



SHELACH

"LIVE FREE OR DIE" IS WHAT G-D WANTS

The Watershed Moment When Truly Choosing G-d Was Born

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Shelach

Moses sends twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Forty days later they return, carrying a huge cluster of grapes, a pomegranate, and a fig, to report on a lush and bountiful land. But ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than we”; only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered, as G-d has commanded.

The people weep that they’d rather return to Egypt. G-d decrees that Israel’s entry into the land shall be delayed forty years, during which time that entire

generation will die out in the desert. A group of remorseful Jews storm the mountain on the border of the land, and are routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

The laws of the *menachot* (meal, wine, and oil offerings) are given, as well as the mitzvah to consecrate a portion of the dough (*chalah*) to G-d when making bread.

A man violates the Shabbat by gathering sticks, and he is put to death.

G-d instructs us to place fringes (*tzitzit*) on the four corners of our garments so that we should remember to

fulfill the *mitzvot* (Divine commandments).



Is it better to practice
Judaism because G-d
wants you to or
because you want to?

Is there another way?

TEXT 1

Exodus 6:8

וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יְדֵי
לָתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם, לְיִצְחָק, וְלִיעֲקֹב. וְנָתַתִּי
אֹתָהּ לָכֶם מִוְרֶשֶׁה, אֲנִי ה'.

And I will bring you to the land that I promised to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And I will give it to you as a heritage; I am G-d.

TEXT 2A

Deuteronomy 1:22

וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כְּלִכְם וַתֹּאמְרוּ נִשְׁלַחְהָ אַנְשִׁים לְפָנֵינוּ
וַיַּחְפְּרוּ לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשִׁבוּ אֵתָנוּ דְבָר. אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר נֵעֲלֶה בָּהּ וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר נָבֵא אֵלֵינוּ.

And you all approached me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word about the route we should ascend and the cities we should approach.”

TEXT 2B

Numbers 13:2

שְׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי
נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Send for yourself men who will scout the land of
Canaan that I am giving to the Children of Israel.

TEXT 2C

Rashi, ad loc.

"שְׁלַח לָךְ." לְדַעְתְּךָ. אֲנִי אֵינִי מְצַוֶּה לָךְ, אִם
תִּרְצֶה שְׁלַח.

“Send for yourself.” According to your own understanding. I am not commanding you [to send]; if you wish, send.



For
yourself –
I leave it up
to you.

QUESTION

1. Sending the spies led to disastrous results. Why didn't Moses take G-d's hint and decline to send them?
2. If Joshua experienced the folly of the spies firsthand, why did he send out spies himself, years later?



Do we have
free choice?

TEXT 3

Talmud, Berachot 33b

ואמר רבי חנינא, הכל בידי שמים
חוץ מיראת שמים.

Rabbi Chanina said, “All is in
the hands of G-d except for
fear of G-d.”

Every step in life follows G-d's preordained script for the universe.

Our moral choices, however, are entirely up to us.



TEXT 4

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Shaar Hayichud
Veha'emunah, ch. 1*

לְמַעֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, שֶׁהוּא יֵשׁ מֵאֵין, וְהוּא פָּלֵא גְדוֹל יוֹתֵר מִקְרִיעַת יַם סוּף עַל דְּרֹךְ מִשְׁלַל. שֶׁהוֹלִיךְ ה' אֶת הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַמַּיִם, וַנִּצְבּוּ כְּמוֹ גֵד וּכְחוֹמָה. וְאֵילוּ הַפְּסִיק ה' אֶת הָרוּחַ כְּרָגַע, הָיוּ הַמַּיִם חוֹזְרִים וְנִיגְרִים בְּמִוֶּרֶד כְּדֶרְכָם וְטָבְעוּ, וְלֹא קָמוּ כְּחוֹמָה בְּלִי סִפְק. . . שֶׁהָרִי חוֹמַת אֲבָנִים נִצְבֶּת מֵעֲצָמָה בְּלִי רוּחַ, רַק שֶׁטָּבַע הַמַּיִם אֵינּוּ כֵן.

