

Choosing Life

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

It makes sense that the torah portion for the morning of Yom Kippur would be as powerful, as profound, as meaningful as any in the Torah. It's the beginning of Parashat Nitzavim. The Israelites are gathered on the Jordan side of the river, as is Moses. He stands there, still larger than life even after all those hard years of wandering, hardship and war, gray and old but powerful. He gives a series of "swan song" orations to his people whom he won't be able to lead over to the other side. He pours his heart out to them one last time: "Please, listen, I can't go with you this time... but this is what you need to know." One senses the urgency of Moses's message: Listen, I can't go over with you. Listen, all of you! A lot is at stake. Everything is at stake. Not just for you, but for those before you and those who will come after you, as well. Hear me! This is life and death we are talking about. It's not just the natural cycle of being. What's at stake is what it means to be alive—to live! What it means to be in relationship to God. What it means to truly be a free people—an am kadosh—a holy nation. "*Hachayim v'hamavet natati lefenekha, habrakha v'haklalah; uvkharta vakhayim l'ma-an_tkhiyeh atah vzarekhah.* I've put before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so you and your offspring would live." (Deuteronomy 30:15)

Uvkharta vakhayim (Choose life!) These are as powerful as any words in the Torah. But what do they mean? What does Moses mean when he says 'choose life'? How do we choose life? The Torah and Judaism give many answers, in fact, this portion itself, gives a few: to love God, to follow the mitzvot. The portion we just read gives us answers, but I believe that the question, "What's it mean to choose life" is much bigger than one explanation. And so today on the morning of Yom Kippur, I want to try to answer this question through a very specific lens—through the lens of Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement. I want to explore what this phrase means, *uvkharta vakhayim*, to choose life, through the lens of this special day. This day when we forgive and are forgiven.

I begin with a story: A Hassidic tale about an encounter that happened on this very day, some 250 years ago. At that time, there was quite a conflict between the Mitnagim and the Hassidim. This story arises out of that conflict. Now the Mitnagim are the branch of Judaism whose main focus is scholarship – Talmud Torah, the study of sacred Jewish texts on the rational plain, governed by a hierarchical system, with the rabbi and the learned Talmud Chakham, the Talmud scholar at the top, and everyone else below. Hassidism arose as a reaction to this movement. Hassidism sought to bring Judaism "down to earth", infusing worship with joy, and popularizing the ideals of the Talmud and Kabbalah (Jewish mystical traditions) in ways the average person could grasp. Many tales arose out of the conflict between these two very traditional yet different groups. The story goes like this:

Followers of the Mitnagim heard that the Hassidic Rebbe in the town across the way had his followers dance and sing during Yom Kippur. 'Oy! Celebrating on Yom Kippur? How can the Rebbe do this?' 'He's irresponsible. It's the day the book of Life & Death is open! They'll be written in the book of death! I must go and confront this Rebbe!' So he goes—in secret—to the

minyan of the Hassidim. And he sees....it's true! The Rebbe's dancing. And they dance and they sing around—for hours! They dance and sing the prayers, these serious prayers. He finally can't take it anymore and he goes to the Rebbe and says, 'Who do you think you are? You call yourself a rebbe and you dance and sing. You're all going to be inscribed in the book of death!' And the rebbe looks at him with much compassion. He puts his hands on his shoulders, to calm him down. He says, 'My friend just stop for a moment and look around the room. Just stop and look.' The Mitnagim begins to look around... At first, he does not want to admit what he sees. And then he says, 'I see an aura of light around all these people dancing. And I see a light around you.' 'And my friend, what do you see when you look at yourself?' 'I see no light at all.' This is the moment of emes, of truth for the Mitnagim. What he realizes is that the light around the Rebbe and his followers is the light of life. They, he realizes, shall live in the year ahead. He also realizes that his anger his judgment.... his inner fury is killing him. (This story was shared with me by K'vod Wieder, I do not know the original source.)

What does this story teach us about what it means to choose life? When we choose not to judge others, especially when their behavior is merely different, not harmful, or truly offensive, we choose death. When we let our judging mind, our critical, mean-spirited mind take control – run amuck – such an unforgiving mind results in a kind of a spiritual death.

