

## “THE CHALLENGE OF CHOICE”

ROSH HASHANAH 2003 - 5764

A Sermon Delivered by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

I

“And in Thy Torah it is written ‘Understand O’ Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.’”

This last verse of the ten scriptural verses in *Malchuyot* is the ultimate statement of our acceptance of God’s kingship over us. The *mitzvah* to recite the *Shema* every morning and evening is explained by the Talmud as *Kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* - the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

So, if every morning I reaccept God’s kingship over me and if on Rosh Hashanah I spend the whole *Yom Tov* accepting it, what if I choose *not* to accept it? Do I have that choice?

Here is the answer of the Prophet Ezekiel (20:32-33): “That thought on your mind cannot be sustained - Your affirmation that: let us be like all the nations, all the families of the world.... By your life, I will rule over you by virtue of a strong hand, an outstretched arm and overflowing anger.”

So much for free choice, according to Ezekiel.

And Judaism has affirmed the Prophet’s conclusion with the principle of *Mushba v’omed me’har Sinai*. “We were all sworn in at Mount Sinai.” We are all obligated by the covenant that God made with our forefathers.

So why the *mitzvah* of *Shema* twice a day? We have no free choice anyway!

And why the central theme of Rosh Hashanah - God *is* our King? We can’t simply drop out! I cannot wake up tomorrow morning and say -

Okay No more *shul*  
No more *tefillin*  
No more *Shabbat*  
No more *kashrut*  
No more *tzedakah*

I can no more say these things than I can say: No more job, nor more office - I quit.

I can’t quit - I’m committed. I am *Mushba v’omed me’har Sinai*. I was sworn in 3300 years ago. And Ezekiel said: *Hayo la yihiyeh* - “it cannot be”. Judaism is, as it were, a life sentence!

So, once again, if that is the case, and my choice is limited, why *Shema* and why Rosh Hashanah?

And the answer is - that we all live on two levels - the theoretical and the real. On the theoretical level we have no choice. We are the people of the covenant. We cannot quit. This is compulsory service. We are not volunteers. We were sworn in long ago. We are in this forever. The *Shema* every morning is not a choice that we make; it is simply descriptive of who

God, our King, is. It is a confirmation of our belief and an affirmation of our life's behavior. As Jackie Mason would say - "No choice - that's it!"

Ah, but in the real world, *that's not it*. And in our world today that *certainly* is not it. As my friend Rabbi Yitz Greenberg pointed out in a speech at PEJE last February, the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by an unprecedented level of free choice for everyone in everything.

The rise in our standard of living has resulted in people making multiple choices in where they live, how they furnish their homes, where they eat and what they eat there. Just think of the astonishing number of choices on restaurant menus. Those of us who are over forty can remember when you went into a restaurant and there were two or three choice on the menu. Now, there are so many choices of appetizers and main courses and desserts that one becomes nervous and anxious over which choice to make. Then after the food comes one has all kinds of doubts: maybe another choice would have been better.

Even at a wedding today one is given a choice of the main course. If you don't eat steak or baby lamb chops you can have chicken. If chicken is not your taste you can have fish. Finally, there is always a vegetarian dish. This is all reflective of a world which is wide-open for our choices.

Similarly, in culture and religion there are also choices. It used to be, as Rabbi Greenberg reminds us, "if you were born a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim (or) a Hindu, that was a life sentence. Now in the United States, 25-30 percent of the population changes its religious denomination in its lifetime." It used to be that sex and gender were life sentences. Now, one can switch.

Judaism recognizes the reality of freedom of choice even though the *Halakha* was first formulated in much more conservative times. But with a reality of choice, Judaism teaches the importance of commitment - to take our principles seriously and adhere to them consistently. Love the Lord your God *b'chol levav'cha* - with an overriding love - *u'v'chol nafsh'cha* - even more than you love yourself - *u'v'chol me'odecha* - and more than you love your possessions. Rosh Hashanah comes to reinforce this and to remind us to continue to make good choices, to remain loyal to God, to Torah and to Israel.

And this is also why we need good *shuls* and good schools and good youth groups and good camps and good Israel programs, because people are going to make choices and, *therefore, we have to be at our best and make it easier and more natural for people to choose to be committed.*

The danger of cultural choices presents a challenge to families and communities to encourage people to make the right choices and to enable the person who chooses to be committed, to feel validated and happy in that choice.

