length of your days;

that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, to give them.

**I. Nitzavim-Vayelekh – One *parasha* or two *parashot*?**

Most years *Parashot Nitzavim-Vayelekh* are read together on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana. Only in years when there are two "free" Shabbatot between Rosh Hashana and Sukkot (one Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and another Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot) do we divide *Nitzavim*, which is read before Rosh Hashana, from *Vayelekh*, which is read on *Shabbat Shuva*, with *Ha'azinu* read then on the Shabbat before Sukkot.

As in similar cases of *parashot* that are sometimes joined together and sometimes separated, the question arises here as well: Are *Nitzavim-Vayelekh* fundamentally a single *parasha*, which at times is divided into two when necessary, or are they essentially two different *parashot*, which at times are joined together as needed?[[1]](#footnote-1)

This question can be answered in two opposite ways, depending on one's point of departure.

In the time of the Gaonim, *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh* was considered by the Masorites as one *parasha* in the division of the Torah into *parashot*, despite the custom of sometimes dividing it into two, whereas regarding the other *parashot* which are sometimes joined together and sometimes read separately, each one was considered an independent *parasha.* Here is what Rav Saadya Gaon writes in his *Siddur*:[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are 53 *parashot* (and not 54, as is customary in our *Chumashim*), and it must be clarified that eight of them are sometimes joined together in pairs of two…[[3]](#footnote-3) and one of them is divided into two and read on two Shabbatot when needed, namely *Atem nitzavim*, which is divided at *Vayelekh Moshe*… in years when there is a Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, for then this *parasha* is divided and we read half of it, from *Vayelekh Moshe* until the end, on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and *Ha'azinu* on the Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

We see then that, according to the Masora in the days of the Geonim, *Vayelekh* is not a separate *parasha*, but rather part of *Parashat Nitzavim*, only that for certain reasons the reading of this single *parasha* is sometimes divided between two Shabbatot.

Owing to this conception that *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh* is fundamentally a single *parasha* (and even a relatively short *parasha*), the early authorities had difficulty with the customary practice of dividing it into two in certain years, and they explained it in various ways.[[4]](#footnote-4) Our remarks below may perhaps provide an additional explanation for this custom.

An examination of the content and style of *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh* reveals that it is consists of two very different parts, between which there is no connection: chapters 29-30 (*Parashat Nitzavim*) which constitute a continuation of the division of the orations concerning the covenant which began in *Parashat Ki-Tavo*, and chapter 31 (*Parashat Vayelekh*), which opens a new part of the book of *Devarim* – a description of Moshe's taking leave from the people of Israel on the day of his death. This part describes the appointment of Yehoshua in the sight of all of Israel, and the handing over of the book of the Torah, the writing of which was now completed, to the priests, the sons of Levi (and the mitzva of "*hakhel*" which is appended to this). This is followed by an introduction to the song of *Ha'azinu* (all these in *Parashat Vayelekh*), and of course the song of *Ha'azinu* itself and the blessings with which Moshe blessed the tribes of Israel.

The division of the "orations concerning the covenant" in the book of *Devarim*, which consists of chapters 27-30, at the end of which is found *Parashat Nitzavim*, immediately follows the division of the "orations concerning the *mitzvot*" in the book of *Devarim* (chapters 5-26), for it was over these *mitzvot* that were given to Israel in Moshe's orations that the covenant in the plains of Moav was made.

The division of the "orations concerning the covenant" includes two major orations, which detail the punishments which will befall those who violate the covenant – chapter 28 and chapter 29.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the end of the second oration concerning the covenant we find a joint conclusion for the two orations, consisting of words of vision and consolation, which describe the renewal of the positive relationship between God and His people Israel (30:1-10).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Each of these two covenant orations is surrounded by short passages, which contain words of rebuke. The role of these short orations is to serve as introductions or conclusions to the two orations concerning the covenant.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The short oration that we set at the beginning of this study and with which we will deal below, concludes all of the orations concerning the covenant, and essentially the huge rhetorical process from the beginning of the book of *Devarim* to this point. *Parashot Nitzavim-Vayelekh-Ha'azinu*-*Vezot Ha-Berakha* serve as an appendix to the book of *Devarim* and their rhetorical nature differs from that of the *parashot* that precede them.

This oration is a concise summary of the blessings and curses in the previous orations, and it even alludes to them in literal fashion:

That I have set before you life and death, **the blessing and the curse…**

The essence of the oration is to emphasize the free choice given to Israel to walk in the good path that will bring them the blessing or in the evil path that will bring them the curse. Both the blessing and the curse are connected to the life of the people living in their land, as is stated three times in this short oration, at the conclusion of each section of it:

16: then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you **in the land where you go in to possess it.**

18: that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days **upon the land, where you pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it.**

20: for that is your life, and the length of your days;

**that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers… to give them.**

The fate of the people living in their land, whether they will live a good and blessed life, and whether they will continue to live there, or perhaps perish from it – this fate is placed in their own hands. When they choose between good and evil they choose between life and doom.

God, who presents these two possibilities to His chosen people, commands them, "therefore choose life."