Yehuda Amichai, the great Israeli poet who died a few years ago, expresses the result of this “deadly” approach to life beautifully when he writes in his poem “The Place Where We Are Right,” that, “from the place where we are right, flowers never grow in the spring. The place we are right is hard and becomes trampled like a yard....” (The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, Bloch & Mitchel, pg. 34)

Our hearts become closed, hard, infirmed places for love and passion and understanding, when we are right and everyone else is wrong. The unforgiving, critical judging mind is not only a risk to our spiritual health, it is equally damaging to our physical well-being. During the last year I have been exploring my own physical responses to stress of various kinds. In the process, I read a fascinating book called: Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers. It's actually a scientific study by a man who spent years, studying baboons (believe it or not) in Africa, doing all kinds of tests with them to find out what happens when they are under stress. What he learned is surprisingly simple; zebras don't get ulcers because they only get stressed when they need to. So, for example, if they see a lion coming after them to eat them, they correctly recognize this as a stressful situation, and their whole body responds to it, the way it needs to – all that adrenaline, all the stuff that happens in the body when it is threatened – and they run. That's what's supposed to happen when they are about to be eaten by a lion! And the rest of the time...they eat grass, they hang out with their buddies. It's a good life. They only get stressed when they need to. And their bodies are created so that they can handle stressful situations when they arise.

Now this is when our advanced human minds get in the way. We can create stressful responses with our minds that have the same physical responses as if we were about to be eaten by a lion! Thus, Robert Supolsky writes: Sometimes, we humans can be stressed by the things that simply make no sense to zebras or lions. It is not a general mammalian trait to become anxious about mortgages or the internal revenue service, about public speaking or fear of what we'll say in a job interview, about the inevitability of death.

Our human experience is replete with psychological stressors, a far cry from the physical world of hunger, injury, blood loss or temperature extremes, and all things that would require a stress response. When we activate a stress response out of fear of something that turns out to be real, we congratulate ourselves that this cognitive skill allows us to mobilize our defenses early. And when we get into a psychological uproar for no reason at all or over something we cannot do anything about, we called it things like: anxiety, neurosis, paranoia or needless hostility. (Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, Supolsky, and pg.8)

Think about it: every time we allow ourselves to get worked-up about someone or something, regardless of whether it's real, necessary or fair, it's killing us! Burning holes in our guts, keeping us from sleeping, giving us back pain, raising our blood pressure—and the list goes on and on. Part of what it means to choose life – literally! – is to develop a more tolerant, less critical, forgiving mind that judges less and responds more with compassion and understanding. Such a mind is better for our bodies and our souls, not to mention our stomachs and out backs! Another story, another Hassidic tale, similar but different, again focused on what it means *uvkharta vakhayim*, to choose life. This story like the last is set in Eastern Europe, the same time period, a couple hundred years ago. Here goes...

God forbid, a young man is kidnapped right before his wedding. What do they do? They do what they always do when they have a problem; they go to the Rebbe (think it's hard to be a Rebbe today). So, they go to the Rebbe and say, "Rebbe, what do we do?" And the Rebbe says, "Well, there's only one man in the village who can pay the ransom." And they say, "Well, who's that?" It turns out, it's the miser who lives at the edge of town... and they say, "Ughh, he'll never give what we need." The Rebbe says, "Come, let's go, let's give it a try." And so, the Rebbe goes with his students to the home of this man to ask him for the money. He knocks on the door; the door opens, and there, the man stands. "What do you want?" he asks, and the Rebbe begins to tell the story; about how the man is young and about to be married, his whole life's before him, that he's been kidnapped, etc. And, to everyone's surprise, the miser listens, and is moved to tears. The miser says, "Wait, I can help." So, he goes in his house and is gone for a while, and he comes back...like this (Hand clenched, shaking). "Here, " he says struggling to open his hand. Finally, his fingers give way, and resting on the palm of his hand is a dirty coin, a kopek, like a penny. And the students are ready to give up on the guy but the Rebbe takes the coin and he says: "May God grant you health and long life. May you live the life of joy and worthy of heaven and may God increase the love in your life." The students look dumbfounded; they think the Rebbe's crazy! The man is so moved by the Rebbe's remarks that he goes back in the house, and he goes back and the whole thing happens, again & again, he comes back with a little more each time, and every time it's hard and every time the Rebbe congratulates him, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, until, eventually, they have the money they need.

