

CHOOSE LIFE – YOM KIPPUR AM, 2013
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

On Yom Kippur, we rehearse our death – depriving ourselves of food, drink and sex, wearing white, contemplating the possibilities of how our demise might occur – by fire or by water, by sword or by beast, by earthquake or by plague. On all other days, we fight back against death, we place a priority on life. Yet on Yom Kippur, we focus on it. Why? As Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg explains, “Human beings cannot be mature until they encompass a sense of their own mortality. To recognize the brevity of human existence gives urgency and significance to the totality of life. To confront death without being overwhelmed, driven to evasions or dulling the senses is to be given life again as a daily gift.”¹ So it is by the contradiction of focusing on death today that we choose life, a life given meaning by the limited time we have. We choose life when we try to make every moment and everything we do count. To underline the point, in our Torah reading this afternoon, we read God’s admonition: “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.”

The word “Choose” is very important because, while we recognize so much over which we have no control, we are given the choice about how we want to respond to the givens of our lives. Some of us have more difficult circumstances to deal with than others – our own illnesses and those of our loved ones; financial challenges; difficult relationships with friends and family; natural disasters. We all have regrets; we all have done things we are ashamed of; we have all hurt others. And yes, the pain is often so hard to bear. But we can choose to allow our misfortune to cause us bitterness, resentment and depression. Or we can look for those little cracks of light in the darkness, shifting our attention to that light, opening our hearts to love and gratitude. To quote Rabbi Jonathan Slater: “your life, your experience, your spiritual awareness is a matter of choice. This is the portion we have been given in this moment; how we bear it is up to us.

On Rosh Hashanah we meet God in the dark of the moon, aware of our imperfections, cognizant of our failures. We could remain there, but we are called to remember at the same time that we also merit standing before God. We are worthy, despite our mistakes... It is possible to be contrite, to feel regret and to bear the full weight of our responsibility for others’ suffering -- and also to feel loved, acceptable and welcome. But, it is our choice.”² I am not being a Pollyanna about this. I have tried this approach – to be open to love, to minimize feelings of bitterness, anger, envy -- and I can testify to the fact that it works. Much of the time.

And we can bring meaning to our lives by helping others to a better life. This afternoon, beginning at 1 o’clock, we will be offering you two projects that can mean a second lease on life for people near and far. For the first project, we invite you to participate in the Gift of Life Registry, part of a Reform movement drive this Yom Kippur to increase the number of Jewish donors to North America’s only Jewish blood and bone marrow registry. There are many moving stories about how donors find incredible fulfillment through donations of this kind.

¹ Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, New York: Summit Books, 1988, p. 184.

² Study on Rav Avraham’s Nitzavim commentary.

Diane Eskritt recently called my attention to a powerful one from the Los Angeles Times.³ “When my first child was born at Cedars-Sinai, I gave a pint of blood in advance [in case it was] needed during the delivery. Somehow or other in my euphoria over the arrival of that baby boy he's 31 now — I must have felt the need to give something back, and I started donating blood regularly. Later, when I had become a familiar face in the donor room, they asked whether I would like to donate platelets...I started giving platelets every two weeks. That was more than 25 years ago.

Eventually, every visit to Cedars was like going to a little party. I knew them, they knew me. Sometimes we would clown around and kid and gossip the whole time; other times I would read or send emails with my free hand. I would joke that donating platelets was my social life. Then one day the recruiting lady, who often bemoans to me the difficulty of getting people to come in and donate, called to beg me to undergo a more onerous procedure. This time the product required was white blood cells, the kind that combat infections. They were needed in a hurry for a man who was awaiting stem cell therapy for leukemia. Because his immune system had been suppressed, he had gotten an intractable fungal infection in an eye. As she explained it, he could not get the stem cells while he had the infection, and if the infection could not be overcome, they would have to remove the eye and a big part of his face. I had a compatible blood type and, more important, I was currently screened and could donate immediately...