## II

There is one further implication in what I call the challenge of choice that I would like to discuss with you. That is in the area of marriage and divorce.

Marriage, today, is also a matter of choice. Not just whether to get married, but whether to stay married. A recent article in The New York Times Magazine reports what a rabbi might have easily guessed: in a difficult economy one of the few growth industries is matrimonial law. Seventy-eight percent of matrimonial lawyers say their case loads are either steady or increasing.

What is happening? It used to be that getting married was a life sentence. I don't use that term flippantly; I use it positively. Not every marriage was great, but *kiddushin* meant a life commitment *unless conditions became unbearable*. One got married, with God's help had children, raised them, married them off and was blessed with grandchildren. And, as Jackie Mason would say - "That's it!"

But today that's not it. In a culture of free choice, married spouses are making choices and often the choice is "I quit"; "I've had enough"; "This relationship isn't serving my needs any more"; "I'm entitled to happiness"; "The feeling just isn't there." "I want to get on with my life."

Now, please understand, I'm not making judgements with these remarks; I'm simply recording facts, facts which almost everyone feels are sad facts - but they are facts. And they are facts which have serious ramifications on the lives of everybody, especially children.

The question is: What can be done to deal with the frightening reality of choice in opting out of a marriage? I suggest: the same thing we are doing with religion and everything else in society. Turn the problem into a challenge.

**So here is one rabbi's tentative advice to every spouse in this *shul*: We have to earn our right to be a spouse every day.** Giving or receiving a ring under a chupah *should* mean a lifetime commitment, but in an age of choice it doesn't. We have to earn that commitment constantly.

We have to try to live every day of our lives as if we were dating and courting; to make ourselves as appealing as we can; not to take the other for granted; to see what is wonderful in your spouse, what makes him/her loveable, to figure out how to make him/her happier and more fulfilled.

Bill O'Reilly, on Fox News just came out with a new book this week. The title: "Who's Looking Out for You?" His first chapter asks: Is your spouse looking out for you?

That's terrible! It's the wrong question! The real question is: Are you looking out for your spouse? Because in an era of free choice your spouse may be thinking of other choices so you had better be looking out for her/him.

Furthermore: we should all be looking for the good in our spouses and not for the weaknesses. There is much too much criticism in some marriages. We focus too much on blemishes. And the Talmud warned us about this: "*Kol ha'nega'im adam ro'eh chutz minig'ai atzmo*. Most of us see all the blemishes except our own." And we make too many judgements about our spouses. Again, the Talmud warns us: "Do not judge your friend until you have stood in his/her shoes." This applies to spouses too. Think of how she/he feels before making judgements. And reserve most of your judgements for self-judgement and most of the criticism for self-criticism.

A group of mediators dealing with divorcing couples were asked if they thought the divorcing partners still loved each other. They all answered in one way or another "yes." Just imagine if the partners had lived their lives as if they were courting. Would they have needed the mediators?

As we begin a new year, I remember a word told to me 24-years- ago by the late Rabbi Israel Miller. It has recently been widely quoted, but it serves as a fitting conclusion to this

discussion. We recite during this penitential period the 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm in which David expresses the hope “to dwell in the House of the Lord every day of my life and to visit in his sanctuary.” Asked a Chasidic Rabbi: “If you *dwell* in the House of the Lord why would you have to *visit* the sanctuary?” Either you are a dweller or a visitor.

The answer is quite obvious and it summarizes our thoughts this morning. We have to be both!

In the realm of religion we should educate ourselves to be dwellers, committed to a full Jewish life and a consistent observance of *mitzvot*, but, at the same time we should develop the spontaneity of the visitor, with a fresh outlook, with enthusiasm, religious excitement and inspiration as if each *mitzvah* or each *minhag* or each Shabbat or each Yom Tov or each page of Talmud was being experienced for the first time. We should joyfully choose to be Jewish.

And in marriage the same dual approach applies. One should accept marriage as a lifelong commitment, dwelling in our matrimonial life day-in and day-out. But we should also understand our obligation to be visitors in our marriage, with a fresh appreciation of our spouse constantly, with a realization that we have to earn our right to be a dweller in our marriage, day-in and day-out. Then, with God’s help, our choice and our spouse’s choice will be the choice of commitment.

If we are wise and courageous enough to live up to this challenge of choice, this will truly be a *shanah tovah* and a happy year for all.