

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Nitzvaim

Life Work

הָעֵדוּתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמְּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה
וּבַחֲרֹתַי בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּבְחַרְתָּ אֶתְּךָ וְזָרַעְךָ:

*I call heaven and earth to witness to you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.
Choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.*

[Deuteronomy 30:19]

COMMENTARY: One of the Talmud’s favorite questions is “what does that mean on a practical level?” Grand principles are inspiring, but the tradition wants to know how we are supposed to live out these principles in our everyday lives.

So when the Torah says, “choose life,” the rabbis want to know just how we are supposed to do that. One interpretation is contained in the teaching below:

תני רבי ישמעאל: "ובחרת בחיים" -- זו אומנות.

Rabbi Yishmael taught: *Choose life* – That refers to teaching your child a craft.

[Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:7/61a]

QUESTIONS: Rabbi Yishmael taught that choosing life means ensuring that your children will have the means to make a living. Why do you think he equates vocational training with life?

Beyond the ability to put food on the table, are there other ways in which work can equal life?

Finally, why does Rabbi Yishmael interpret the verse as an obligation to teach one’s children a craft? Why not an obligation for every individual to learn some marketable skill? Is there some way in which training one’s children to be able to work is a form of “choosing life?”