The Creation of heaven and earth from absolute nothingness is more wondrous than splitting the Sea of Reeds. In that case, G-d directed an easterly wind to blow through the night, and the waters split and stood upright like a wall. Had G-d suspended the wind for even a moment, the waters would have immediately flowed downward, as is their pattern and nature. They would certainly not have stood upright like a wall. . . . Stone walls stand upright without the support of the wind, and the nature of water is different.



TEXT 4

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Shaar Hayichud
Veha'emunah, ch. 1*

וְכֹל שֶׁכֵּן וְקֵל וְחוֹמֶר בְּבְרִיאת יֵשׁ מֵאֵין, שְׁהִיא לְמַעַלָּה מִהַטָּבַע, וְהַפְּלֵא וְפְלֵא
יוֹתֵר מִקְרִיעַת יַם סוּף. עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה שְׂבִהַסְתְּלִקוֹת כֹּחַ הַבּוֹרָא מִן הַנְּבִרָא
חַס וְשְׁלוֹם, יָשׁוּב הַנְּבִרָא לְאֵין וְאֶפְסֵי מִמֶּנּוּ. אֵלָּא צָרִיךְ לְהִיּוֹת כֹּחַ הַפּוֹעֵל בְּנִפְעָל
תָּמִיד, לְהַחֲיוֹתוֹ וּלְקַיְיֵמוֹ.

Creation is a greater wonder. To create something from nothing defies the laws of nature. It is much more miraculous than splitting the Sea of Reeds. It follows that the withdrawal of the Creator's power from the created thing, G-d forbid, would certainly cause the created thing to revert to nothingness. Rather, the Creator's power must be continually present in the created being to give it life and ongoing existence.

TEXT 5

Deuteronomy 30:15; 19

רֵאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב,
וְאֶת הַמָּוֹת וְאֶת הָרָע . . . וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים.

See, I placed before you today, the life and the good, the death and the bad, . . . and you should choose life.

QUESTION

Why does G-d pull off the impossible just to give us free choice?



TEXT 6

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 12, p. 73*

הכוונה בדירה בתחתונים הוא שהתחתונים, מצד ענינם הם, יהיו לו דירה יתברך. ולכן צריך שהדירה תיעשה על ידי העבודה דנשמות ישראל המלובשות בגופים, כי דוקא אז נעשים התחתונים דירה לו יתברך.

מה שאין כן אם הדירה הייתה נעשית מצד הגילוי דמלמעלה, הרי אז התחתונים עצמם, מצד ענינם הם, לא נעשו דירה לו יתברך.

When G-d expressed a desire for a home in the lower realm, He wanted the lower realm to choose to become a home for Him. To accomplish this, it is necessary that the home be created [not just] by Jewish souls [but by souls] vested in physical bodies. Only then is the home built in the lowest realm.

If G-d were to build His home through us by compelling us to build it, we—creatures of the lowly realm—would not become a home for G-d on our merits.

ANSWER

G-d grants us free choice in order for us to build Him a dwelling place from our own initiative.



TEXT 7

*Rabbi Yitzchak
Ginsburgh, Mivchar
Shiurei Hitbonenut, pp.
168-169*

הבחירה החפשית אצל היהודי אינה מצטמצמת אך ורק לתרי"ג מצוות . . . אלא אדרבה עיקר הבחירה שלו זה . . . דוקא לגבי דברים שהוא עושה לדעתו, כלומר בלי מצוה.

ואם כן היהודי הוא בעצם בוחר, הוא בוחר בבחירה חפשית . . . כאמור, בחירתו החפשית של היהודי מודגשת ביותר בדברי ברשות שלו.

The range of our free choice is not limited to the 613 commandments. . . . On the contrary, our primary freedom of choice is exercised with mundane choices: things we do of our own volition without being instructed to do so.