**II. The relationship between the oration in our *parasha* and the other orations in the book of *Devarim***

As stated, this concluding oration concludes not only the orations concerning the covenant in chapters 27-30 which directly precede it, but it essentially concludes the entire grand oration of Moshe from the beginning of the book of *Devarim* to this point. Since it is a concluding oration, it maintains linguistic and substantive connections to two earlier orations in our book.

1. There is a striking similarity between this oration and the oration appearing at the beginning of *Parashat Re'eh* – 11:26-30.[[8]](#footnote-8) It would appear that that oration as well serves as a conclusion of the unit of orations included in *Parashot Va'etchanan-Eikev* (chapters 5-11). It is like a miniature oration concerning the covenant, announcing in advance that over the *mitzvot* and contents appearing in the previous orations a covenant will be made that contains blessing and curse.[[9]](#footnote-9) We present here the correspondence between the two orations:

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| *Re'eh*, chapter 11 | *Nitzavim*, chapter 30 |
| 26: **Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse:** | 15: **See, I have set before you this day…**19: …life and death, **the blessing and the curse;** |
| 27: **the blessing,** **if you shall hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day;** | 16: **that I command thee this day**…to walk in His ways, **and to keep His commandments**…and the Lord your God **shall bless you…** |
| 28: and the curse, **if you shall not hearken** to the commandments of the Lord your God…to go after **other gods** | **But if** your heart turn away, **and you will not hear,**[[10]](#footnote-10) but shall be drawn away, and worship **other gods,** and serve them; 18: …you shall surely perish… |

The Rambam emphasizes the great principle of free choice in the fifth chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva,* basing the principle on these two great orations of Moshe in the book of *Devarim*:

1. Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his…

3. This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and *mitzvot*, as it is stated: "Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil]" (30:15). Similarly, it is stated: "Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse]" (11:26), implying that the choice is in your hands. Any one of the deeds of men which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil.

2. There is also a similarity between the oration in our *parasha* and one of the first orations in the book of *Devarim*, that which appears in chapter 4:

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| *Va'etchanan,* chapter 4 | *Nitzavim*, chapter 30 |
| 25: When you shall beget children, and children's children, and you shall have been long in the land, and shall deal corruptly, and make a graven image… | 18: …that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days upon the land, where you pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it.  |
| 26: **I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day,** that you shall soon utterly perish from off the landwhere you go over the Jordan to possess it;you shall not prolong your days upon it… | 19: **I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day,** that I have set before you life and death… therefore choose life…20 … for that is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land… |

The Ramban, in his commentary to our *parash*a, summarizes the intention of the oration we are examining, and connects it to the oration in chapter 4:

15: "See, I have set before you this day" – He goes back to warn them further, informing them that the two paths are in their hands, and they are free to walk in the one that they desire, and there is no impediment stopping them, in the lower world or in the upper world.

And he calls upon the heaven and the earth to witness against them **a second time,** after having already said: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you shall soon utterly perish." For now he says: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day," for "I have set before you life and death," which are "the blessing and the curse," and I have advised you to choose life, "that you may live, you and your seed."

It is **as if he is attaining the signatures of witnesses [- the heaven and the earth] at the end of all his words.**

Calling upon heaven and earth to testify is discussed later in *Parashat Vayelekh*, in the introduction to *Parashat Ha'azinu*:

31:28: Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, **and call heaven and earth to witness against them.**

And in *Parashat Ha'azinu* itself this testimony is realized:

32:1: Give ear, you **heavens**, and I will speak; and let the **earth** hear the words of my mouth.

Nevertheless, the Ramban does not connect our oration to the verses that follow shortly thereafter, but rather to the call to heaven and earth to testify found at the beginning of our book, far from this oration. The Ramban was correct in doing so, for he understands our oration as the conclusion of all the orations, from the beginning of the book to this point, and he sees the call to heaven and earth in our oration as the "attainment of the signature of witnesses at the end of all his words."[[11]](#footnote-11)

And yet, there is a difference between the testimony of heaven and earth at the beginning of our book and their testimony in the oration close to the end of the book: At the beginning of the book they testify "that you shall soon utterly perish from off the land," because they worshipped idols, whereas in the conclusion of all the orations they testify that when you shall choose life, "you may live, you and your seed… for that is your life, and the length of your days, that you may dwell in the land…". That is to say, heaven and earth are witnesses to the two possibilities of blessing and curse, only that at the beginning of our book, they testify to the fulfillment of the curse, whereas at the end of the book, they testify to the fulfillment of the blessing, and thus their role is completed specifically with the blessing.

**III. Difficulties arising from the study of our oration**

After these general remarks concerning the concluding oration in *Parashat Nitzavim*, let us examine the oration itself, and consider its literary nature and several difficulties that arise from it.

**1. The guide word and its meanings**

An attentive reading of this oration points us to the repetitions found therein. One root repeats itself six times in six verses. This root is *chet-yod-heh*, which appears four times as a noun – *chayim*, "life," and twice as a verb, "to live":

1. 15: See, I have set before you this day **life** and good…
2. 16: …then **you shall** **live** and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land…
3. 19: …that I have set before you **life** and death, the blessing and the curse;
4. therefore choose **life**,
5. that **you may live,** you and your seed;
6. 20: to love the Lord your God… for that is **your life,** and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land…

To this we must add that the pair of opposites life-death appears in two places in our oration: in verse 15: **"life** and good, **death** and evil"; and in verse 19: "I have set before you **life and death,** the blessing and the curse."

