

**Yom Kippur Morning**  
*October 12, 2016 – 10 Tishre 5777*

What does it mean to make choices? What is the nature of personal responsibility?

Our Torah reading this morning begins to answer those questions. But even our Torah reading is based on having made a specific and informed choice. We follow Reform precedent established in 1894. The traditional reading for Yom Kippur morning is from Leviticus 16, where the High Priest Aaron and his sons receive their instructions for performing the cultic rites for Yom Kippur. At the time, the Reform Jews had – as many of us still have – difficulty relating to this traditional passage.

In its place, in 1894 until today, our Reform movement chose to read passages from the book of Deuteronomy (29:9-14 and 30:11-20), stressing the doctrine of personal responsibility based on informed decision-making. Rabbinic tradition teaches us that the gift of Torah endows us with two tasks: first is the task of learning Torah, and then we are charged with the difficult but necessary task of making decisions based on our study of Torah. Torah is understood as a blueprint for what to and what not to do *and* it is up to us to make use of this wisdom; it *is* within our grasp, as our text says: “[This Torah] is not in heaven... No, it is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, and *you* can do it.” This assertion, that it is each person’s responsibility to walk in God’s ways, cannot be delegated to others.

Our text then turns to the choice that our responsibility entails: “I have set before you life and death, blessing or curse; choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live.”

What does it mean to be able to choose?

To be *able* to choose is to be *free* to choose.

And freedom lies at the heart of human experience.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, existential philosopher of mid-twentieth century, "...freedom is what sets human beings apart from all other kinds of objects. Other things merely sit in place, waiting to be pushed or pulled around... Animals mostly follow the instincts that characterize their species... But as a human being," he continues, "I have no predefined nature at all. I create that nature through what I choose to do. Of course, I may be influenced by my biology, or by aspects of my culture or my personal background, but none of this adds up to a complete blueprint for producing me... I am always a work in progress." Sartre always looked forward: One must keep moving, creating what will be – acting in the world and making a difference to it...

One must keep moving, creating what will be through choices to be made – thereby acting in the world *and* making a difference to it. There is a strong sense of freedom in the instruction to keep moving, which could affect one's decision-making in a less than positive way; but that kind of decision-making is tempered as one seeks to live one's life as a moral agent – in making a *positive* difference in the world.

And what about those choices! Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by the sheer number choices that come before us.

Barry Schwartz, an American psychologist, has explored the role choice has in our lives. In his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, he posits that having too many choices can be a bad thing. He does not say that *choice* is a bad thing; choice is indeed good, it can be liberating. But, the problem occurs when the number of choices we have grows out of proportion, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. From this point on, choice does not liberate, but debilitates.

One of the most famous scenes in Lewis Carol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* occurs when Alice meets the Cheshire Cat, known for that mysterious smile that continues to hang in the air after the cat very slowly disappears. Alice asked the cat for directions:

*“Cheshire Cat,” she began rather timidly... “Would you please tell me which way I ought to go from here?”*

*“That depends a great deal on where you want to go,” said the Cat.*

*“I don’t much care where,” said Alice.*

*“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.*

This simple scene says a lot. If we do not care where we are going in the journey of life, then it does not much matter which path we take... which choices we make. On the other hand, if we do care, then we will try to find our way to the proper path by making thoughtful and informed choices.

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I have sat with a number of people over the years. Many have been confronted with some very difficult situations which called for some very difficult choices to be made. I have come to see that *how* a person makes difficult choices is based on what they have experienced and their view of the world. Some of their choices have been heroic. Some of them wish they could have made different choices, and are living through their consequences. And some make choices that have put them in a position of “swimming against the current”, but wanting to make a positive difference, they continue at it over, and over again.

“Block 18, Row P, Plot 53, next to my husband...” These were the instructions Ruth Schochet gave me when she had heard from her oncologist that the medical treatments she was receiving were no longer effective for her. She asked that I be the one contacted by her assisted living facility when the time came, and that I then call the funeral home here in Cleveland and New Jersey to set her final arrangements in motion. That was December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014; Ruth was told she had about six months to live.

We are urged by our text to “choose life” – but there is a time when we come to a point when preparing for the end of life is our next step.

And yet... What we do with that remaining time is also a choice.