In these areas, we make the choice with complete freedom, . . . for, as we said, our free choice is primarily emphasized in the context of prosaic choices.



When we train ourselves to think like G-d, we carve out a space for Him in our minds and hearts, and in our everyday lives.

TEXT 8

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sefer
Hasichot 5748:2, p. 494*

ענינו פון חודש סיון (חודש השלישי)
איז מתן תורה (מלמעלה). און אויך די
קבלת התורה וואס אידן האבן מקבל
געווען, איז אין אן אופן ווי אידן
שטייען לעבן הר סיני, און הערן די
דברות ויי זיי קומען מלמעלה, פון
אויבערשטן.

מה שאין כן ענינו פון חודש תמוז
(דער חודש וואס נאך קבלת התורה)
איז ווי אידן גייען אוועק פון הר סיני
און הויבן אן זייער עבודה בכח עצמו.
צו מאכן די וועלט פאר א דירה לו
יתברך, לויט די הוראות וואס זיי האבן
מקבל געווען פריער ביי מתן תורה.

The third Hebrew calendar month, the month of Sivan, is marked by G-d giving us the Torah from Above. Even our reception of the Torah is [inspired from Above]. We stand [proverbially] near Mount Sinai and receive the commandments as they descend from Above, from G-d.

The following month's theme, Tamuz, marks the Jews journeying away from Mount Sinai and initiating the worship of G-d from below. We begin to transform the world into a home for G-d according to the instructions we received earlier at Mount Sinai.

Sivan



Choice influenced by
G-d's instruction

Tammuz



Making choices
on our own

TEXT 9A

Lucy Dawidowicz, The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 63

In . . . most prewar European states . . . Jews became members at birth of a legally constituted and officially defined Jewish community having governmental status. A Jew could take his leave from such a community only by submitting a formal petition to the municipality; upon approval, the petitioner was then classified as a “nonbeliever.” In Poland, where the Ministry of Religion did not recognize “nonbelievers” as a category, the only effective way of withdrawing from the Jewish group was through conversion.

But America, as they say, is different. Here, group membership is considered strictly a private matter, and non-identification with the Jewish group involves no communal penalty or public sanction since it requires no public declaration of disaffiliation (as in Weimar Germany, for instance, where the local Jewish communities, informed by the municipality of Jewish withdrawals, used to publish notices in the newspapers under the heading *Austritte aus dem Judentum* [“Official Withdrawals from Judaism”]).

TEXT 9B

Jeffrey Gurock, "From Exception to Role Model: Bernard Drachman," American Jewish History 76:4 (1987), pp. 465–466

Although [early American rabbis] preached to anyone who would listen of the Jew's obligation to observe the Sabbath, of the necessity to provide children with a comprehensive Jewish education, and of the community's responsibility to monitor and to supervise the provision of kosher meat, etc., they lacked the power to coerce their parishioners. In open America, no ecclesiastical power could mandate religious observance. No tithe could be enforced to support institutions. And in an unregulated free enterprise system, anyone could open a butcher shop, sprinkle sawdust on the floor, paint the words "Basar Kasher" on the window, and declare himself an authorized slaughterer and overseer of meat preparation.

In a place of
religious freedom,
we can choose G-d
authentically.



TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sefer
Hasichot 5749:2, p. 538*

כשהקדוש ברוך הוא אמר למשה, שלח לך, לדעתך, אני איני מצווה לך, אם תרצה שלח, הרי לא זו בלבד שמשה לא חשש שיש כאן ענין בלתי רצוי, אלא אדרבה, שמח על החידוש שבדיבור זה.

שעבודת המטה תהיה באופן של בחירה חפשית לגמרי, ללא הכרח דציווי הקדוש ברוך הוא, כי אם מדעתו ורצונו של האדם. שיהיו מתאימים מעצמם לרצונו של הקדוש ברוך הוא.

G-d told Moses, “Send for yourself, according to your understanding. I am not commanding you; if you wish, send.” At this time, not only was Moses not concerned that sending spies might be inappropriate, but on the contrary, he rejoiced over the novelty of this instruction.