So now, flash to the wedding. It's a great wedding, but the followers of the Rebbe, the Rebbe's students are very disturbed. Why did the Rebbe put up with all of this? What's this about? So, they corner the Rebbe (I know how this feels)...and they say, "What is this? Why'd you put up with this?" And this is what he says: "Remember the first kopek, the first penny, how dirty it was?" "Yes." "For years, that man had held onto that kopek because no one would take it. A kopek was all he had the strength to give; yet people believed he was capable of giving more. I accepted what he was able to give and that opened his heart up to enable him to give more, and

more, and more.” (adapted from *God Whispers: Stories of the Soul, Lessons of the Heart*, by, Karen Keder.)

Now, this story revolves around money, but it’s really not about money at all. It’s about our expectations of giving and receiving. How often do we get angry, disappointed, let down by folks because we expect too much from them: a friend, a parent, a child, a fellow congregant, and a rabbi. We’re all human, we’re all flawed, imperfect, and probably doing the best we can. But, we want more. We want it, maybe even deserve it, and we probably even need it.

But, if it’s not there, if it’s not who they are, if it’s not what they’re capable of giving, we’re expecting too much of them. Worse than that (and this I think is the most painful part) we’re not really seeing them as human beings; they’re gone as a human being, they become a projection screen of who we want them to be; they’re actually invisible to us. And when we push, they shut down like the miser with the penny in his hand. They shut down, and so do we, because we feel hurt, disappointed, angry and in pain: emotions that like leeches, suck our lifeblood, our capacity for compassion and joy, right out of us.

Uvkharta vakhayim, what’s it mean to choose life? I believe, part of what it means to choose life is to not expect too much from people; to learn to accept people for who they are, to respond to them with understanding and compassion. Forgive them for what they are not, and try to appreciate them for who they are.

Okay, let’s confess: It’s not easy—we all have our list, right? “He did this, she did that, how can they think that, that really hurt, I didn’t deserve it, I really needed it, that wasn’t fair,” on and on and on – right? We all have our list. The truth is, 9 times out of 10, it’s up to us to make the change. They’re not going to change, and it’s not our place to expect them to change. And this is a hard place to be, but it also the truth. Another story about what it means to choose life, this time a contemporary tale, a true story, one I read a few years back in the *New York Times*, called “After the Fire” by a Jewish woman writer, named Kate Weaner.

The story is about her dying father, their last months together and the horrible secret of his life, which he revealed just before his death:

Before his illness, she wrote, he always kept us all at arm’s length. He was quick to anger if we challenged him, intolerant of scrutiny of any kind. And then, only weeks before I lost him forever, I learned why. He had gone in eight short months from a skiing, bike-racing, dating man of 70 to a shrunken, exhausted soul with paper-thin skin, and in this condition he revealed to my brother, sister and me the shameful secret he had kept buried since childhood: when he was 14, his mother and sister had deliberately set fire to their dry goods shop to collect insurance money. It was late at night, and the couple who lived in the apartment above the store came running out from the flames, screaming and carrying their children in their arms. They could have easily been killed.

My father had no part in planning the arson, but he saw what happened, and it changed his life forever. “I came from people who were despicable,” he told us through a flood of tears. “They set this fire out of their own greed. I tried to excuse it by telling myself that survival forced us to

do these things.” He looked anguished. “Survival? We had enough to eat. We had a place to sleep. We had our own store. Some of our neighbors considered us rich. To risk killing children so you can make a fancier store? That’s evil. I was part of evil. Now you see why I’m ready to die?”

My brother asked, “Are you saying you deserve to die?” “No, no”, he insisted. “It’s not like that. It’s that I’m tired of living with shame. I’ve held on to it all these years. I’m exhausted from trying to cover up, driving and driving myself. Dying is the way I can let go of it at last.” But, even after he confessed, he did not forgive himself. Shame had been his companion in life, and it went with him into death.

