Betting on Jewish Survival

a sermon by Rabbi Marx

The American dream is not what it once was. Years ago, around the turn of the century, the American dream was to work hard, often 12 hours a day, so that one could save up, buy a nice home and provide for the next generation’s advancement through education. Our grandparents came to this country with little. All they wanted was to provide a brighter future for their children. So, they dreamt of better future, a small home, and savings enough for their kid’s college education. Today the American dream is different. It doesn’t include working hard and having a better future. For this generation, it’s all about winning the lottery and instantaneously making big.

I don’t play the lottery very much. In fact, maybe I played it twice this year. But I must confess, every time I played, I was dreaming big. Every time I played I couldn’t wait to see the morning paper to determine if I had a made it big. For a buck, it was exciting.

When I was in New York this summer, I noticed an ad promoting the state lottery. The ad says, “For a dollar, you can buy a dream.”

I think that is why we buy lottery tickets---we buy them in the hope that, no matter how great the odds are against us, no matter how remote the possibility of our ever winning may be, we just might have a realistic dream of fantastic wealth. Whenever I buy a ticket, I enjoy imagining just how much fun it would be to spend my winnings.
Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld points out that the lottery appears twice in the bible in connection to Yom Kippur. Once in connection to the observance of Yom Kippur during the period of the Temple in Jerusalem and once in connection with Jonah, the Haftorah for Yom Kippur afternoon.

Unfortunately, the two appearances of the lottery teach the exact opposite message. One teaches us to tolerate that which we cannot change. The second teaches us to change that which we cannot tolerate. Life is never simple.

On Yom Kippur morning, according to the Bible, the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest conducted the sacrificial service. As part of the service, he took two goats that were identical in every way; size, shape, and appearance. He took these two goats and cast lots between them. Put in modern terms, he held a lottery. One was chosen to be sent out into the wilderness, driven off a cliff, and offered to Azazel, the demon of the wilderness. The other, also chosen by a lot, or lottery was offered up in the Sanctuary, as atonement for the House of Israel.

One was sent away into oblivion, the other had a glorious fate, at least in the eyes of the Kohen Gadol.

Herzfeld believes that the choice was determined by lottery to show the randomness of life. One’s death is meaningless and one’s death has supreme transcendent significance. Some things in this world, are a matter of chance, luck, randomness. A hurricane bears down on a region wiping out complete towns and economies. It is clearly not the will of God, as some misguided clergy have claimed. It is the result of a warm gulf waters and trade winds. But why was one person killed and another saved. How come one person takes one step to the left just before a roof collapses and is saved, while another is swept away in torrential flooding? There is no reason or explanation. Drunk drivers have accidents. That makes sense. It’s logical. But how come the drunk
happened to hit this pedestrian, and not that pedestrian? Why does a man and woman get killed instantly by a drunk driver from our community, when others might be a minute later and avoid catastrophe? For that, there is no rational explanation. It is simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. One theme of Yom Kippur, which was clearly communicated by this custom, was to teach us that some things are really matters of chance, matters of luck, matters of randomness. We have in some circumstances no control.

In some cases, it does no good to blame our selves or to blame God for what happens. Sometimes terrible things happen, and we have to learn to accept that. I know some people who have given up faith in God because someone whom they loved was an innocent victim of the uncertainty of life. All I can say to such people is don’t blame God for things like this. It is not God’s fault, and it is not our fault. It does no good to wallow in anger or to brood in self-pity or in guilt, over things that neither we nor God have any control over. One goat was chosen for a glorious role in the service; the other goat was driven off into obscurity. It was simply the luck of the draw that determined which went which way.

The purpose of the lottery on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, was to teach us that some things are simply matters of chance, matters of randomness, matters of mazel.

But now let us look at the lottery that takes place in the haftorah for Yom Kippur afternoon. This afternoon we read one of my favorite books of the Bible, the book of Jonah. In it, Jonah tried to run away from God. Filled with anger towards the Ninevites for their hostility towards Israel, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, and speak to the people there in the name of God and encourage their salvation. He wanted to see them suffer. So, he hired a ship that was going in the opposite direction. God caused a fierce storm to come up, and the
ship nearly broke apart. The sailors sensed that this was no ordinary storm, and that its cause must have rested in some form of divine displeasure. So, THEY CAST LOTS in order to determine who caused the storm. They had a lottery and Jonah had the winning ticket. They confront him saying, “Tell us who you are, and what you have done, that has brought this fierce storm upon us.” Jonah confessed that he was running away from God’s service and that he must be the reason for the storm. Then the text says: the sailors said: “Come, let us all pray to this God. Perhaps, we can persuade Him to stop the storm.” They prayed and sure enough, the storm stopped. The sailors were so grateful that they went to Jerusalem, where they thanked God for having saved their lives.