Going forward, Jews would be able to worship G-d with absolute free choice, without requiring Divine instruction at every turn. Rather, the Jew would [be trusted to] figure out G-d’s will by aligning their mind with G-d’s will.

ANSWER

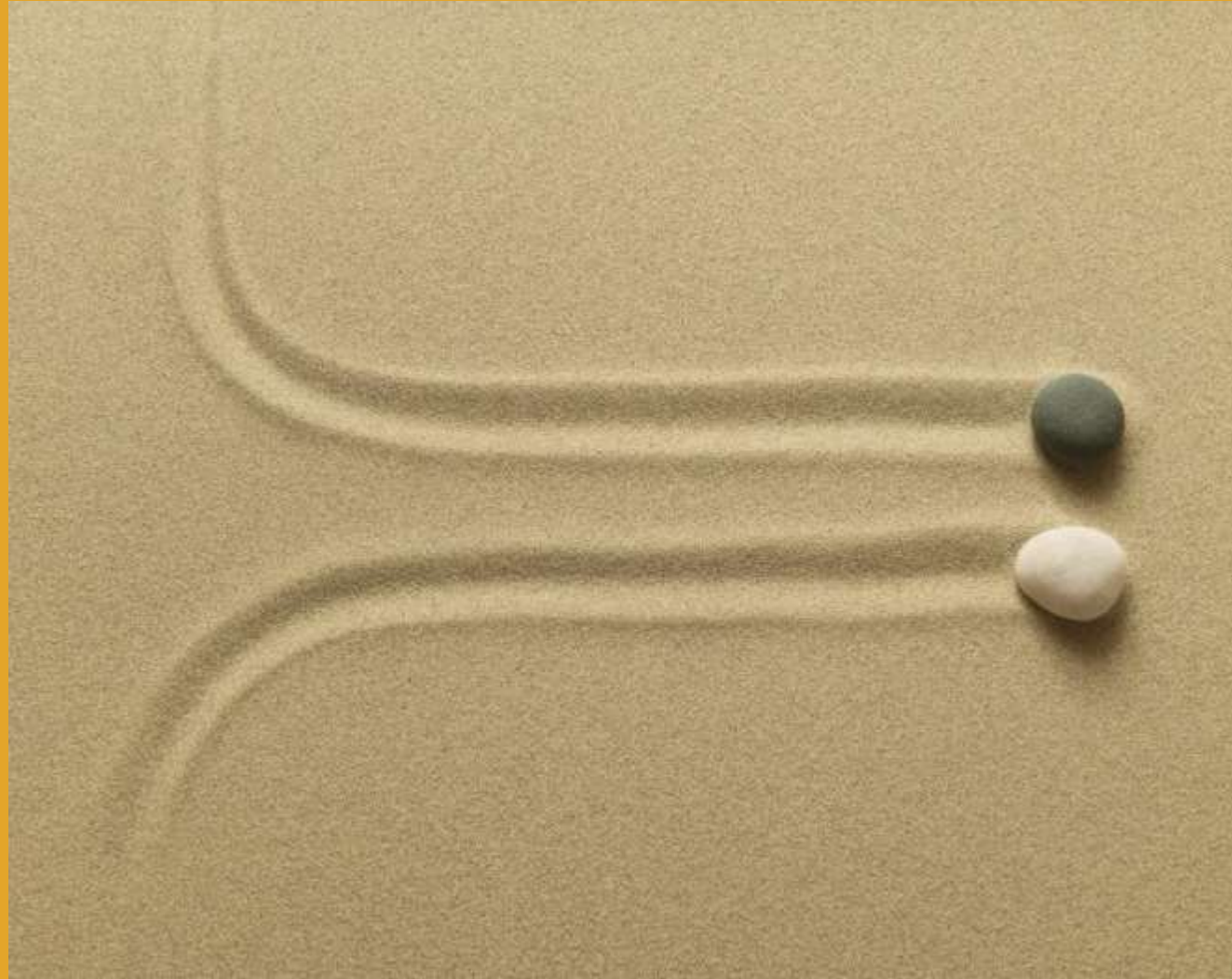
1. Moses rejoiced at the first chance to exercise free choice. His spies, however, did not align their free will in accordance with G-d.
2. Joshua's spies returned with an honest, uplifting report of the land.