It is clear, therefore, that the root *chet-yod-heh* serves in our oration as a guide word. This raises two questions, which may be related to each other. First of all, why doesn't this root appear in our oration seven times, as is the rule concerning guide words in Scripture?[[12]](#footnote-12)

Second, does the word, in all six of its appearances, bear a single meaning, or perhaps it has more than one meaning in the passage?

The second question draws our attention to verse 19, where the guide word appears three times: "I have set before you **life** and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose **life,** that **you may live,** you and your seed." It is evident in this verse that the word *chayim* in the command (or advice) "therefore choose life" does not have the same meaning as the root *chet-yod-heh* appearing in the continuation, "that you may live," as the *Netziv* explains in his *Ha'amek Davar* commentary to v. 15:

It is impossible to interpret the words *chayim* and *mavet* [in verse 15] in their literal sense [as "life" and "death"], for if so… it is strange to explain below [in verse 19] "therefore choose life, that you may live…." It is inappropriate to give advice, to do something so that it may be so! If someone is in doubt whether to choose life or death - it is inappropriate to advise to choose life so that he may live!

Thus, we must follow the guide word in this oration, and discuss the meaning of the word in each of its appearances.

**2. The redundancy in the oration**

Another repetition that stands out in our oration is the repetition of its central idea.

In the opening verse of the oration it is stated:

15: See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.

The verses that follows, 16-18, seem to be a detailing of verse 15: Verse 16: "in that I command you this day to love the Lord… then you shall live and multiply" details "life and good," whereas verses 17-18: "But if your heart turn away, and you will not hear… you shall surely perish" detail "death and evil."

But then comes verse 19 and repeats verse 10, and thus opens a new part of the oration:

… I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse…

Are "life and the blessing" not the same thing as "life and good"? And are "death and the curse" not the same thing as "death and evil"? Why then is the "setting before you" of these two paths repeated in the two verses, and even in similar words?

So too in the second part of the oration (verses 19-20), which appears to repeat what is stated in the first part, there is a detailing of the walking in the path of "life and the blessing":

19: …therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed;

20: to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him;

for that is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers…

This detailing parallels, sometimes even on the literal level, the detailing of walking in the path of "life and good" appearing in verse 16 in the first part of the oration:

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| Verses 19-20 | Verse 16 (not in order) |
| that you may live, you and your seed | then thou shall live and multiply |
| to love the Lord your God | to love the Lord your God |
| to hearken to His voice | to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments |
| for that is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land. | and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land where you go in to possess it. |

What is missing in the second part of the oration (verses 19-20) is a detailing of walking in the way of "death and the curse," and in this way it differs from the first part, and therefore it is also shorter.

What is the reason for this doubling in the oration? What does the second part add to the first part, and what is the meaning of the difference that we noted between the two parts regarding the scope of the detailing?

In the following sections, we will conduct an interpretive discussion, the results of which will help us resolve the difficulties that we raised in this section.

**IV. “Life and good, and death and evil”**

Let us begin our renewed discussion of the oration from its first verse. The words life/good and death/evil are so common in Scripture and in everyday speech that one might think that they require no interpretation. But in fact this is not true, and the commentators struggled greatly with their explication.

First, we must ask, what is the precise meaning of each of these four terms in our passage, since each of them is found in Scripture in a variety of meanings and in different contexts.

Second, we must ask whether the connection between the two words in each pair is a connection of parallelism. That is to say, are the words, "life and good," an instance of hendiadys, the expression of a single idea by two words connected with "and," or are they at least two words that are close in meaning (and the same for the pair "death and evil")? Or is perhaps the relationship between them that of cause and effect (in which case we must ask which is the cause in each pair, and which the effect)?

1. Here is **Rashi's** commentary, which answers all of our questions:

(15) "Life and good" – the one is dependent on the other; if you do good, behold there is life for you, and if you do evil there is death for you. Scripture goes on to explain how this is so.

(16) "In that I command you this day to love [the Lord your God]" – You have here a description of the "good," and upon this depends –

"that you shall live and multiply" – here you have life.

(17) "But if your heart turn away" – here you have evil.

(18) "You shall perish" – here you have death.

The amazing brevity of Rashi's commentary and his didactic ability to insert his few words into the wording of the Bible, as an integral part of it, leave the reader speechless: after all, the matter is so simple; why then did we at all deliberate about it?

We see then that "good" and "evil" are elements taken from the moral-religious realm: **doing** good and **doing** evil. The good is loving God and fulfilling His commandments, whereas the evil is just the opposite. Life and death are to be understood in their plain sense: existence in this world or perishing from it.

The relationship between the words of each pair is one of cause and effect: The doing of good leads to life, whereas the doing of evil leads to death – perishing.

The basis for Rashi's interpretation is in the repetition of the root *chet-yod-heh* in the detailing in verse 16: "'Then **you shall live** and multiply – here you have **life**."

