

Choose Life
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Yom Kippur Morning 5769

“I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so you and your offspring shall live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19) This simple verse from our Torah portion speaks to the complexity of our existence. We live in a world where life and death co-exist, a world in which we encounter both blessing and curse.

Blessings include family and friends, health, sustenance, meaningful work, great books and music, breathtaking sunsets, chocolate, Peets coffee, a nap, a warm blanket, a hug.

And there are the curses – white chocolate, Folgers coffee, being woken from a nap. And there are true disappointments and frustrations - estrangement among family and friends, broken hearts, work that neither fulfills nor sustains us, unemployment, financial crises, failing health, aches and pains, loneliness.

The balance of blessings and curses are different for each of us. Sometimes we are in control. We can choose blessing or curse. But many times, blessing or curse chooses us. Life contains all of it, blessing and curse, birth and death.

What then does our Torah portion for today mean when it says, “choose life”? Who among us would choose death? Is it in our hands to choose life over death? What kind of choice is really set before us?

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld observes that “it is the conscious act of choosing that makes us alive.” The conscious act of choosing is what sets us apart as human beings. Animals react by instinct. As human beings, we look at the cards we are dealt and we reflect, we decide, we act, we choose to be present, we choose how to live.

I believe that this commandment is telling us to choose life even when we face death. “Choose life” is the message at the heart of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, our Torah reading and prayers invoke themes of death and rebirth. Fasting, contemplating our lives, and wearing white all remind us of our mortality. This holiest of days grants us space to reflect on how we make life-affirming choices in the face of life’s harsh storms.

Lately, I have been thinking about the profound power and difficulty of making life-affirming choices even in the face of death. This past year, our congregation has suffered many losses. We lost members of our community who lived long, full lives; they were spouses, parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents. We lost parents whose lives were cut short never to see their children venture into adulthood. We lost brothers and sisters. We lost young adults whose dreams went unfulfilled. And we lost a young child. I have

witnessed how we as individuals and as a community have struggled to choose life in response to death.

As a rabbi, I have the privilege of being present in all of life's moments. It is a joy to bestow a Hebrew name on a little one and to welcome a new life into the Covenant of the Jewish people. I value the opportunity to study Torah with our youth as they prepare to become *bar* and *bat mitzvah* and to bless them in front of the ark. I am honored to stand under the *chuppah* with two loving companions as they join in marriage. And I am humbled to stand with you at the grave, to offer words that honor the memory of your loved one; to help hold you up during life's hardest moments.

It is in the depths of loss that I have learned from you how to choose life. I have seen many of the painful and inspiring choices you have made. Some of you have shared your stories with me. I want to share three of these stories with you now. They have been powerful life affirming lessons for me; I hope they will shape your reflections on this day.

Choose life. Joe Lerner, known to most of us here at the temple as the Vice President of the senior friendship club, second only to Ceil, was known to his family as "the plant doctor." Joe had a green thumb. He cured sick plants and nursed them back to health. He even had his own greenhouse at home. After Joe died, a little over two years ago, his garden withered without his constant care.

On his first *yarzheit*, his family decided that they wanted to gather to do something to honor's Joe's memory. Joe's family is tight-knit, including three generations of Lerner's here at the temple. His wife Shirley decided it was time to bring the garden back to life. They all gathered in Joe and Shirley's home. Everyone brought plants. They worked hard and talked little. Once the garden was planted, they sat in a circle and looked at pictures and shared memories of Joe. They lit candles and said prayers. Joe's daughter-in-law expressed how close she felt to him in the garden, among all the growing things. The thing about a garden is that it needs constant watering and tending. There is life there, as long as they continue to nurture it.

The gathering in the garden was so meaningful that the family decided to do something together every year as a way to keep Joe's spirit alive. This year they spent the day in Half Moon Bay. Joe loved the coast. They hope to always go somewhere with water, a gentle reminder to keep watering the garden and their souls.

Choose life. Perhaps you were one of the 31 people in our congregation over the past 6 months who received a note or a call from our caring committee after you experienced a loss. Perhaps what you did not know is that many of the members of our caring committee's bereavement team have lived through loss of their own. One of our volunteers shared this sentiment with me: "One of the most

important things I promised my husband before he died was that I was going to be alright and he did not need to worry. I think once I said that he felt relieved and free to let go. That I made that commitment to him has been my directive on how to live the rest of my life.”

Since her husband’s death a few years ago, this volunteer looks differently at her life. Things that used to seem important aren’t as important now. She carefully chooses how to spend her time doing things that are meaningful. She volunteered for the caring committee because she had been on the other side. She knew what was helpful for her, and where there were voids. She said, “As awful as the thought of death is, there is so much you can do to keep your loved one with you.” Through her work on the committee and through other choices she makes every day, she finds ways to keep her beloved husband’s values alive.

Choose life. Every week for the last ten months, I have seen one of our temple members at Shabbat services. Sometimes he is here on Friday night, sometimes Shabbat morning, and sometimes both. I learned that Dr. Alan Schwartz is saying *Kaddish* for his dad who died last December. Saying *Kaddish* is part of the tradition that Alan grew up with. His dad said it for his parents. Alan sees his choice to continue this tradition as a gift that our faith and his family have given to him. In the face of loss, he thought, “I wanted to do something meaningful for him and for me.”