TEXT 11

Talmud, Taanit 29a

בְּעֶשְׂרִים וְתִשְׁעָה בְּסִיּוֹן שָׁלַח מֹשֶׁה
מֵרַגְלִים.

The spies were sent on the
twenty-ninth day of Sivan.



28 Sivan

- Moses exercised free choice for the first time to send the spies.
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe arrived in the United States.

TEXT 12

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak
Schneersohn, Igrot
Kodesh 2, p. 497*

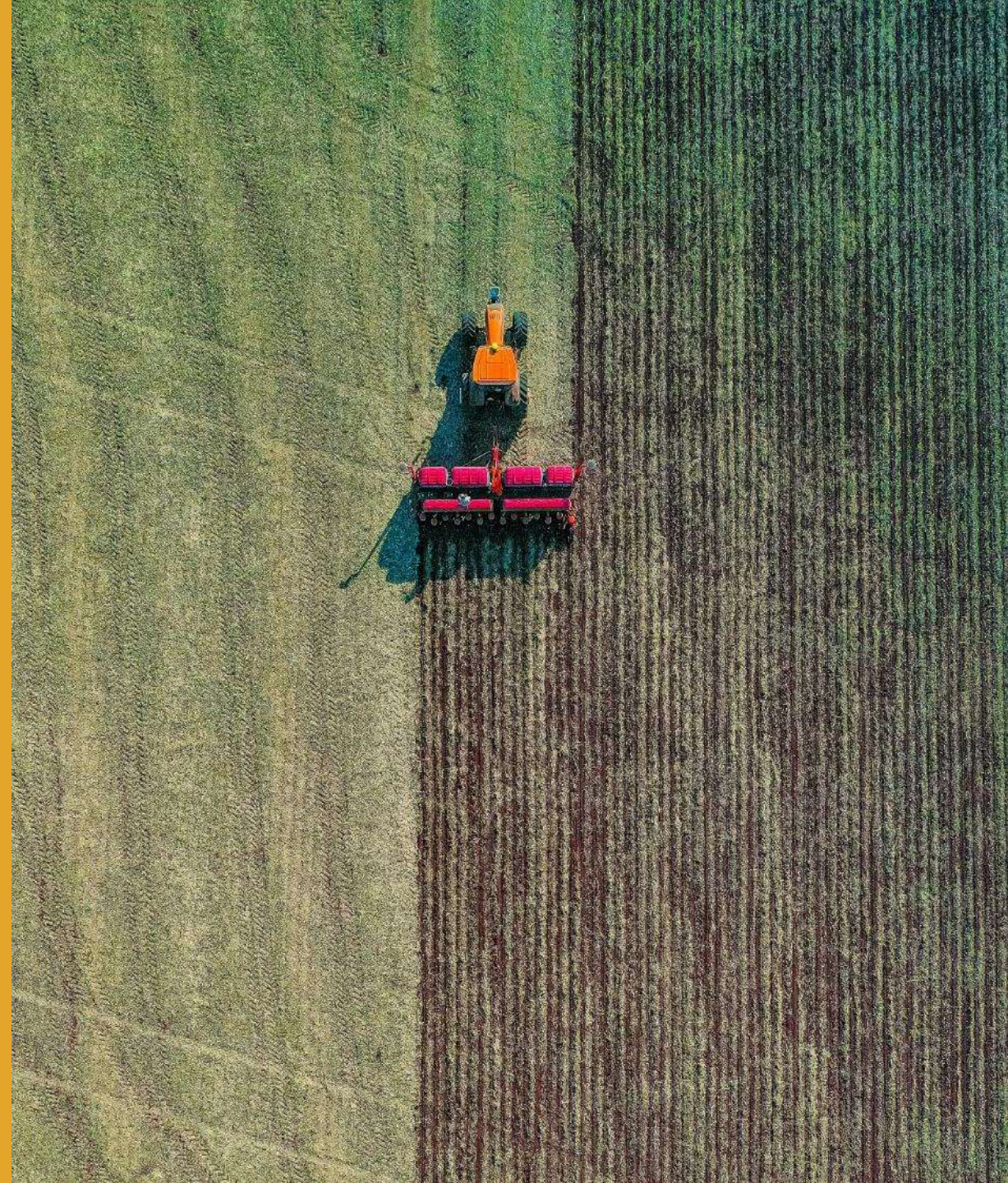
דמלא כל הארץ כבודו בשני חצאי הכדורים בשווה, אלא
שחצי זה הוא אשר בשטחו הוא ארץ ישראל, עשר
קדושות, מקום המקדש, ומעמד הר סיני הוא מעולה יותר.