There is only one difficulty that does not give us rest in connection to Rashi's interpretation: If "good" is the cause and "life" is the effect, verse 15 should have been formulated in the reverse order: "the good and life, evil and death." This is the order of the repeated detailing of verse 15 found in verses 16-18, and this is the logical and obligatory order!

2. Therefore, we must examine an interpretation that is just the opposite of that of Rashi, found in the Aramaic translation of the Torah known as Targum Yonatan to verse 15:

See that I arranged before you this day **the way of life** in which **good reward** is paid to the righteous, and **the way of death** in which **evil recompense** is paid to the wicked.

According to Targum Yonatan, "life" is "the way of life" – the way of the Torah and the *mitzvot*. This is stated explicitly in two places in the continuation of the oration: The words in verse 19, "therefore choose life," are rendered: "therefore choose the way of life, **which is the Torah."** And again in verse 20, the words, "for that is your life, and the length of your days," are rendered as: "for the Torah in which you occupy yourselves is your life in this world."

Indeed, the word *chayim*, life, in Scripture is sometimes used in the sense of the content of life, the proper way of life (primarily in the Wisdom Literature). Here are two examples:

*Mishlei* 3:18: She [wisdom] is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her…

4:13: Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go; keep her, for she is your life.

According to Targum Yonatan, the word good means "good reward" – the blessing with which a person is blessed in his life. This meaning is far more prevalent in Scripture than the meaning of moral good adopted by Rashi.

The advantage of this interpretation is that now the order in verse 15 is logical, and accords with the detailing of this verse in the coming verses: "life" (in the sense of the proper way of life) leads to "good" (in the sense of blessing and recompense), whereas "death" (the way of death) leads to "evil" recompense.

But according to this interpretation, the words "then you shall live and multiply" in verse 16 are part of the detailed account of the "good," and not part of the detailing of "life" (and not as it is according to Rashi). There is no difficulty with this: On the contrary, the Torah deliberately uses the word *chayim* in two adjacent verses (15 and 16) in two different senses: the "life" **about which you are commanded,** life the content of which is loving God and doing His commandments, is what **bestows upon you as a reward** "life" – real existence which also has continuity.

This ambiguity is repeated in verse 19:

Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed.

The "life" which you are commanded to "choose," according to Targum Yonatan, is "the way of life, which is the Torah." If so, "that you may live, you and your seed," is the reward for choosing the way of life and the Torah about which you are commanded. The reference is to real life, parallel to "that you shall live and multiply" in verse 16.[[13]](#footnote-13)

3. The next interpretation that we will present for verse 15, that of the Ibn Ezra, differs from its two predecessors. It does not see the pairs of words life/good and death/evil as pairs denoting cause and effect, but rather as pairs of parallel terms that are close in meaning:

(15) "Life" – longevity; "good" – wealth, bodily health and honor.

And "death" and "evil" – the opposite.

According to this interpretation, the main function of the verses that follow (16-18) is not to detail verse 15, but to complete what is not stated in it: What will bring you blessing, life and good - this is completed by the first half of verse 16:

In that I command you this day to the love the Lord… and that you keep His commandments and His statutes…

Only the second half of the verse - "Then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you" – goes back and repeats the reward mentioned in verse 15. This is what the Ibn Ezra says about this detailing:

"That you may live" – this is the explanation of "life" [which in verse 15, the Ibn Ezra explained as "way of life")

"and multiply" – this is the explanation of "good," for it denotes material increase with sons and with wealth.

In similar fashion, verse 17 **completes** verse 15: What will lead to "death" and "evil": "But if your heart turn away, and you will not hear, but shall be drawn away, and worship…." Only in verse 18 do we find a detailing of "death" and "evil." Once again here are the words of the Ibn Ezra regarding this detailing:

(18) "You shall surely perish" – this is an explanation of "death" and "evil," for they will perish, they and their children, and their wealth.

4. To complete the picture, we shall present a **fourth** possible **explanation,** which is the opposite of that of the Ibn Ezra, but which, like that of the Ibn Ezra, see the words "life" and "good" as two parallel terms that are close in meaning: "Good" is "doing good" (as it was understood by Rashi), and "life" is life with fitting content – life that involves doing good (as it was understood by the Aramaic translation attributed to Yonatan). Similarly, "death" and "evil" denote a life of doing evil, empty of content and purpose, and therefore like death.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The verses that follow (16-18) begin with a detailing of the "good" and of the worthy "life" about which you are commanded, and **they add** that such life has reward: "that **you shall live** and multiply" – the real life of you and your seed – "and the Lord your God shall bless you…."

Verse 17 details the acts that are defined as "death" and as "evil," and verse 18 **adds** that these acts bear punishment.

Even though we do not find this interpretation in the words of the commentators (perhaps we did not work hard enough to find it), it seems that this interpretation accords best with the wording of Scripture, and it will serve as the basis for our explanation of the rest of the oration.