For Ruth, it was to continue to be as independent as possible. She continued to read her many mystery books. She continued to enjoy visits from her family and friends and former students. She continued to support our congregation, and made an extra effort to support Phase 1 of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Building Renovation and Improvement fund-raising. And she continued to celebrate the Jewish year as best she could. We read the Book of Esther together on Purim, with Ruth sounding the gragger at each mention of he-who-shall-not-be named. We lit the Chanukah menorah together with her daughter and grandchildren visiting from Israel... reciting the blessings and singing the songs with the electric menorah glowing in the window of her living room. And we talked and remembered. Ruth chose to live her life as best as she could on her terms, as independently as possible, and as Jewishly as possible. She passed away this past July, not six but *sixteen* months after she received her prognosis from her doctor. *Zichronah liv'rachah* - May her memory be for a blessing.

“Block 5. Cell 10. Bed 2.” This was the description Joe gave me of where his room was in prison – the Marion Correctional Institute in Marion, Ohio. I went to the prison last May with a group of fellow rabbis of Reform congregations from around the state of Ohio. Our intent was to meet with prisoners, listen to their stories, and discuss amongst ourselves the prospects of prison reform and what we could do to move it forward in a positive way here in Ohio.

That morning we did meet with prisoners. They shared their stories with us. They shared poetry and songs they had written. They recited soliloquies from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in preparation for the annual prison Open House, where they would be performing “Hamlets” – and the role of Hamlet would be performed by a variety of inmates.

What I heard that was most moving was from Joe, who had been sentenced to prison for killing someone in a robbery gone wrong. The first thing he said was, “I know what I did was wrong, and I am here to do my time...” In terms of *teshuva*, he had been able to acknowledge what he had done, and was willingly making restitution for his actions – as best he could.

The second thing Joe told me continues to haunt me. Joe spoke about growing up and getting in with the wrong crowd. And then he said, “I didn’t hear that I was smart until I got to prison...”

“I didn’t hear that I was smart until I got to prison...” Joe was in his forties. It took that long for someone to tell him he had potential... that he could learn and be successful?

I heard this and thought of the power and responsibility of parenting and of teaching. I thought of how important it is to acknowledge the potential in each young person. And I thought of how a positive self-image can be life-enhancing and life-changing. And how this affects the choices one makes...

Section number 6. Column number 3. Line number 4. In July, I found myself standing in front of the Viet Nam War Memorial Travelling Wall in Middleburg Heights. For so many people standing around me, the hot summer air hung in silence. Before us are the names of all those who had been called and chose to serve. It was hard not to think of the choices they were called upon to make; choices that saved lives... at the cost of losing their own.

In August, I received a call letting me know that Iyad Burnatt was in town and he was very interested in sitting one-on-one with Jewish leaders and talking about his efforts as a Palestinian leader from the West Bank who organizes non-violent demonstrations against what he refers to as “the Occupation, the settlements, and the wall.” Just hearing him use the term “occupation” and I already think I know where he is coming from. Iyad’s brother is a filmmaker who,

along with an Israeli director, made the Academy Award nominated documentary: "5 Broken Cameras", which tells Iyad's story.

I saw this invitation as an opportunity for conversation.

I saw this invitation as an opportunity to hear another's point of view.

He came. We sat in Ratner Hall with two other congregants and two of his hosts while he was here in Cleveland. I prepared tea and cookies. And we talked.

What does it mean to sit face-to-face with and hear from someone who, daily, lives with hardship? His life is not an easy one. He has been arrested numerous times and held in Israeli prisons. But, after his release, back he comes in a renewed effort to make peace. Why? As he told us: To make a better future for his children – for all children. He has made the choice to choose life – to choose not to respond with violence and killing, but with words and conversation; to *work with* people rather than to terrorize them.

What a chance he is taking! We know too well the violent end of the spectrum. That is not where Iyad stands. He stands with peace.

It was not an especially easy conversation to have. But, I felt it was an important conversation to have. If I am teaching about how important it is to listen to other's points of view, how can I not do that myself? When you quiet yourself long enough to hear the voice of another, you cannot help but be changed in the process. It is an experience that broadens your perspective, and deepens your *own* understanding. And... it is a choice only *you* can make

*Anachnu nitzavim hayom* – We stand here this day... fully aware of the myriad of choices available to us each and every day of our lives. And, yet, ultimately, we are called upon to choose between that which is life-enhancing and that which is not.

Let us stand together... living our lives to their fullest.

Let us stand together... acknowledging that we are not perfect, yet we strive to be the best that we can be.

Let us stand together... in appreciation for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice in choosing to defend the ideals of democracy.

*Anachnu nitzavim hayom* – Let us stand together... opening ourselves to the exchange of ideas in the quest to broaden and deepen our own understanding.

It is my prayer that, knowing that we stand together, we move forward together to help move our world – from ourselves and our families, to our community, to our nation and beyond – to help move our world closer to *Shalom*: peace and wholeness.

The choice is yours.