It turned out that what was required was three visits to Cedars over three days. The first was to get a shot that would boost my production of white cells. Then there would be two three-hour sessions with a needle in each arm...The patient's wife came to thank me. She was intensely grateful, but I felt like an impostor and that her gratitude was misplaced. To her what I was doing was a very great thing, and I was a very good person; to me it was almost nothing, and I was just me...A couple of weeks later I learned that [the procedure] had worked. The [patient's] infection was almost gone, and even the blood cancer had temporarily retreated. The nurse who came to tell me had tears in her eyes. It felt strange — the disproportion between what I had done and what it had meant to other people. Sometimes it can be very difficult to accomplish very little; at other times it is very easy to do something of really incalculable magnitude...”

The drive this Yom Kippur is not for platelets or white blood cells. Rather, it is for stem cells, most of which can be gotten through a donation of blood. It is estimated that one in 200 Americans will receive a stem cell transplant in their lifetime. Only 30 percent will be able to find a suitable donor within their family. The other 70 percent must turn to a registry. Since tissue type is inherited, a matching donor and recipient usually share a similar ethnic background. Our drive this Yom Kippur is through the Gift of Life registry, a world leader in helping children and adults find the matches they need. In the early 1990's, there were so few Jews in the registry that Jewish patients had less than a 5% chance of finding a match. Today, because of Gift of Life's targeted recruitment in Jewish communities across the U.S., Jews have greater than a 70% chance of finding a match. Still, more Jewish donors are needed.

³ Peter Garrison “How I saved a man's life,” Op Ed, LA Times, June 29, 2013.

If you are healthy and between 18 and 60, and you would like to participate, we will have a station set up in the Beit Midrash at 1 PM where you can begin the process. You will not need to give blood today. All you will need to do is **swab** your **cheek** and fill out a form -- we'll take care of the rest. It will take 5 minutes. That's all you will need to do. If you are chosen, you most probably would be asked to give blood rather than bone marrow, which is a less invasive procedure. If you are over 60, or if you are unable to give blood, but would still like to participate, a cash donation would be much appreciated as it costs \$60 to process each donor's swabs.

Another important way to choose life is to do what we can to end genocide. After the Holocaust, we said: "Never again!" Unfortunately, as one writer put it: "Genocide has occurred so often and so uncontested in the last fifty years that an epithet more apt in describing recent events than the oft-chanted "Never Again" is in fact "Again and Again." We have witnessed genocides in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Darfur. Today, genocide continues in Sudan, South Sudan, Burma, Somalia and Syria. One of the worst genocides is occurring right now in the Democratic Republic of Congo – Congo for short. Congo has been engaged in the world's deadliest conflict since World War II.⁴ Since the fighting began in 1998, almost 5 and a half million people have died from war-related causes – most from malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia and malnutrition—all typically preventable under normal circumstances. Children account for 47% of these deaths.

Over 2 million people have been displaced and 45,000 people continue to die each month.⁵ Hundreds of thousands of people have been impoverished by the violence. Rape, including gang rape, and other forms of sexual violence are considered the worst in the world. A team reporting for BBC Newsnight reported that soldiers in Congo were ordered to rape women by their superior officers. The UN Special Representative on sexual violence called the country "the rape capital of the world."⁶

One of the main reasons for the current fighting is the battle over resources. Although citizens of Congo are among the poorest in the world, with the second lowest GDP per capita globally, the country is widely considered to be the richest in the world in natural resources, with untapped deposits of raw minerals estimated to be worth in excess of 24 trillion dollars.⁷ Congo's rich resources provide an easy way to finance the conflict. Profit from the mineral trade is one of the main motives for armed groups on all sides of the conflict in eastern Congo.

Armed groups earn hundreds of millions of dollars per year by trading four main minerals: the ores that produce tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold. This money enables the militias to purchase large numbers of weapons and continue their campaign of brutal violence against civilians, with some of the worst abuses occurring in mining areas.

⁴ Worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/congo

⁵ Anup Shah, "The Democratic Republic of Congo," globalissues.org/article/87/the-democratic-republic-of-congo.

⁶ 2010.

⁷ worldwithoutgenocide

Why should we care? To begin with, we have suffered our own genocide, and have vowed to be vigilant about others. We are also mandated by the Torah to care for those who are abused because we were slaves in Egypt. On a more practical level, the minerals that are so precious in Congo are those that power our electronics – our phones, computers, music players, and cameras – as well as automobile engines and power plant turbines. Minerals like tantalum, tin, and tungsten are essential for our wired lifestyle.⁸ Here is a helpful explanation of what is going on in Congo and how these minerals, fueling the violence, are used in our electronics.