**V. The interpretation of verse 19 according to the various commentators cited above.**

From the discussion in the previous section, it follows that both according to the second interpretation, that of the Aramaic translation, and according to the fourth interpretation, that we proposed on our own, the root *chet-yod-heh* that appears twice in the first part of the oration, in verses 15-16, is used in two different senses: The "life" in verse 15 is the life **about which you are commanded –** a life of loving God and walking in His ways, whereas the verb, "that you may live," in verse 16 refers to real life, existence, which is the **reward** for the first life.

Let us consider the other four instances of the root *chet-yod-heh*, all of which appear in the second part of the oration, in verses 19-20, and incidental to that we will explain that part of the oration and the need for it.

First, we must explain the first part of verse 19:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day,

that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse.

Does this verse repeat verse 15? The answer to this largely depends on the way we interpreted verse 15.

It stands to reason that the words "life and death" in verse 19 should be understood in the same way that these words are understood in verse 15, each commentator in accordance with his own understanding, for in both of these verses it is stated about life and death that "I set them before you."

But the words "blessing and curse" are new. Regarding these words there is no room for interpretative doubts: The blessing and the curse clearly belong to the recompense that a person receives for his actions, and not to a demand that is made of him. One who explained the words "good" and "evil" in verse 15 as referring to the recompense (reward or punishment) for a person's actions, that is to say, **the Aramaic translation** and the **In Ezra**, will identify the "good" with the "blessing" and the "evil" with the "curse." These commentators will have to explain why verse 19 replaces the terms "good" and "evil" with the similar terms "blessing" and "curse," and why the order in verse 19 is different from that in verse 15, why it does not say "that I have set before you life and the blessing, death and the curse." In any event, according to those commentators, verse 19 repeats verse 15, with minor changes for the sake of variation, but the content is the same. The difficulty with the doubling in our oration is difficult according to their explanation, and added to it is the difficulty with the changes, which seem to be superfluous, in verse 19 in comparison to its parallel, verse 15.

Rashi, who explained "life" in verse 15 as referring to real life, which is a reward for one who does "good," will have to explain that verse 19 is **restricted** in its scope and in its statement in relation to verse 15: "Life and death," according to him, necessarily parallel "the blessing and the curse," that is to say, both the first pair in verse 19 and the second pair in it relate to **recompense,** and not to any demand made upon man. If so, while verse 15 presents both the demand made of man and his reward ("if you do good, you will have life, and if you do evil, you will have death"), verse 19 presents only the reward: "I have set before you the blessing-life and the curse-death."

True to his approach, Rashi also interprets verse 20 in this way: "'Therefore choose life' – choose for yourself the good recompense, the blessing." But this interpretation is difficult: Is it necessary to command a person to choose what is good for him and what he would pursue in any case? Surely all living things choose life and flee from death! What novelty is there here then? This is Rashi's answer:[[15]](#footnote-15)

"Therefore choose life" – I show you these in order that you may choose the portion of life. It is like a person who says to his son: Choose you a good portion of my estate, and sets him in the best portion, saying to him: Choose you this. And concerning this it is stated: "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot" (*Tehilim* 16:5) – You place my hand on the good lot, saying: Choose this.

It is difficult to see in this exposition a resolution in keeping with the plain meaning of the text of the difficulty in the command to choose life. Apart from this, Rashi's explanation raises two additional difficulties: First, as stated, not only does verse 19's repetition of verse 15 not add anything new; it is more restricted in scope. Second, the difficulty raised by the Netziv in his *Ha'amek Davar* commentary (see section III) – how can the command, "therefore choose life" be justified by the argument, "that you may live"' – is difficult according to Rash's explanation, but since Rashi did not comment on the words, "that you may live," we do not know what he would answer about this.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**VI. The interpretation of verse 19 according to the fourth explanation**

According to the interpretation we proposed at the end of section IV, the meaning of verse 19 is different. As may be recalled, this interpretation sees verse 15 exclusively as an expression of the moral demand made of man (and not of the reward or punishment for his actions). Before you are set "life and good" – the two constituting a single entity, life the contents of which is doing good; and "death and evil" – life that involves the doing of evil and therefore is considered like death.

The verses that follow (16-18) **spell out in detail** what is life that involves doing good and **add** what is the good reward for it. They also detail and add with respect to death and evil.

We will now consider verse 19: The words "life and death" in this verse can be understood as they were understood in verse 15 (as is the case also according to the other explanations) – that is to say, life of doing good as opposed to life void of doing good which is like death. However, verse 19 adds also "the blessing and the curse" – and these, of necessity, are the recompense for "life and death." That is to say, the "life" which man is commanded to live leads to the "blessing," whereas "death" as an expression of renouncing the commandments of God leads to the "curse." It turns out that verse 19 **adds** to verse 15 what is not stated therein, but is stated only in the continuation – in verses 16-18, that the way of "life and good" brings man "blessing" ("that you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you…"), whereas the way of "death and evil" brings upon man "curse" and doom ("you shall surely perish"). Or in other words, verse 19 is not a repetition of verse 15, but rather a short and concise summary of the entire first part of the oration – of verses 15-18!

