

Choose Life – Parashat Tazria 5774

Rabbi Michael Safra

I'm curious who got to see Simon Schama's documentary on the "Story of the Jews" last Tuesday. If you missed it, you may want to check it out on the internet, as well as its continuation, which will air on Tuesday afternoon on PBS.

I like the way Schama framed our story. He began with a question: What, if anything, do we Jews have in common? A series of pictures of Israelis flashed on the screen as he continued: "It's not the color of our skin, not the languages we speak, the tunes we sing, the food we eat, not our opinions – we are a fiercely argumentative lot, not even the way we pray – assuming we do. What ties us together is a story."

And the framework of that story is a verse from Deuteronomy (not today's Torah portion) in which Moses speaks to the Jewish people just as they are preparing to leave the wilderness – the barren place where God provided all our needs and protected us – in order to enter the Promised Land – where they will be responsible and subject to the ups and downs of history. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day," Moses says. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – that you and your offspring would live – by loving the Lord your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him."

"Choose life, ובחרת בחיים." That is the essence of our story, that in every place Jews have found themselves, they have made a commitment to live, to look forward, to put the past behind, to expand the meaning of Torah and to face the future with courage and strength.

The Talmud describes the beginning of Judaism as we know it. It was the year 70 and the city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans. The conditions were unbearable. And so Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai lay down in a coffin and had his students sneak him outside the walls, where he came face to face with the Roman general Vespasian. (Notice the detail– the story begins with death, with a coffin). Rabbi Yochanan meets the general and tells him he will soon become emperor; and when the horseman came at that very moment to proclaim that the emperor has died and the rabbi's prophecy has come true, Vespasian is so grateful that he grants the rabbi a wish. Rabbi Yohanan knew that Jerusalem would be destroyed. He told Vespasian that he understood there was no turning back. But he asked for a city for

himself and his students. And in that city of Yavneh, Rabbi Yohanan established the first academy, the first yeshiva, the first place of Torah learning, guided by the principle that the Torah and its interpretations would replace the Holy Temple as a way of life to sustain the Jewish people on their difficult journey through history.

That academy expanded and sprouted more schools that developed the teachings and interpretations that became the Mishnah and Talmud. The essential style of learning continues to this day, as does the principal that Judaism will always adapt. ובחרת בחיים, Judaism will always choose life.

This morning we read from two Torah scrolls. From the first, we read about skin disease. Tazria was actually my bar mitzvah reading twenty-__ years ago, so I know well that its descriptions of flakes and colors and bumps is a little gross and a lot boring. We can skip the details, except to say *tzara-at* is a spiritual disease, and that the Rabbis – and even the Bible itself – treated the flaking and wasting away of the skin as somehow akin to death. When the disease is confirmed, the afflicted person is impure and sent out of the camp until the time that the symptoms disappear. Death and impurity belong outside the camp. When the person is ready to return to the camp, the prescribed ritual is to take two birds, to kill one bird and sprinkle its blood with a hyssop (remember the hyssop); and then to send the second bird away. Notice the symbolism – the dead is left behind, but the living bird flies on to new horizons.

Okay. Now let's look to the reading from our second Torah, which described the Paschal lamb. On the night before they left Egypt, the Israelites were to slaughter a lamb and paint a blood-mark on the doorpost *with a hyssop* – (back to the hyssop). They ate the lamb that night, while the Angel of Death killed the first born Egyptian and spared the first-born Israelites. One more detail. ... Before they ate the lamb, the people had to have their bags packed and their travel clothes on – because they were leaving behind the death and impurity of Egypt and journeying forward on a new path of life. A few days later they crossed the Red Sea with walls of water on either side, almost as a birth canal to their new life.

I bet you didn't know there was a connection between leprosy and the Exodus from Egypt. But that's our people's essential message: Choose life.

It reminds me of a story about a child who came home from religious school one day after having learned all this stuff and his father asked him what he learned that day. And the boy answered,

“It was actually really cool. We learned about how the Jews were being chased by the Egyptian army and they saw the Red Sea in front of them and they were really scared, until suddenly they spotted an Israeli warship and it shot off a few missiles as a warning before two F-16s took off and dropped these huge bombs on the Egyptian cavalry, and then all of a sudden these amphibious ships drove up on to the dry land and attacked until there wasn’t a single Egyptian left!”

The father cannot believe his ears and he says, “Really? Is that what they teach in that school?” To which the boy responds, “Well, not exactly. But if I told you what they told us, there’s no way you’d believe it!” ובחרת בחיים, Choose life.

A lot of us in the Jewish community worry about whether the next generation is connecting to Israel. I often hear the problem this way: We need to teach our children the facts about Israel because they are getting to college and are being approached by people from the other side, and they don’t know how to respond. And our community has developed numerous initiatives to teach the “facts”, which of course refer to the facts of the conflict and the Iranian threat.

These are important issues, but I want to warn against over-attention to what might be the wrong narrative. That’s the narrative of death, as if every Israeli lives in constant fear that each time they kiss a child or a spouse might be the last. Sometimes we are seduced by the “Victim Contest”. We insist that we – and not the Palestinians – are the real victims, and it is because of our victimhood that our children should advocate for Israel. ... And I don’t think that works very well.

The Jewish people has another narrative – the narrative of life – the story of a people exiled from the Land of Israel who set up centers of Jewish learning in Babylonia and Morocco and Fez and England and Germany and France and Spain – where they created a Golden Age, until they were kicked out. But they did not die. They moved to Poland and Russia and created communities that thrived ... until they didn’t. And some set up successful communities in the New World, while others emerged from the darkness to literally make a desert bloom.

Recently our member Judy Saks donated a set of photographs from the famous Israeli photographer Rudi Weissenstein, taken between 1936 and 1953. The photos are a treasure and I know we will want to talk about them more once they are on permanent display in our lobby. But I want to tell you about two of them.

One is a picture of school children studying Hebrew in 1936. The other is a night-view of Ben Yehudah Street in Tel Aviv from the same year. You see tall buildings, a large movie house, tall buildings, and lots of cars. Now think about what these pictures represent. It was only 1890 when Eliezer ben Yehudah established the Hebrew Language Committee. Before that, nobody imagined that a person could buy a train ticket – much less perform brain surgery – in Hebrew. The city of Tel Aviv was founded in 1909, when 66 families gathered on a desolate sand dune to parcel out land by lottery using sea shells. Here we are less than 30 years later and we see cars and tall buildings and movie houses. We know the Holocaust was going on at the same time in Europe; and soon Jews would be forced to leave their homes in Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Morocco, Ethiopia, Syria. But only 70 years later, we also know Tel Aviv as a modern, bustling, hi-tech city that boasts world-class culture and nightlife. That's the story of life, ובחרת בחיים. We won't just survive. We will live and we will thrive.

We face our problems in Israel and in America, but you might say it is a shame that we continue to be so influenced by Simon Rawidowicz's characterization in a 1967 essay on "Israel: The Ever Dying People."

On Shabbat Tazria, on Shabbat HaChodesh, which leads up to Passover, my message is that we need to think differently. ובחרת בחיים, We must choose life. As a community, as individuals, we must look at Judaism and decide which parts we can leave behind; and more importantly, which parts are we going to keep and reinterpret and expand? What are we going to do to help this bird of a community fly forward with strength and hope and confidence in our ability to leave our descendants a future of which they can be proud? That's the question we need to ask and to answer on Shabbat, on Passover, and beyond. Shabbat shalom.