

Howard and Shlomo were brothers disliked by the entire community. They ran a crooked business, they lied, and they cheated the poor. They were also very, very wealthy.

When Shlomo died, Howard went to Rabbi Bloom and said, "I will donate one million dollars to the synagogue if at the funeral you say that my brother Shlomo was a mensch."

The Rabbi thought long and hard but eventually agreed.

When it came time for the funeral, the Rabbi recounted Shlomo's wrong doings during his eulogy at length. He then closed with the sentence "But, compared to his brother, he was a mensch!"

Jews have always found a way to find LIGHT in DARK times. Through our humor, our actions and by finding perspective

Think about if you have ever said any of the following or heard someone say:

"Rabbi, I am not at all religious."

"I am a Cultural Jew."

"I am spiritual"

Both your rabbis have heard each one of these many, many times. The implication is that being spiritual, following the heart and mind, is a more pure form of communicating with God than attending the synagogue or studying Torah or following the commandments. Rabbi David Wolpe has the best response to these often heard words, "Spirituality is what you feel. Theology is what you believe. Religion is what you do."

Rabbi Harold Kushner shares in his book, "Nine Essential Things I've Learned about Life" that his friend, Reverend Lillian Daniel, a congregational minister taught him that people who reject religion but then "find spirituality in spring flowers and changing leaves will have no problem as long as it's sunny out, but they will have no framework for making sense of a hurricane or, for that matter, a business reversal or a diagnosis of serious illness. At times like that, you need a tradition to turn to that has seen it all and has no illusions about the world. You need a community, people who have learned to find God in the shadows as readily as in the sunshine...and you need people whose

faith compels them not to pity you or to question God on your behalf, but to hold you and dry your tears.”

My friends, unfortunately, we are living in a dark time. From the almost one million people worldwide who have died from COVID, and the so far over 200,000 in our own country who have died, millions who have lost jobs, and all of us left wondering when will this be over and we can get back safely to in person events, gatherings and please God, temple and SCHOOL! We have a terrible political divide, fears about the health of our democracy and future of our country and racism, riots, storms, floods and fires. The list goes on. The work we must do to repair our broken world seems immense. But as Jews, we know, that is what we must do. Carry on, and work to fix the brokenness, to bring more light and actually BE a light to the nations. That is who we are - an Or L'goyim, carrying the light of justice and peace to the world especially in these troubled times.

We do it by making the choice to live by our Jewish values every day. The values that are in our Torah and Talmud and have been embodied through the generations by our ancestors - and tonight, on this holiest of nights, we remind ourselves that though much is out of our hands and in God's hands, we pray to be written into the book of life for one more year and through the acts of Teshuvah/Repentance, Tefillah/Prayer and Tzedakah/Righteousness, that our actions may bring the world closer to balance, peace and wholeness.

We have so many incredible Jews who have come before us who set the example of living by their Jewish values to make the world brighter in dark times, Jonas Salk, Louis Brandeis, Albert Einstein, but right now, it is one person who comes to mind.

The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had the words, Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof on her wall of her office in the Supreme Court, “Justice, Justice Shall you pursue.” It was the Jewish value, written in our Torah, the pursuit of justice that interested her and because at the time she grew up, not only were women not rabbis, women were not even counted in her schul for a minyan for Kaddish, which turned her away from organized religion for some time (though she and her late husband Marty belonged to a Conservative synagogue raising their children there), according to numerous articles.

But “Notorius RBG”, as she was lovingly called by many millennials, who saw her as an icon of strength and power, according to the Washington Post this week, lived by her Jewish values, bringing more justice and more light to the world.

Her Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt said of her: This was Justice Ginsburg's life's work, to insist that the Constitution deliver on its promise that we the people would include all the people,” Holtzblatt said of Ginsburg.

“Ginsburg was dedicated to equality not only on behalf of women. She cared as deeply for minority groups, immigrants, the disabled and others.

In this, her identity as a Jew played a big role.

In a 2018 interview with Jane Eisner, then editor of the Jewish daily Forward, Ginsburg said that she grew up in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust, and it left a deep and lasting imprint on her.

“She saw being a Jew as having a place in society in which you’re always reminded you are an outsider, even when she, as a Supreme Court justice, was the ultimate insider,” said Eisner. “That memory of it — even if it’s more from the past — informed what she thought society should be doing to protect other minorities.”

Justice Ginsburg lived by Jewish values and so should we.

Behind the scenes she tried in small ways to make the court more hospitable to Jews. She pushed the court not to hear cases on Yom Kippur, a practice that continues to this day.

She was a beacon of light that brought more justice into the world.

This is the day, the 25 hour period that we fast, we pray, and we say the difficult words, “Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom” meaning essentially that so much of life is out of our control. Yet, as Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Temple writes: This prayer says: the human condition is fragile. That’s the norm. When tragedy strikes, it is profoundly sad. But it’s no surprise. That’s part of being human. The surprise is that we

do enjoy so many, many days of sunshine. The surprise is when we do get to see our kids grow up healthy and thriving. The surprise is that we have so few days of real sadness. Those are the gifts of life – undeserved, unearned, wondrous gifts of divine grace.

Tragedy striking is no judgment, it's no punishment. You're not singled out. You're not alone. You're not the only one. This is one thing a rabbi knows. I look out from here and I see the faces of the many families I've shared tears with. We have stood at gravesides together, or over hospital beds. We have agonized over crumbling marriages, over children with challenges, over aging parents, over warring siblings, over failures of character, failing health, failed ambitions, spoiled dreams. The prayer asks, "Who will live and who will die?" Everyone of us. Who suffers in life? Everyone of us.

We have so little control over the conditions of our existence, but we have three tools for transcending the harsh facts of human life. Three divine gifts for making the human condition live-able and meaningful and bearable.

We can pray to God, do acts of righteousness and mend our relationships- three of the most important Jewish actions.

We read from the Torah tomorrow to

בְּחַיִּים--לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה, אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ Choose Life so that you and your seed may live. And, As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg taught us this week through the Jewish Federation's 40 days of teachings: every decision we make CAN be a choice for life and good or for death and bad.

During a global pandemic, we can understand this choice in new ways. There are clear things we can do to choose life, light and action:

1. When we venture out, do we choose to wear a mask, whether it is required or not, to protect our own lives and the lives of others or do we forego the mask, risking death of ourselves and others?
2. With a crucial presidential election ahead, we can VOTE and get involved with our reform movement's Civic Engagement Campaign: a nonpartisan effort to strengthen our democracy by encouraging everyone to participate in the U.S. election and ensuring that Reform Jewish values are represented in the public square. Please be in touch with our Social Action Chairs, Richard Young and Kathy Kramer if you want to get involved.

What choices do we make every day based on our Jewish values? We asked this question to some of our Judea Teens, and here is what they said:

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Whether we consider ourselves religious Jews or cultural Jews, and of any age, we can choose to take actions in our lives that will make this world brighter. Anne Frank wrote in her diary: "Our lives are fashioned by our choices. First, we make our choices. Then, our choices make us."

Finally, my friend and colleague Rabbi Jordan Braunig of Emory Hillel reminds us: On Yom Kippur we hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah... asserting that fasting is not good enough, but also reminding us that we can be repairers of what is broken.

The prophet Isaiah asks us to call out full-throatedly, to be as loud as a shofar, to be honest and not to hold back. May we all Choose life. May we all Choose to make a difference in the world. May we all Choose to live Judaism every day and bring light to our darkened world following those role models that came before and watching as our children begin to take the lead. Amen!