But what need is there for this summary of verses 15-18 in verse 19? Does this summary add anything that was not stated in the previous verses? It seems that it does not. This summary was stated only for the sake of the continuation of verse 19:

Therefore choose life, that you may live…

This amazing command does not appear in the first part of the oration. There we find two paths between which man must choose, each path leading to certain results. The paths that are set before man, together with their necessary results, are presented in a seemingly objective manner: they are the possibilities standing before you and these are the consequences, and it is up to you to choose between them. One who presents things in this manner is seemingly impartial to what you will choose, but he wants you, the chooser, to know and understand what you have chosen and what the consequences of your choice will be.

The same is true also in the first part of verse 19, which is nothing but a summary of the previous part of the oration.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is at this point that the *Sifrei* (*Re'eh* 53) expresses the feeling that we are trying to express, that the presentation of the two paths with their consequences for man to choose between them may seem objective and impartial:

Since it is stated: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse," Israel might say: Since God set before us two paths, the path of life and the path of death, we will go in the path which we choose!

Therefore the verse states: "Therefore choose life."

God is not impartial to Israel's choice, but rather He strongly desires that they should choose life, that they may live! Human choice is indeed in man's hands, but it is also of clear interest to God, who bestowed upon man free choice, but reveals how He wants man to exercise his choice.

Now we must clarify the words: "Therefore choose **life,** that **you may live."**

The noun "life" in the first part of the sentence means a life of doing good, about which you are commanded (as it does in verse 15 and at the beginning of verse 19). Regarding such life, it is appropriate **to command:** "Choose"!

The reason for this commandment – "that you may live" – means: "that you may exist in the world, you and your seed" – life in the plain sense. If so, the relationship between the meaning of the root *chet-yod-heh* in its first two appearances in verse 19 ("I have set before you life and death… therefore choose life") and in its third appearance in the verse ("that you may live") is the same as the relationship between the meaning of the word "life" in verse 15 and the meaning of "that you shall live" in verse 16 which immediately follows it: the relationship between the life that you are commanded to live and the life that is given to you in reward for doing so.

It should also be noted regarding verse 19 that God's desire that you should choose life – "therefore choose life!" - is not only because such life involves cleaving to God and performing His *mitzvot*, but also because such life bestows upon you, the chooser, life in its plain sense. "That you may live" is not only a promise of reward, but also an expression of God's desire that man whom He created should live, as He is "the king who desires life":

*Yechezkel* 18:23: Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? Says the Lord God;

and not rather that he should return from his ways, and live?

**VII. The interpretation of verse 20**

We must still clarify verse 20 which concludes our oration:

To love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him;

for that [*hu*] is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers….

The first part of this verse seems to begin in the middle of a sentence. What are the words that need to be mentally filled in before the words: "to love the Lord your God"?

In the second part of the verse one may ask: To what does the pronoun *hu,* translated here as "that," refer, and what is the meaning of the words "your life" – "life" in the first sense, i.e., the life that you are commanded to live, or perhaps "life" in the second sense, i.e., the life and existence that are given to you as a reward. These two questions seem to be interconnected.

"Your life" in verse 20 is life in the plain sense - "your existence," for the phrase that follows, "and the length of your days," explains "your life," and both are life and length of days as you dwell in the land which God swore to your fathers. Thus, everything that is stated in the last part of the verse is part of the reward that is given to one who fulfills the demand in the first part, "to love the Lord, etc."

Accordingly, it is difficult to accept the Ibn Ezra's interpretation that the word "*hu*" alludes to God. Such an interpretation is appropriate for "life" in the first sense – life of devotion to God. But "life" refers to the existence that is given to you as a reward. More appropriate then is the first explanation offered by the Ibn Ezra:

"For that is your life" – in the opinion of the commentators, this refers back to "the voice of the Lord."

That is to say, obeying the voice of God, about which you were commanded in the first part of the verse, is what will bring you to "your life and the length of your days."

Aharon Mirsky, in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary, offers an even better interpretation:

It may be suggested that the word *hu* refers back to all that is stated above: "to love, etc." For *hu* can refer to the overall matter, even if it was not mentioned by name… as in: "That [*hu*] is what I spoke to you" (*Bereishit* 42:14).

Let us now go back to the first and seemingly truncated part of verse 20. The words that need be filled in will become clear if we set verse 20 below verse 19 in the following manner:

19: Therefore choose life… that **you may live**, you and your seed

20: to love the Lord your God … for that is **your life** and the length of your days

"The life" that you are supposed to choose – what does that mean? "To love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him"; and "the life" that will be given to you and to your seed in reward for your choosing – what does that mean? "The length of your days, that you may dwell in the land."

**VIII. Summary**

The time has come to offer clear answers to the questions that we raised in section III of this study.

We asked there about the guide word - the root *chet-yod-heh* - whether it is used in only sense in our oration, or in different senses. It has become clear that the root is used in our oration in two senses: the one, the life about which man **is commanded** – "life marked by the fear of heaven and the fear of sin," and the other, life that is man's reward – "long life, life of peace, life of good, life of blessing" (from the blessing of the month).

