

## The Choice Point: A Process of Conflict Engagement and Spiritual Growth

Rabbi David Jaffe

The idea of The Choice Point (Nekudat Behira) was developed by Mussar master Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and builds on the centrality of Free-will to Judaism. According to Rabbi Dessler we only have real free choice at the point where our sense of what is true and real is evenly balanced by temptation and irrational forces that pull the other direction. This perspective is important for conflict engagement because, when in conflict people often don't feel like they have any choice. "You leave me no choice but to X" "You pushed me up against the wall and now I have to Y." The Behira Point practice helps see that we always do have choice.

Rabbi Dessler uses the image of two armies facing each other to illustrate the Behira point. One army represents irrational temptations and the other clear thinking and a sense of reality. Many of our actions are deep within one territory or the other and are not necessarily subject to real behira. For example someone raised in a respectful, kind home will not have a battle with his conscience whether or not to push his way ahead of older people to get on a crowded bus. Waiting his turn is a rote, automatic behavior ingrained by parents, educators or his previous choices. However, this person may have a live choice whether to take extra time to help an old woman get on the bus with all her bags and risk losing a seat. This is the point where the "truth as he knows it" (it is good to help elders) meets temptation and self-deception (I want to make sure I get a seat for me because if I don't I'll be tired for my next activity). According to Rabbi Dessler, we grow with our choices. When we choose in the direction of our clear thinking and reality it is easier to think clearly in this area next time. When we choose toward irrationality, it becomes harder the next time to think clearly in this same area. This process of becoming more attuned to, and able to act on, our sense of reality, is synonymous with spiritual growth.

*Here is an example from my own life from a conflict I used to have with my wife that illustrates the Behira point. I am a Modern Orthodox Jew and my wife is traditional, but not Orthodox. When we met I was not yet Orthodox and became more observant after we got married. When it came time to send our children to elementary school I felt strongly that they go to the Modern Orthodox school. My wife wanted to consider the liberal Jewish school. The choice of school became a symbol for our different religious visions for ourselves and our family. We both felt anger, self-righteousness, resentment, desperation and despair with each other at various points during the process. "These are my children!" well, "These are MY children!" When we would get into these arguments I felt compelled to respond defensively. After all, the future of my children's Jewish identity was at stake as I associated being in a traditional environment with maintaining a commitment to pass on Judaism to the next generation. An intense fear of assimilation gripped me in these moments and it was difficult to think clearly or have any perspective. I did not have a live choice in the heat of the conflict to respond more openly. As Rabbi Dessler writes, my thinking in those moments was deep in the territory of patterned emotions of fear.*

*The real choice point for me was the day or week earlier. I know it is true that my wife and I love each other and share so many values, including wanting our children to live committed Jewish lives and not assimilate. However, I feel a pull to dominate and impose my particular religious views. I have a choice to try to dominate or to negotiate and trust the love and what we do share in our vision for our family. That is a live choice. When I think about it and let myself notice both the deep desire to impose my will, a desire that grows out of fear, and the love and trust we have, I own that I actually have a choice. I am not "pushed up against the wall with no options." Owning my behira is empowering and gives me a shot at a better resolution than we would get to if we both just tried to impose our will on the other. Noticing*

*this behira point away from the heat of an argument, I decided to proactively engage my wife in a planning discussion where we shared our visions and searched for common ground. I did not really want to have this difficult conversation but I could tell it was the right thing to do. I had a live choice.*

We don't have a live choice about every aspect of a conflict, but there is always at least one point where we have choice. We need to identify that point and grow from there.

Exercise:

Identify a current conflict in your life. This can be an inner conflict, a conflict between you and another person or a conflict in one of your communities. It can be a conflict that you are actively dealing with right now or something that flares up once in a while.

- In what ways do you feel like you “have no choice” about how to behave?
- What is an actual behira/choice point for you in this conflict. This is the point where, “the truth as one knows it” is balanced with self-deception and irrational temptations. Journal or meditate about this choice point.

During the 9 Adar week try to notice, “What choice do I actually have in this conflict?” Try to choose toward your best thinking.

Rabbi David Jaffe is the founder and principal of the Kirva Institute and the Spiritual Advisor at Gann Academy in Waltham, MA. His teaching, organizing, writing and consulting explore the intersection of moral-spiritual development and ethical action in the world. He is writing a book on the spiritual foundations of social change.

For opportunities to learn more about practices like the Behira/Choice Point and how they contribute to constructive conflict please visit [www.kirva.org](http://www.kirva.org).