For Alan, there is something about saying *Kaddish* that connects him to something larger than himself and this brings him comfort. It makes sense that so many feel such a strong connection to the *Kaddish*. *Kaddish* has become a rhythmic chant, a mantra recited for centuries, as countless Jews before us questioned, searched, and affirmed life with the same words. At the moment of loss of life, the moment when we might be inclined to turn from God, the *Kaddish* is a vehicle for us to stand and offer praise to the Source of all life in the universe. *Kaddish* offers us a moment to say our loved ones meant something to us, a moment to say we will remember them always, that their lives mattered.

Alan reflected, “Each time I say *Kaddish*, even after all these months, I notice that there is still an involuntary little catch in my voice as I recite the prayer and think about my father. This is a moment of sadness yet gratefulness for his gifts to me. Each time is a healing moment. As I recite the prayer I feel linked back to my childhood, to the mental images of going to *shul* with my parents, grandparents and relatives around me. I feel connected to them and Jewish history.”

In addition to the healing power of ritual, something else surprising happened to Alan. Coming to services has not been a chore. He said, “Coming to services on a regular basis has helped me to have a higher religious experience. Observance of Jewish ritual helps me to punctuate my life: to stop, observe and

appreciate. Services help me to pause and give notice to the passage of time and to be thankful.” Through choosing to say *Kaddish*, not only is Alan keeping the memory of his father alive, he has also found deeper meaning in his own life.

Choose life – a family gathering, acts of kindness, prayer. All three involve connection to others. Community is Judaism’s comfort to mourners. I imagine that most of us in this room have at some time experienced the caring embrace of a community, whether at *shul*, in the intimate warmth of a living room during *shiva*, or out in the beauty of nature. Most of us have felt it because there is no home that exists without loss.

Because we cannot escape suffering and loss, our tradition teaches us that we must strive to create light from darkness, and choose life over death. A legend¹ describes how Adam was frightened during the first night after his creation. As twilight approached, Adam beheld the sinking of the sun on the horizon and the lengthening of the shadows on the earth. The light and warmth had gone out of the garden, and he did not understand what was happening. Having never experienced darkness before, he could not know that the sun would rise again. God instructed him to rub two stones together and thus a spark of light was emitted. Upon one stone was marked the word *afelah* – darkness; on the other stone was marked *mavet* – death. Darkness and death bear within them a spark. To choose life is to hold onto that spark.

To choose life is to hold on to that spark, even in the midst of grief that is the most difficult of all to bear. The death of a child is incomprehensible. It is unfair and unjust. There are no words to describe the ocean of pain. All that is left is a cry that comes from the depth of the soul.

The death of a child leaves us with no answers; only questions, painful questions. And yet, while we are powerless in knowing the meaning of a child’s death, we can know the meaning of a child’s short life. And we can make choices, very hard choices that ultimately affirm life, even in the face of such tragic loss.

I want to share one other story with you; one that is not like the others because it is the story of a little boy, and the story of a playground. Brandon was a sweet, happy little boy, so full of energy and so full of life. He loved to sing and dance and run. He loved to smile and say “hi.” He came to our temple every day, where he was cared for at Ganon. He died unexpectedly last May.

In the grips of horrible grief, during the nightmarish days leading up to the funeral, Brandon’s loving parents decided they would create an infant/toddler playground here at the temple in loving memory of Brandon. Brandon’s play space will be a place where his enduring spirit, his boundless energy, and his sweet memory will live. I know that when my little boys play there, I will think of

¹ Based on Talmud Avodah Zarah 8a and Genesis Rabbah 12:6

Brandon. And when I see other children playing there, I will think of Brandon. I will think of him and smile, a smile mixed with tears, as I remember this happy little boy who was so filled with love.

U'vacharta bachayim – And yet, choose life. A garden, a caring committee, a community of worshippers, a playground. None of these choices are easy; none are simple. Each of us might choose differently, for the path of mourning is unique for every individual. None of these choices are in place of taking the time to mourn and grieve. And I am not saying that any of these things fill the holes left in our hearts. Each of these people, each of these families, would give these things up if they could have their loved one back. But, we know we can't make that happen. What we can do is decide how to respond and how to live our lives. We can choose to water the garden, we can choose to be there for others, we can choose to be part of a *minyan*, and we can choose to create memorials more enduring than stone, through our words, our deeds, and our love.

All these choices share one thing in common – love. Love never ends with the beloved. Probably the most famous sentiment in our tradition about love and death comes from the Song of Songs where we learn: “*aza cha-mavet ahava* - Love is as strong as death.” (Song of Songs 8:6)

How is love as strong as death? The realization of our finitude inspires us to ask the big questions: What is it all for? What does it all mean? When I go, what will I really leave behind? What is of lasting value? My colleague, Rabbi Josh Zweiback, observes that the verse from Song of Songs suggests a simple answer to each of these profound questions: love. “Love is what gives life meaning. Love is what enables us to face our fear of death. Love is what we leave behind. Love is what is of lasting value.”

In this way, death and love are equally strong.

We can let love envelope us when love is what we need. When we have love to give, we can turn to those around us and love and support them. And perhaps we can face our own mortality a little more bravely with the knowledge that love is eternal.

“I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse.” Our faith leads us to believe that we cannot escape death but we can sanctify life. Our tradition teaches us to love. Judaism tells us to choose how to live.

Someday - in the past, present, or future - each of us will lose someone most precious, each of us will mourn deeply, and each of us, we pray, will choose life. Choosing life means that a part of our loved ones remain with us. We choose to keep their values, their memories, their stories, and their souls alive through the way we live our lives.

We choose how to live; courageously or in fear, honorably or dishonorably, with purpose or in drift. We decide what is important and what is trivial. These

choices are ours to be made. We decide. We choose. (excerpt from our *Selichot* service)

These are sacred choices. May the love in our hearts lead us to choose life.