We further asked, why does this root recur in this oration only six times, and not seven times, as is usually the case with guide words in Scripture. The following table of the appearances of this root will help us answer this question:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| "Life" about which man is commanded1. 15: See, I have set before you this day **life** and good… | "Life" as a reward2. 16: …then **you shall** **live** and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land…  |
| 3. 19: …that I have set before you **life** and death4. therefore choose **life** | 5. 19: that **you may live,** you and your seed6. 2O: for that is **your life,** and the length of your days |

This table clarifies the equality that exists between the appearances of the guide word in the one meaning and its appearances in the other meaning, three and three. This equality stems from the essential connection between the two meanings: life in the first meaning – which the person accepts as a demand made upon him – leads to life in the second meaning - as a reward for the way of life he accepted upon himself. In the first part of the oration this finds expression in the fact that verse 16 completes the first part of verse 15; in the second part of the oration the demand of man that he live a life of Torah and *mitzvot* appears in two adjacent phrases in verse 19, and afterwards comes the reward: life in its plain sense also in two phrases.

The number seven is a valuable typological number, in which (or in its multiples) most of the guide words in the Bible were cast. But the disadvantage of this number is that it is not even. Where the Bible wishes to emphasize a guide word in two meanings or in two contexts between which there is numerical equality, it will do so with six or eight instances of the guide word. The oration that is the subject of this study is an example of such a case.

To conclude this discussion let us note that the use of the same root, the same word, to describe the demand made of man and to describe the reward that he receives for complying with this demand – "life" – is meant to teach us that there is no real gap between the two meanings of this word: Man's real existence – **his life,** does not exhaust itself in the fact that he breathes and that the biological processes that characterize living things take place inside him. Human life is worthy of being called life only when they bear meaning. And this meaning, which bestows upon man's physical life the name "life," is found on the two sides: both in the demand of man to devote himself to God and fulfill His commandments, and in the reward that he receives – continuity in future generations, and a blessed existence in the land that God has given His people.

In the continuation of section III we asked about the duplication regarding the content of the oration. We have already seen that this is not redundancy, but a deliberate structuring of the oration, whose message is given in two stages: the first part of the speech presents the two paths set before man, with their respective consequences, as an objective proposal subject to the free choice of each person.

Such a presentation serves as a rhetorical ploy in Yehoshua's oration in *Yehoshua* 24:14-15 and in Eliyahu's oration on the Carmel in I *Melakhim* 18:21. In our oration it is not a ploy as in those orations, but rather a basic stage in the presentation of the idea of free choice, which is the main idea in our oration.

At the beginning of the second part of the oration, there appears in great brevity, a summary of the first and larger part of the oration, in order to complete the idea of free choice and to elevate it: God does not look with impartiality from the sidelines at man's free choice, but rather He instructs him to choose life, in its two meanings. In no way, of course, does this interfere with the person's freedom of choice; it is merely an expression of God's desire and caring to benefit him. An expression of this desire of God, that man should choose life, together with an expression of His 'helplessness' to force him to do so, come together in the amazing verse in which God says to Moshe:

*Devarim* 5:26: **Oh that** they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me, and keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!

\*\*\*

During this period of forgiveness and mercy, during which our *parasha* is read, most of our prayers revolve around "life." Most of the additions that we add to the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer during the Ten Days of Repentance revolve around this:

Remember us for **life**, O King who desires **life,** and inscribe us in the book of **life,** for your sake, the **living God.**

Who is like you, O merciful Father, who remembers his creatures for **life** with mercy.

And inscribe for a good **life** all the members of Your covenant.

In the book of **life**, blessing and peace… let us be remembered and inscribed before You… for good **life** and peace.

In the *Selichot* for the eve of Rosh Hashana there is a long *piyyut* with twenty-four stanzas, in which each of its stanzas opens with the word "life" and concludes with a verse containing the word "life," which closes the stanza.

Our oration is represented in that *piyyut* in two stanzas: The second stanza concludes with the verse: "See, I have set before you this day life," and the seventeenth stanza concludes with the words, "Therefore choose life." But one who examines the stanza reveals that the *paytan* reverses the direction of the call: It is not God who commands man: "Therefore choose life," but rather man who calls out to God:

As You apportion wars and peace, fear and panic,

plenty and famine and trembling, life and death,

blessing and curse,

may You choose life!

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. See our study of *Parashat Pekudei*, first series, *Ma Bein Parashat Vayakhel le-Parashat Pekudei*, section I; our study for *Parashat Bechukotai*, first series, "*Parashat Behar u-Bechukotai* – *Siyumam ha-Meromam shel Sefer Vayikra*, section I; our study for *Parashat Tazria-Metzora*, second series, and note 1 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ed. Davidson, Assaf, Yoel, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 364-365. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "They are: *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, *Tazria-Metzora*, *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*, *Behar-Bechukotai*." The practice described by Rav Saadya does not recognize the joining of *Parashot Matot* and *Mas'ei.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Tosafot* in tractate *Bava Batra* 88b, s.v. *ukilelam* cite two such explanations:

1. Rabbi Nissim Gaon explains that *Vayelekh* is separated from *Nitzavim* when there are two Shabbatot between Rosh Hashana and Sukkot which are not Yom Tov, even though it is a short *parasha*, and *Matot* and *Masei* are joined, even though they are longer, because we want the year to end with its curses, for there are curses in *Nitzavim*, and we do not wish to introduce the rebuke for the previous year in the coming year.