[Youtube.com/watch?v=aF-sJgcoY20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aF-sJgcoY20)

A number of major human rights groups have charged that some multinational corporations have been profiting from the war and have developed “elite networks” of key political, military, and business elites to plunder Congo’s natural resources.⁹

The battle over the minerals and other resources has also affected Congo’s wildlife and environment. National Parks that house endangered gorillas and other animals are often overrun to exploit minerals and resources. Increasing poverty and hunger from the war, as well as more people moving into these areas to exploit the minerals result in hunting more wildlife, such as apes, for bush meat. Gorillas, for example are already endangered species. Wars over resources like these make the situation even worse.¹⁰

What is being done? The UN’s current mission in Congo is in its 13th year but has largely been ineffective.¹¹ A resolution was recently introduced in Congress called: “Concerning the Ongoing Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Need for International Efforts toward Long-term Peace, Stability, and Observance of Human Rights.” It calls for a comprehensive U.S. strategy toward Congo. This would be a significant step in U.S. efforts toward peace in Congo. The Senate passed the resolution in late June and the House version has moved out of committee and is moving toward a vote by the full House. For this resolution to succeed it needs our support. It is important to call on the House to follow the Senate in passing this resolution and demonstrate the U.S.’ commitment to ending the violence and exploitation of Congo.

In addition, some companies have begun to verify that they are using conflict-free minerals. **The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act of 2010** mandates that if companies use minerals from Congo or an adjoining country, they must file a report with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission describing what they have done to ensure the source of the minerals. Under this law, **companies are responsible for identifying where their suppliers get their minerals.**

⁸ “The Genocide Behind Your Smart Phone,” from *Newsweek*, on The Daily Beast web site.

⁹ raisehopeforcongo.org

¹⁰ globalissues.org/article/87/the-democratic-republic-of-congo

¹¹ worldwithoutgenocide

Although this law is an important first step, it does not establish penalties for companies that continue to get minerals from conflict areas.

In the back is a list of electronics companies rated to determine the extent to which each company is monitoring the source of their minerals. Please take a copy and try to buy your electronics from companies that are trying to be responsible in this regard. There is also a list of resources about the situation in Congo. To bring awareness to this genocide, we are engaging in a project modeled on artist Naomi Natale's One Million Bones' installation on the National Mall in Washington DC. This past June, artists, students and activists from around the world made bones of clay that were laid out as a symbolic mass grave in our nation's capital.

We are making bones this afternoon that will be laid out in front of City Hall on our own Riverside Mall in a couple of weeks. While we cannot make a million bones, we are hoping for a couple of hundred. To participate in this artistic awareness campaign we are joined this afternoon by Rev. Jane Quandt and members of her congregation, First Congregational Church in downtown Riverside. We have set up a table in Room 4/5 where you can make one or more bones out of clay. Anne and Lynn Craven, along with other volunteers, can show you how to do this. The bones will then be part of an exhibit the evening of October 3rd during the Riverside Arts Walk. We will display the bones, explaining what they represent. The bones will eventually be laid out around the Martin Luther King, Jr. statue facing City Hall. Please join us for this important project. As artist Naomi Natale, who originated the Bones project in other cities said: "When we make something with our hands, it changes the way we feel which changes the way we think which changes the way we act."

Of course, Yom Kippur is not the only time you can save another life. On October 13th, Diane Eskritt is heading a Blood Drive, TBE's first in many years. By donating to LifeStream, you are not only helping someone you might not know – but also, later, if a congregant needs blood, TBE's participation means that assistance is available to defray costs not covered by insurance. And Lifestream is affiliated with Magen David Adom – Israel's emergency medical responder – so you might be helping someone in Israel too.

And don't forget the needy right here at home -- there is still time to bring canned goods for our food drive organized by Ilene Stein. Our barrels are in the foyer, and our goal this year is to collect 2,000 pounds of food for the hungry in Riverside.

I cannot conclude a sermon on choosing life without offering a prayer for Syria. 100,000 Syrians have been killed by their own government, a quarter of the population has become refugees, and hundreds have been gassed to death. Let us open our hearts to those who have suffered there and pray for peace in Syria.

