

Choice

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There are several covenants, contracts between God and Israel in the Torah. But this final one includes a new idea, that of choice. "I am giving you the choice to accept a covenant, I am making with you and all future generations...You may think you are blessed (if you do not want to accept this contract) and be in peace, for I am only following my heart's desire (free will)." That looks like a reasonable deal. But then the Torah goes on to warn such a person that abandoning God will have awful consequences. Is there not a contradiction between the right to choose and the threat of disaster of the choice is a wrong one?

The Torah, given its age and context, presents God to us as a positive source of love and on the other hand as an authority. A parent, combining love and authority. We may bridle at the idea of an authority telling us what to do. But is this not how all parents have to function? Everyone knows one's child will have the freedom to make his or her own choices to some degree. How often do children indeed rebel against their parents? Parents may know the consequences of giving a child freedom, of imposing no constraints, of not trying to argue against decisions. So, we say to kids, "it is your choice but I warn you. It is not going turn out so well." Sometimes parents are wrong. But very often children regret the lack of guidance from parents as much as getting too much, later in life.

Thousands of years ago, as today, the challenge is between having standards and values as opposed to self-indulgence and no constraints. The value systems are the ones that we are being asked to choose and fight for. Because, as the saying goes "No Pain, No Gain."