



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
Kol Nidrei Adult Alternative Service 5776/2015
Choose Life So That You May Live: Shaping the Story of Our Lives

They are standing with their belongings packed, ready to go. They are at the end of a seemingly endless journey, and they are about to begin a new venture. They are excited, nervous, restless, and eager to get started. The person who has - until this point - been their guide, leader, and teacher has been speaking to them for some time. He reminds them of what they have experienced on their journey - both good and bad - and of what they must do in their new lives. They have heard most of this before, and they are tolerant of the old man, but a bit impatient. They want him to get on with it. Then - among the repetition of familiar rules and laws - comes a puzzling statement from their leader - a real head-scratcher:

“Choose life,” he says, “so that you may live—you and your children.”¹

Moses says these words to the Israelites, who are standing on the east bank of the Jordan River - poised to enter the Promise Land - at the end of an arduous forty year trek through the wilderness. After Moses leads the people out of Egypt, they receive God’s Torah and agree - in exchange for becoming God’s treasured people - to abide by the Torah’s teachings. Moses will not enter the Promised Land with them. He is old and about to die. Moses’ long speech - which makes up most of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah - reminds the Israelites of how they are to live their lives once they are a free people in their own land.

What did Moses mean by telling the people to “choose life so that you may live”? This not only states the obvious - the people **are** living and will live (God-willing) after they cross the Jordan - but it seems redundant. “Choose life, so that you may live.....”

It is fitting that these words are in the Torah portion that we will read on Yom Kippur morning. Just as the Israelites are beginning **their** new lives, we, too are at a beginning - of a new year. During these High Holy Days, from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, our task is to

¹ Deuteronomy 30:19

look deeply and critically at how we are living our lives. Through the process of *chesbon hanefesh* - literally, an accounting of our souls - we are supposed to ask ourselves challenging questions: Are we treating others the right way? Are we trying to make the world a better place? Are we living according to what matters most to us?

The work of the High Holy Days is to examine the way we are living, and to make the changes necessary to align what we **know** to be the right way to live with the **reality** of how we are living.

Yom Kippur, in particular, asks us to reflect on what we are **doing** with the great gift of our lives. Yom Kippur reminds us that life is finite. Yom Kippur gives us an entire day to think about what really matters and about what changes we must make so that we are living according to what is most important to us. What better time to think about what it means to choose life so that we may live?

Over the centuries, many people have been curious about what it means to “choose life so that you may live.” The medieval Torah commentator Abravenel, says that

“when we choose life, our choice should not be wholly dedicated to life on the material plane...life should mean more than that...life is not an aim in itself...the essence of ‘life’ lies in doing good deeds and cleaving to” God.²

Abravenel’s contemporary Sforno writes that choosing life “that you would live” means choosing what he calls real, true life. This means using what he calls our “transitory lives” to love God. We show our love for God by recognizing God’s goodness and greatness, which is manifest in the world. The way we live our lives, Sforno teaches, should show our appreciation for the goodness that God has set before us.³

Another clue to what it means to choose life “so that you may live” comes from the Talmud. At the end of our life, when we face the heavenly tribunal - the Talmud says - we will be asked a series of questions. The last two questions are as follows:

“Did you delve into wisdom?

² “Studies in *Devarim* (Deuteronomy),” p. 315, by Nahama Leibowitz. Haomanim Press, Jerusalem, 1996.

³ “*Torat Hayyim Chumash*,” p. 256. Hamakor Press, Jerusalem, 1993.

When you learned Torah, did you learn it deeply, and discern one thing from another?"⁴

While these questions are, on the face of it, about studying Torah, they are also about how we live our lives.⁵

*Did you delve into **wisdom**?* The Hebrew word for wisdom is *chochmah*, which here refers to the wisdom we gain through our life experiences. The Talmud is asking: As you go through life, are you reflecting on and learning from your life experiences - both good and bad? Are these reflections leading you to wisdom about your life and about the world?

*When you learned Torah, did you learn it deeply, and **discern** one thing from another?* The Hebrew word "discern" (*havanta*), describes our ability to analyze information objectively. Are we carefully evaluating the *chochma*, the wisdom we gain from our experiences and using it to make necessary changes in how we live?

This *chochmah* from Jewish tradition teaches us that choosing life so that we may live is about more than putting one foot in front of the other every day. It is about using the wisdom we gain as we go through life in order to guide our lives. Choosing life is about living according to what matters most to us.

Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen studies the ways in which human motivation changes over time. Dr. Carstensen found that, contrary to what we might think, people report more positive emotions as they age, and they find life to be more satisfying than when they were younger.⁶ Carstensen writes that these surprising results were **not** a by-product of life experience per se. They reflect the perspective that comes with aging: **the knowledge that our time on earth is finite and that we should focus on what really matters to us.**

Dr. Carstensen's research is described in the book "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End," by Dr. Atul Gawande.⁷ Dr. Gawande's book, which is a "must read,"

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.

⁵ "The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven: Reviewing and Renewing Your Life on Earth," by Dr. Ron Wolfson, pp. 80-81. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2009.

⁶ "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End," by Atul Gawande, p. 95. Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

focuses on the end of life. He raises important questions that can help us understand what it means to “choose life, so that we may live,” wherever we are in our lives.