When I first read this story, it broke my heart. Can you imagine a person suffering his whole life for something he didn’t even do? But then, as I pondered this tale, I realized how true it is—sad but true—for so many of us, as hard as it is for us to forgive others, it’s even harder for us to forgive ourselves, even for things we’re not responsible for: children who are convinced that their parent’s divorce is their fault; parents who are somehow convinced, that the tragic death of their child is their fault; survivors who blame themselves for surviving.

Choosing life means forgiving ourselves, especially for things we’re not responsible for. Okay, but what about the stuff we are responsible for? What about our failings, our weaknesses, our sins of various kinds? Of course, we must do everything we can to right our wrongs, to pay our debts, to set what’s crooked straight. Nevertheless, at some point, when we’ve done the best we can do, the only life affirming response that we can have is to have compassion on ourselves to recognize our humanness and accept our weaknesses. Ultimately, choosing life means learning to love ourselves in spite of our failings. And this is not easy.

It’s funny, I really learned for the first time this year, that we confuse Yom Kippur. We think Yom Kippur is all about remorse, facing our failings, beating our chests in regret. Sure, that’s a part of the day, but the day is much bigger than that.

The “beating our chest stuff”, that’s all in the foreground. The bigger message, the life-affirming message, is this: TODAY IS YOM KIPPUR! The Day of Atonement, the day we are forgiven! That’s what this day’s about. In fact, Yom Kippur is also known as Yom Harachamim: the day of compassion, the day God’s infinite heart opens and flows over us like a river. That’s what atonement is all about. Being cleansed; being forgiven, being set back on the right path. We get confused and think that our tradition wants us to dwell on our failings; when in fact, the opposite is the case. (I must thank K’vod Wieder for this insight.)

Rabbi Nachman, a great Hassidic Rebbe taught that despair separates us from God. As God loves us, we must too, strive to love ourselves. We must do whatever we can to draw near to the faucet of compassion that God represents. That’s a life goal and an essential part of this day. And he has this great teaching that I’d like to share with you about how to do this. He begins with the premise that we must search for one good thing in ourselves. It’s hard, but we must find it, and nurture it like the last ember in a fire, blow on it, stoke it until it grows in warmth and rejuvenating power. He writes: “You have to search until you find some modicum of good in yourself, to restore your inner vitality and attain happiness. And by searching for and finding this

good in you... you genuinely move from the scale of guilt onto the scale of merit, and then, you return to God.” (Azamra, Rabbi Nachman, pg. 9)

Now lets return to Kate Werner’s story. In trying to cope with her father’s loss, she turned to Judaism for solace. She was a neophyte, but nevertheless, entered into the rituals of Yom Kippur. She learned the word “Teshuvah”, she recited the Vidui, and she went through the list of transgressions from A to Z. She says it was hard. But then, the most important work, she says, was not beating her chest, but learning to forgive herself.

She also found that her father, in his final days, allowed himself to feel love, and to give love, in return. She writes: “I live everyday in that love he found” (The love that begins with self-love)

Let’s not wait until death to find forgiveness and the love it brings. Let’s start now—let’s choose life now. Moses gave quite a talk, on the Jordan side, some 3,000 years ago. “Choose Life.” he said. That was his essential message. And, less we think choosing life is too hard, Moses makes it very clear:

For this commandment, which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven, that you should say: ‘Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it down to us, that we may do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say: ‘Who will cross the sea for us and bring it over to us, that we may do it?’ No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

Choosing life is all about “heart”; developing a heart of compassion, for others, for those different from us, challenging to us and especially, for ourselves.

I want to conclude with a prayer, from Rabbi Nachman, from The Gentle Weapon,

The Power of Love

Teach us to search for the fine qualities in others,

To recognize their immeasurable worth.

Teach us to cultivate a love for all Your children,

For no one, no one is without redeeming value.

Let the good in us connect with the good in others,

Until all the world is transformed through the compelling Power of love.

May we choose life in the year ahead.