G-d's glory fills both hemispheres equally. However, G-d's glory is experienced with a higher degree of revelation in the hemisphere that hosts the Land of Israel, with its ten centers of holiness, including the Temple Mount and Mount Sinai.



In the “lower hemisphere,” religion is authentic and organic, and G-d feels at home.

We are sent by
G-d to make our
corner of the world a
better place.



TEXT 13

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sefer
Hasichot 5748:2, p. 496*

ווי מ'האט א ציווי. . . צו טאן א שליחות
מסויימת אין הפצת היהדות והפצת המעיינות
חוצה, פאדערט זיך אז. . . זייענדיק א בר דעת,
זאל אליין צולייגן זיין שכל און אויסזוכן די
וועגן, און בעסטע וועגן, ווי צו מקיים זיין די
שליחות. . . צו אפשאצן דעם מצב פרטי,
געפינען די ריכטיקע אותיות ווי ער זאל מיט
דעם צווייטן אידן רעדן, וועלכן ספר, קונטרס,
ער זאל מפיץ זיין, וכיוצא בזה.

. . . די זאכן וואס ער קען און דארף אליין
פארשטיין, דארף מען עם ניט זאגן ווייל דאס
איז מובן מעצמו.

. . . ועוד ועיקר, דאס וואס מ'זאגט אים ניט
אלע פרטים בנוגע קיום השליחות, איז עס א
זכות פאר עם. בכדי צו מזכה זיין אים אז ער
זאל מקיים זיין די שליחות בכח עצמו.

As sentient beings, . . . we must use our
intelligence to determine the best methods of
fulfilling our particular mission to spread
Judaism and its wellsprings to the outside. . . .
[We are expected to] assess the dynamics of
our situation and find the most effective words
and tone of voice in which to communicate,
and to determine which books to recommend,
which materials to use, etc. . . .

We do not need to be instructed about details
we can assess independently, details that are
self-understood. . . .

Most importantly, we are not provided with
detailed instructions about our mission for our
benefit—so as to enable us to fulfill our
mission on our own initiative.



The ideal way to serve G-d is to align our desires with what G-d wants.

KEY POINTS

1. The doctrine of continual creation makes it impossible to have free choice. Yet, G-d miraculously gives us free choice on matters of morality.
2. G-d does this because a key part of His desire to have a home in the lowly sphere is that people of the lowly sphere build it. This can only happen if we have free choice.
3. The first time Jews utilized free choice was when Moses sent the spies. This was a watershed moment in Jewish history.

KEY POINTS

4. Throughout the years, the range of free choice was limited by community and other factors. Today, free choice is at its peak. Thus, it is only here and now that our Jewish practice is authentic and organic.
5. The Lubavitcher Rebbe came to America, the center of free choice, on the very day of the calendar that the spies were appointed. He utilized the freedom of America to spread Judaism around the world.