2. Rabbeinu Yitzchak explains that we always read *Nitzavim* before Rosh Hashana, in order to separate between the curses of last year in *Ki-Tavo* [only those curses are considered curses, but not those found in *Parashat Nitzavim*] and the coming year.

According to Rabbeinu Yitzchak, the need to separate between *Parashat Ki-Tavo* and Rosh Hashana with a separate *parasha*, i.e., *Parashat Nitzavim*, necessitated that the *parasha* be divided into two in certain years, in order to fill up another Shabbat in addition to the Shabbat on which *Parashat Ha'azinu* will be read (for *Parashat Ha'azinu* is not suited for division). Rav Nissim Gaon's explanation, on the other hand, already touches upon the complex content of *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh*, and attributes its division to this complex content, which we will discuss below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the differences between these two orations concerning the covenant and the need for the two of them, see our study for *Parashat Ki-Tavo*, second series, section III. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. An analysis of these verses is presented in our study for *Parashat Nitzavim*, first series. At the beginning of that study we demonstrated that these verses belong, in terms of their content and style, to the oration in chapter 28. They were, however, brought after the oration in chapter 29 in order to conclude the two orations that foresee destruction and exile with words of consolation. See our study for *Parashat Ki-Tavo*, second series, note 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The covenant oration in chapter 28 is preceded by the passage 26:16-19 (which serves as a solemn conclusion for the orations concerning the *mitzvot*, but at the same time constitutes and introduction to the oration concerning the covenant), and also by the passage 27:9-10. At the beginning of chapter 29, vv. 1-8, there is a section of an oration that comes to close the blessings and curses in chapter 28, and it serves as a divider between the two orations concerning the covenant.

At the end of the covenant oration in chapter 29 (9-28) comes the same conclusion with words of consolation of the orations concerning the covenant – 30:1-10 – that which we mentioned above and in the previous note. In addition, the covenant orations conclude with two short passages: 30:11-14 – a description of the closeness of the *mitzvot* to those fulfilling them and the easy possibility of performing them; 30:15-20 – freedom of choice between good and evil and between blessing and curse and the command to choose life. This concluding oration is the subject of this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This was noted by the Ramban in his commentary to 11:29 (s.v. *venatata*), in his explanation of verses 26-28): "This [v. 26: 'Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse'] means that I set before you **the way** to a blessing and **the way** to a curse. And the meaning of 'before you' – that you shall choose from among them what you desire. And He informed them [in the continuation, in verses 27-28] that you will have the blessing when you observe the *mitzvot*, and the curse – if you do not observe them. **This is like what He said further** [in chapter 30]: **'See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.'"** [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Therefore he says there (verse 29): "And it shall come to pass, when the Lord your God shall bring you into the land where you go to possess it, that you shall set the blessing upon Mount Gerizim, and the curse upon Mount Eival," the reference being to the command appearing in 27:11 and on. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In both orations there is a lack of correspondence between the conditional statement promising the blessing, which opens with the word "*asher*," and the conditional statement in which the Torah threatens a curse, which opens with the word "*im*." Nechama Leibowitz dealt with this lack of correspondence in her study for *Parashat Re'eh* (*Iyyunim be-Sefer Devarim*, pp. 121-125). Among other explanations, she cites the words of Rabbeinu Bachye ben Asher: "He does say about the blessing *'im* you shall hearken,' as he says about the curse… because '*im*' is a term of uncertainty, and he did not want to use it in connection with a good matter, but in connection with punishment he uses a term of uncertainty. Therefore he writes regarding the blessing *'asher you* hearken,' which is a term of certainty." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As stated, *Parashat Vayelekh* and *Parashat Ha'azinu* belong to another division of the book of *Devarim*, and do not constitute a literary continuation of *Parashat Nitzavim* which concludes the orations concerning the covenant and the earlier orations in the book of *Devarim.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The repetition of the guide word of a literary unit in the Bible seven (or a multiple of seven) times is a prominent phenomenon in all the literary genres found in the Bible, and has been clearly proven with a great number of examples in the commentaries of Cassuto and Benno Jacob. In our studies, we too have brought many examples of the phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this Aramaic translation the words "that you may live" are rendered as "that you may live in the life of the world-to-come," but nevertheless they are understood as the **reward** for choosing life, in the first sense of the word "life." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This borrowed use of the word "death" in this sense accords with what *Chazal* have said (*Berakhot* 18b): "The wicked in their lifetimes are termed 'dead.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. a. These words of Rashi are a free adaptation of the words of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha in *Sifrei Re'eh* 53. The changes are so many and so significant that this explanation can be seen as the words of Rashi himself.

b. Other commentators have tried to solve the problem by interpreting the imperative language, "therefore choose life," as a suggestion (thus Rav Saadya Gaon and apparently also the Ibn Ezra, and so too the Ramban in his commentary to verse 15, whose remarks were brought at the end of section II). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Netziv's objection is difficult even according to the Ibn Ezra's interpretation. The Ibn Ezra explains the words, "that you may live," but his words do not appear to answer the question. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Already at the beginning of v. 19, there seems to be a new tone of "caring": "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day." [↑](#footnote-ref-17)