Dr. Gawande notes that, as people age, they become less interested in achieving and accumulating, and “more interested in the rewards of simply being.”⁸ He writes: “...we have a deep need to identify purposes outside ourselves that make living feel meaningful and worthwhile.”⁹ “Life is meaningful,” Gawande teaches, “because it is a story.”¹⁰ We have a purpose in life that is bigger than ourselves, and bigger than our day-to-day existence. We frame this story through what he calls our “remembering self.”¹¹ Our “remembering self” wants to encompass “not only the peaks of joy and valleys of misery but also how the story works out as a whole.”¹² The chance to shape our stories, Gawande writes, is “essential to sustaining meaning in life.”¹³

In order to shape our stories, we must first figure out what story we want our lives to tell. In order to do that, we need to ask ourselves some key questions:

- What do we want to do with our lives?
- What goals are most important to us?
- What are our biggest fears and concerns?
- What trade-offs are we willing to make, and which ones are we not willing to make?¹⁴
- What is keeping us from making what is most important to us a priority in our lives?

These aren’t easy questions to ask, or to answer. Our lives, and the many spheres in which we live our lives - family, work, school, community - are structured in certain ways to keep us marching forward in a particular direction. We go from school to college to work to family to career, doing what is expected within an expected timeframe. The institutions of our society do not make it easy for us to reflect on these questions. The “system” in which we live

⁸ Ibid., p. 127.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 238

¹¹ Ibid., p. 239.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 243.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 234

does not make it easy for us to think about how we want to shape the story of our lives while we are living them.

We might look to the millennial generation for some guidance. According to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, millennials are the workers companies most want to attract and retain. Millennials, however, are the age group most dissatisfied with working conditions that demand long hours and doing the work of more than one person - a situation that has become all too common in the wake of the recession.¹⁵ What millennials want, according to recent research, is “flexibility in where, when and how they work.”¹⁶ They are willing to “take a pay cut, forgo a promotion or be willing to move to manage work-life demands better.”¹⁷

Lack of flexibility and lack of family time is one of the main reasons that millennials leave their jobs. One survey found that “nearly 40% of young workers, male or female, in the United States are so unhappy with the lack of paid parental-leave policies that they say they would be willing to move to another country.”¹⁸ Ours is the only advanced economy in the world that has no paid parental-leave policy.

Ryan Shaw, 23, doesn't have children, but he believes that work-life balance is not only important, but that it is “necessary for success.”¹⁹ Shaw liked his job, doing social media marketing for a start-up in LA. He was not happy, however, living far from his family in Florida. The high cost of living in LA made it difficult for him to pay off his college loans. Shaw received other job offers, but these required him to work more hours. Shaw told his boss he would stay with the company, but only if he could work from his laptop - wherever he happened to be. Shaw decided to move back home to Florida, to be closer to his family. He said:

“The narrative that's always drawn is you have to choose financial success or personal success [and] having a normal life. And to me, that's a false choice...I think you can have both. I'm sort of playing the long game. I want to take care of my health and have deep relationships with people I care most about. And not just people who happen to be in the same building with me every day.”²⁰

¹⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/millennials-want-a-work-life-balance-their-bosses-just-dont-get-why/2015/05/05/1859369e-f376-11e4-84a6-6d7c67c50db0_story.html

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Ryan's story is both inspiring and scary. There are some changes we cannot make to our lives, because of the realities of having to earn an income, and caring for children and elderly family members. How we think about and how we live our lives may change if we - or someone in our family -- have significant health concerns, or if we lose our job.

Our inertia and our fear of change also get in the way of making changes in how we live our lives. Choosing life so that we can live means that we must overcome our tendency to inaction. "Our sin," writes Rabbi Jane Kanarek, may lie not in "too much boundary pushing," but rather "in our hesitation to push ourselves to reach our imaginative possibilities."²¹

Yet change is what *teshuvah*—the process of returning to the right path, that is the focus of the High Holy Days -- is all about.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan writes that *teshuvah* is "the continual remaking of human nature" and a process through which we can achieve "progressive self-realization." *Teshuvah*, according to Kaplan, helps us repair our failure to realize "to the fullest degree the potentialities inherent in our natures...we all have latent powers for good, powers we do not summon to active use." Doing *teshuvah* properly can help us understand how we "waste our potentials" and how we can use our gifts not only for our own fulfillment, but for our society.²²

"Choose life, that...you may live." **These words command and compel us to recognize that our time on earth is finite, and that this time is a gift.** As Dr. Gawande's writes, we "may not control life's circumstances, but getting to be the author of your life means getting to control what you do with them."²³

How will we shape our stories in the coming year? Will we push past our self-imposed boundaries, the ones that prevent us from living lives that focus on meaning rather than on acquiring and striving? Choosing life, in the words of a Hasidic master, means

"You are forced to choose between the two, and cannot simply straddle the fence. You must choose your course, and the Torah advises, "Choose life."²⁴

²¹ Sh'ma, September 2008.

²² "A Torah Commentary for Our Times," by Harvey J. Fields, Volume III, p. 171. UAHC Press, New York, 1993.

²³ "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End," by Atul Gawande, p. 95. Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014.

²⁴ A teaching of the Ohel Yaakov, in: "Torah Gems," compiled by Ahraon Yaakov Greenberg. Translated by Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Himelstein. Volume III, p. 308. Yavneh Publishing House LTD., Tel Aviv, 1998.

The poet Mary Oliver writes:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?²⁵

Like our ancestors assembled on the banks of the Jordan River, we, too, are standing at a threshold. This year may we stop straddling the fence. This year, may we live according to what matters most to us. This year, may we be the authors of the story that **is** our “one wild and precious life.”

Amein

²⁵ “The Summer Day,” by Mary Oliver. From “New and Selected Poems, 1992
Beacon Press, Boston, MA Copyright 1992