

Bereshit 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/14/17

It might have slipped past your radar, but the Nobel Prize for Economic Science was awarded this past Monday to Richard Thaler, who is Jewish and was born in East Orange, New Jersey. He teaches and does research at the University of Chicago. Professor Thaler is one of the pioneers in Behavioral Economics, a theory that has come to have great influence in recent years. Behavioral Economics teaches that emotions change economic patterns. People don't always make rational decisions when they spend their money, even when it is not in their own best interest. "Standard" economics has always been based on the idea that people will do what is best for themselves. But if you have ever found it impossible to pass up a good sale even if you're low on cash, bought something you don't need just because it was a "good deal," or refused to pay for an overpriced drink even when you're really thirsty, you have upended traditional economics and proved Professor Thaler's point. We don't always make decisions rationally.

Marketing experts have long known this to be true. The more enticing something is and the more accessible it is, the more likely it is that the product will be purchased, even if it's not good for you. Putting healthier foods on lower shelves and junk food at eye level will increase the sale of junk food even though we know it's not good for us. We don't always act in our own best interest. And that's exactly what happens in the Garden of Eden in this week's Torah portion. Gd says to the first man, "You can eat from whatever trees you want, except for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, for as soon as you eat of it you will die." But then the snake comes and challenges the woman and says, "You are not going to die. As soon as you eat it your eyes will be open and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad." And you know what happens next. Even though they know it's not good for them, the temptation is too great, and the apple is too enticing, so they grab it and eat it.

What puzzles me here is that they eat from the Tree of Knowledge and NOW know good from bad. Really?! The first couple already knew right from wrong and good from bad! They knew they were doing something wrong. That's why when Gd calls them out on it they are ashamed. So what "good and bad" did they learn from eating of this tree? And, what can we learn from this story? The Torah tells us that their eyes were now open. What exactly did they see that they had not seen, or noticed before?

I think they learned that there are two sides to decision making. One is thoughtful, reflective and deliberate, and the other is impulsive, quick, and emotional. And the metaphor used in the Torah is one to which we can all relate, namely eating. Lack of thinking time, habit, and poor decision making mean that even when presented with a factual analysis on healthy eating, for example, we are still likely to pick a burger and chips, or a cookie and soda, or whatever junk is lying around. You could construct some powerful arguments about how an obesity epidemic is leading to more diseases such as Type II diabetes and coronary heart conditions. You could put large red traffic light signs on unhealthy foods in the supermarket and engage in expensive public information campaigns warning that overeating products high in salt, sugar and fat can reduce life expectancy, but all of that will rarely stop most of us. But that does not mean that we cannot do something about it. We too can, with eyes wide open, make better decisions, even on the fly.

What Professor Thaler won the Nobel Prize for was "Nudge Theory," which means that we can nudge ourselves and others in the right direction just as easily as marketers can nudge us toward the things that are not so good for us. Nudge Theory is based on the simple premise that people will often choose what is easiest over what is wisest. Tests have indeed shown that putting healthier foods on a higher shelf increases sales. The food is more likely to be in someone's eye line and therefore "nudge" that person towards the purchase - whether they had any idea about the obesity argument or not.

What did the first couple learn from eating of the tree? Gd tempted the first couple so that they would learn how to better deal with temptation; that temptation, and emotion, are both a large part of our daily decision making process. We are all prone to temptation and to taking the easiest path forward. So what do we do? We can learn to fight temptation OR we can make the easy path the better one. Obviously, we need to do both. We need to be able follow through on our convictions. Period. We really do. But we also need to acknowledge the insight into human nature that the Torah teaches us this week and make the right choices also the easy choice.

Using Professor Thaler's theories, supermarkets started putting salad bars in central locations because they knew people would feel good about making healthy choices, especially if they were easy. They started putting free healthy snacks for kids by the front door because it was both easy and healthy and made customers feel better about their shopping experience. They made it easier for people to follow through on their good intentions. They nudged them in the right direction.

But of course this is but one way in which the Nudge Theory can be used. In nearly every aspect of our lives, we will choose those things that are most accessible to us, that are being done by our peers. The principles that define us will help us to choose what is right from wrong, but surrounding ourselves with easy choices to do what is good, for us and for others, will help us to live the kinds of lives that Gd has intended for each of us. So I ask you, what can you do in your own life that will make it easier for you to do the right thing with the least amount of will power? Unlike the very first couple, we don't need to be ashamed of our human nature. We can learn to make the right thing also the easier thing and feel good that we are bringing together both sides of our Gd given human souls - the side that is guided by thoughtful principles, as well as the side that is guided by impulse and emotion. The moral of the story is that Gd gave us both for a reason, and we can indeed make the most of both.