

ויהי איש אחד מצרעה ממשפחת הדני ושמו מנוח ואשתו עקרה ולא ילדה.

מדרש: הרשעים קודמים לשמים, "נבל שמו", "גלית שמו", "שבע בן בכרי שמו". אבל הצדיקים שמם קודמם: "ושמו אלקנה", "ושמו בועז", "ושמו מרדכי", "ושמו מנוח".

To understand this Midrash, let us begin by contrasting two very different figures.

The first is Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist and activist, who became a cult figure whose funeral was the largest ever seen in France.

The second – להבדיל – is R' Eliyohu Eliezer Dessler, who came out of the Mussar tradition of Kelm, who founded the Gateshead Yeshiva, who served as mashgiach in Ponovizh, and who was a pioneer in blending Lithuanian Mussar with קבלה and חסידות.

Sartre's central teaching was this: Man is radically free to make absolutely any choices he wants; to accept any set of moral values he chooses; to be anything he chooses. But most people are afraid of that freedom, and cling to the roles society assigns to them. A person actualizes himself by raising his consciousness; by realizing how many choices he has.

So a person grows by realizing he has greater and greater freedom of choice, and by freeing himself more and more from outside constraints.

Let us set that side by side with one of the lessons taught by R' Dessler: נקודת הבחירה, *the pivot of free choice*.

We are free in the moral choices we face, but the level of the choices that present themselves to us differs for each person.

A person who grows up in a family of gangsters – has בחירה whether to become a murderer or not; his בחירה pivots around that choice. But the choice of whether or not to be a צדיק is remote from him, it is beyond his level of בחירה.

For the greatest צדיקים, their נקודת הבחירה is inconceivably exalted, between doing מצוות with less or more מסירות נפש, between less and more radical חסד etc.

A person grows by moving his or her **בחירה נקודת** incrementally upward. Each choice **ל טוב** internalizes moral behavior, and makes possible, little by little, a higher level of **בחירה**. That is the **אורח חיים למעלה**, **למשכיל**, the path upward.

These are really two exactly opposite conceptions of human self realization. For Sartre, self realization means multiplying choices, so that we become more and more free of constraint. For R Dessler it means internalizing certain constraints so that we can go on to higher and more rarified levels of moral agency.

Sartre encapsulated his philosophy in the slogan: *being precedes essence*. Meaning – first you exist, and then you decide – freely, and without reference to anything outside of you – who and what you want to be.

Contrast that slogan with how R' Dessler explained the Midrash with which we began: **צדיקים שמם קודם להם, רשעים הם קודמים לשמם**.

R' Dessler explained that a person's name represents the mission for which **רבש"ע** sent him or her to this world. **צדיקים** accept that mission, and seek to fulfill it. So **שמם קודם להם**; their name, i.e. their mission – what they are called upon to be – comes first. But **רשעים קודמים לשמם** – they choose to be whatever they want, they don't accept any morality or constraint outside themselves.

*The being of **רשעים** precedes their essence.*

R' Dessler is teaching us a very deep philosophy here, of which Sartre had no conception. Sartre was looking for a philosophy of absolute freedom and self-realization, and he thought to find that in total rejection of all constraint. But **חז"ל** tell us that **שעוסק בתורה** **אין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתורה**; that real self-realization comes about through realizing one's divine potential as a **צלם אלקים**, though an understanding that **שמם קודם להם**, **צדיקים שמם קודם להם**, and that we find ourselves through knowledge and acceptance of what the **רבש"ע** wants of us, and by rising to that challenge.