Compare these two lotteries. The first teaches us that sometimes bad things happen, and when they do, there is nothing whatsoever that we can do to prevent them or to undo them. But in the second lottery, the lesson is the opposite. In the second lottery, the sailors find out who or what is causing the storm, and then they do something about it. Once, they find out that God caused the storm, because of Jonah’s sin, they turn to God, and pray to God to change their fate. Miraculously God does. Jonah’s message: Teshuvah, personal transformation is possible. What’s more, one’s fate can be changed as a result of teshuvah. The point of the lottery in the story of Jonah is to teach us that the central prayer of our faith is NOT: Thy will be done. The central prayer of our faith is: Thy will be changed…If we change, our fate will change.

Two types of lotteries. One teaches us what can’t be changed and one teaches us what can be changed. One year the shuttle disintegrates as it reenters the atmosphere and we feel powerless. Two years later, we witness astronauts remove loose tiles from the shuttle’s underbelly so that the accident doesn’t reoccur. One year NASA shows our vulnerability and the chances we take
through space flight. The next year they show us that we can alter our destiny or change our ways mid-flight.

To find some peace in this world, we must tolerate what we can’t change, while mustering the power to change what we can’t tolerate. Reinhold Neibur, a noted Christian theologian expressed this tension of life in the serenity prayer. He prayed, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The strength to change what must be changed and the wisdom to know the difference.”
The first two lines are within reach. But how do we know the difference? How do we know when to submit quietly and accept our fate and when to stand up and fight for what we think is right?

I have a partial answer and it is found in the life of Simon Wiesenthal z”l, the Nazi hunter, who just died a few weeks ago. He understood that we are either the last generation of Jews, or else we are the ones who will fight for life and hand over the heritage to those who come after us. Too many of Wiesenthal’s family were killed by those who gave them no choices. Too many of his family were selected for extermination, as Joseph Mengele, the Auschwitz angel of death, motioned his family to the gas chambers. Wiesenthal’s response was to fight back for those who perished and those who would guarantee our future. Wiesenthal hoped to communicate through his tenacious Nazi hunting and education programming that the answer to our future is in our hands. He dedicated his life to fighting for justice and the survival of the Jewish people. By his actions, he gave us insight into the question of what’s in our hands and what’s not. He taught us that we must take charge of our Jewish lives. Whether there will or will not be Jews, tomorrow will NOT be determined by chance or by luck or by randomness as the lottery between the two goats signified; it will no longer be determined by our enemies, though they be numerous and ever renewing themselves. Whether there will be Jews tomorrow will depend on us.
Imagine this for a moment: If you walked up to a Babylonian soldier who was stationed in Jerusalem as it was burning on the 9th of Av in the year 586BCE, or a Roman soldier stationed in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. and asked, “How would you like to bet a couple of dinars or drachmas on whether or not there will be a Jewish people 2500 years from now?” Do you think they’d take the bet? They sure would, believing that, such a gamble was a sure thing. The Temple was in ruins. The Jewish people were going into exile. Many were sold into slavery. Babylon and Rome were at their Zenith. They would buy that lottery ticket because they would look around, and see the end of Jewish life. They would take that bet and most assuredly lose it.

If you walked up to a Nazi SS soldier in the height of WWII and asked him to bet on the Jewish people, who were dying in the Death Camps all across Europe, do you think he would have bet on the Nazis with their arsenal of planes and tanks, or on the Jews. He would have bet on the Nazis and he would have lost.[1]

Why are we still here? It’s because we understand the difference between what’s in our hands and what is not. The answer to the question of whether Judaism and the Jewish people will live depends on us. Whether or not Israel will survive and be stronger or not, depends on the unity of the Jewish people. Our future depends on whether we care enough, are willing to fight enough, are willing to study enough and give enough. It depends on whether we are willing to join shuls and support them so that we can have schools where kids get a serious Jewish education. It depends on whether we are willing to come to the aid of the State of Israel and do everything we can to make it safe and secure. It depends on whether we are going to come to services throughout the year, to take an adult education class, to participate in social action, to see our membership at Beth Or as an opportunity to give rather than receive.
Some things are beyond our control. Others, like Jewish continuity, vitality, and faith are in our hands. May we live wisely and thereby make our survival a good bet.

[1] Rabbi Jack Reimer

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