Avinu Malkeinu for Syria by Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

Avinu Malkeinu, hear our prayer
Avinu Malkeinu, the world knows enough suffering

Avinu, be merciful
Malkeinu, be just

Avinu, hear the cries of the people of Syria
Malkeinu, guide them towards resolution

Avinu, heal those whose bodies are broken
Malkeinu, grant wisdom to those who treat pain

Avinu, let wandering refugees find safe harbor and care
Malkeinu, let leaders seek a path away from violence

Avinu, ease the mourning of those who have suffered loss
Malkeinu, bring justice to those who perpetrate cruelty

Avinu, teach us to seek peace and pursue it
Malkeinu, fortify our leaders with the resolve to do what is right

Avinu, we pray for the people of Israel and all peoples who long to live under
Your canopy of peace.
Malkeinu, may the soldiers on the side of liberty know courage and compassion, strength and
hope

Avinu, be merciful
Malkeinu, be just

Avinu Malkeinu, the world knows enough suffering
Avinu Malkeinu, hear our prayer

We continue with the Torah service and the traditional Avinu Malkeinu.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Background: <http://www.globalissues.org/article/87/the-democratic-republic-of-congo>

<http://www.genocidewatch.org/drofcongo.html>

<http://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/congo>

Electronics companies ratings: http://www.enoughproject.org/files/corporate_action-1.pdf

For **more information** on the resources and minerals and other backgrounders:

- [Africa's Seven-Nation War](#) report from the *International Crisis Group*.
- [Report](#) of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from United Nations Security Council, 12 April, 2001, which reveals a massive level of illegal exploitation by corporations and countries alike.
- A summary of the lengthy UN report can also be seen [here](#), from the *Environment News Service*.
- [Guns, Money and Cell Phones](#), from the *Industry Standard*, Jun 11 2001, describes in detail the issues around coltan exploitation.
- [A Black Mud From Africa Helps Power the New Economy](#) by Blain Harden, *New York Times*, August 12, 2001
- [What is Coltan? The Link Between your Cell Phone and Congo](#), by Imtiyaz Delawala, *ABCNews.com*, September 7, 2001.
- [Conflict Cell Phones](#), by Anthony Lappé, *Guerilla News Network*, June 8, 2001
- [Mineral for Cell Phones Aggravates Congo War](#) from *Drillbits and Tailings*, a publication from Project Underground, Volume 6, Number 3, March 31, 2003

Amnesty International details that there have been [many human rights violations reported due to the economic exploitation](#). For example:

- Thousands of Congolese civilians have been tortured and killed during military operations to secure mineral-rich lands.
- Foreign forces from Rwanda and Uganda have promoted interethnic conflicts and mass killings as a means to secure mining zones.
- Combatants of the various forces in the region have killed or tortured independent miners and traders for their minerals or money.
- Many of the hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, driven from their homes into neighboring countries or other parts of the DRC, have died from malnutrition and lack of access to humanitarian assistance.
- Children as young as 12 have been among those forced into hard labor in the mines.
- Human rights defenders who have reported or criticized such abuses have been beaten, detained, forced to flee, or killed.

Yet, a number of companies and western governments pressured a United Nations panel to omit details of shady business dealings in a report out in October 2003. As reported by the British newspaper, *The Independent*:

Last October [2002], the panel accused 85 companies of breaching OECD standards through their business activities. Rape, murder, torture and other human rights abuses followed the scramble to exploit Congo's wealth after war exploded in 1998.

For example the trade in coltan, a rare mineral used in computers and mobile phones, had social effects "akin to slavery", the panel said. But no Western government had investigated the companies alleged to have links with such abuses. Some, including ones from the UK, US, Belgium and Germany, had lobbied to have their companies' names cleared from the "list of shame".

"Many governments overtly or covertly exerted pressure on the panel and the Security Council to exonerate their companies," Ms Feeney said. Some companies gave legitimate explanations for their business in Congo, or pulled out. But lawyers for others challenge the panel's findings, often capitalising on errors in earlier reports as proof of unreliability.

In the report this week, the cases against 48 companies are "resolved" and requiring "no further action".¹²

¹² Declan Walsh, [UN cuts details of Western profiteers from Congo report](#), The Independent, October 27, 2003