

The Longer Shorter Way

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: "Once a child got the better of me."

"I was traveling, and I met with a child at a crossroads. I asked him, 'which way to the city?' and he answered: 'This way is short and long, and this way is long and short.'

"I took the 'short and long' way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: 'My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?' Answered the child: 'Did I not tell you that it is also long?'"

(Talmud, Eruvin 53b)

Also in life there is a "short but long" way and a "long but short" way.

In his *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi sets down the fundamentals of the Chabad-Chassidic approach to life. On the cover page of this "Bible of Chassidism" he defines his work as follows:

"[This book is] based on the verse, '**For [the Torah and its precepts] is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it**'-- to explain, with the help of G-d, how it is indeed exceedingly close, in a long and short way."

The Torah and its commandments (mitzvot) are the Creator's blueprint for creation, detailing the exact manner in which He meant life to be lived and His purpose in creation to be fulfilled. But is a life that is ordered by Torah indeed feasible? Can the ordinary "everyman" be realistically expected to conduct his every act, word and thought in accordance with the Torah's most demanding directives?

The Torah itself is quite clear on the matter: "*For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven... nor is it across the sea... Rather, it is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it.*" Torah is not an abstract ideal, a point of reference to strive toward, but a practical and attainable goal to achieve.

But how? In the *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman develops the Chabad approach -- a holistic approach to life in which the mind and intellect play the leading and pivotal role. First, a person must study, comprehend and meditate upon the quintessential truths of existence: the all-transcendent, all-embracing, all-pervading reality of G-d; the root and essence of the soul and its intrinsic bond with its Creator; man's mission in life, and the resources and challenges that are

3 September | 25 Elul

Parashat Netzavim-Vayelech
Shabbat Begins: 7:28 pm
Shabbat Ends: 8:29 pm

extended to him to fulfill it. Since these concepts are extremely subtle and abstract, one must toil "a toil of the soul and a toil of the flesh" to grasp them and relate to them.

The next step of this approach is to translate this knowledge and comprehension into emotional feelings. Because of an innate superiority of the mind over heart that the Creator has imbued in human nature, the understanding, assimilation and meditation upon these G-dly concepts will compel the development of the appropriate emotions in the heart: the love and awe of G-d. "Love of G-d" is defined by Rabbi Schneur Zalman as the unquenchable desire to cleave to Him and be unified with His essence; "awe of G-d" is the utter abhorrence towards anything which erects barriers between Him and man.

Finally, when a person has so oriented his mind and so transformed his heart, his observance of the Torah's precepts becomes not only possible, but a compelling need. He craves the fulfillment of the mitzvot with every fiber of his being since they are the bridge between him and G-d, the means -- and the only means -- by which he can connect to his Creator. And any transgression of G-d's will, no matter how attractive to his material nature, is literally revolting to him, since it disrupts his relationship with G-d and runs contrary to his own true self.

But a person may argue: Why spend a lifetime pursuing this demanding regimen of mind and heart? Why must I toil to understand and feel? Why not take the direct approach -- open the books and follow instructions? I'm a simple Jew, this person may maintain, and the attainment of such lofty spiritual states as "comprehension of the Divine", "love of G-d", and "awe of G-d" are way beyond my depth. I know the truth, I know what G-d wants of me -- the Torah spells out the do's and don'ts of life quite clearly. I have a material and egocentric nature? An inborn inclination towards evil and self-destructive desires? I'll control them. My faith, determination, and willpower will do the job.

This, however, is the short but long way. As the most direct and simple line between two points, it is misleadingly the surest way to town; but in truth, the direct approach is a dead end. As with the route which Rabbi Yehoshua first chose, it seems to lead straight to the city -- only somehow it never quite makes it. For it is a path of never-ending struggle, the scene of perpetual duel between the self-oriented animal soul of man and his upward-reaching G-dly soul. True, man has been given free choice and furnished with the necessary fortitude and spiritual staying power to meet his every moral challenge; but the possibility of failure, G-d forbid, also exists. No matter how many times he will triumph, tomorrow will bring yet another test. On the short and long road one may win battle after battle, but there is never a decisive victory in the war of life.

On the other hand, the long but short way is winding, steep, tedious, and long as life itself. It is full of ups and downs, setbacks and frustrations. It demands every ounce of intellectual and emotional stamina the human being can muster. But it is a road that leads, steadily and surely, to the aspired-to destination. When one does finally acquire an aptitude and intellectual taste for the G-dly, when one does develop a desire for good and abhorrence for evil, the war has been won. The person has transformed himself into someone whose every thought, deed and act is naturally attuned to his quintessential self and purpose in life.

The content in this page is produced and copyrighted by www.chabad.org.

3 September | 25 Elul

Parashat Netzavim-Vayelech
 Shabbat Begins: 7:28 pm
 Shabbat Ends: 8:29 pm