

Rosh Hashanah 5779 - Choose Life

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This summer, it seemed that the whole world was mesmerized by the story of twelve teenage boys from a Thai soccer team that got trapped in the Tham Luang system for nearly three weeks. These boys and their coach spent nine days in nearly complete darkness, with the waters continuing to rise. They had little or no food, only the water dripping from the stalactites that they drank sparingly. How did they survive those nine days? What kept them alive?

The answer comes, at least in part, from a remarkable 25 year old man, Ekapol Chanthawong, known as Coach Ake. Coach Ake had been trained as a monk in his religious tradition and had developed a trusting relationship with his players, Coach Ake helped the boys to stay calm and avoid panic. He taught them to meditate to calm their mind and to preserve their body's energy. He did not allow them to give up, even when he himself despaired. Coach Ake saved these boys lives by his own sheer will to live. And when the rescuers finally arrived, Coach Ake made sure that each of the boys made it out safely, before going himself.

How would I have reacted if I were in Coach Ake's position? How would you respond? None of us can say with certainty and hopefully, none of us will ever be put into that situation. We wonder what gave him the ability and the strength to keep himself and those boys alive for nine days. Certainly, the faith of his religion played a role. But when he spoke to the media, he spoke of the sense of purpose he derived from the need to keep the boys alive.

In thinking about these questions, my mind wandered to two other events in the news from just a few weeks prior to the boys being trapped. In the first week of June, the world was shocked at the news that designer Kate Spade had committed suicide and then, just a few days later, international celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain took his own life. Part of the shock of these two suicides is that they were not known to have drug or alcohol problems. Neither one had suffered an extraordinary loss in their personal or business life. Kate Spade had been having marital issues, Anthony Bourdain was facing questions regarding a payment of hush money on behalf of his girlfriend Asia Argento, but no one in their circles saw this coming. At some point each of them lost their will to live, like many of the 40,000 people each year who commit suicide in this country.

So again, I pose the question: What was the difference between Coach Ake and the 12 boys and Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain? To a certain degree, we will never know.

But perhaps this is why it is necessary for the Torah to command us to choose life.

In the Torah portion that we read this past Shabbat, we learn that God places before us blessing and curse, life and death and commands us "ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך" - Choose life, so that you and your offspring will live."

This may seem obvious, but the choice is not always easy.

Baba Metzia 62a describes a classic moral dilemma: If two people were walking on a desolate path and one of them was holding a jug [*kiton*] of water. If both drink from the jug, both will die, as half the jug would not be enough water for either of them. If only one of them drinks, he will have enough to make it to a place where he can get more food and water.

Two opinions are offered: Ben Petora taught: "It is better for both of them to drink and die, so that neither one will see the death of the other." Ben Petora's answer seems reasonable – until you realize that two people died instead of one. Rabbi Akiva takes the opposing view and says your life takes precedence over someone else; therefore, if it is your bottle, you should drink all of the water and live. Better that only one person should die. Rabbi Akiva teaches that your first responsibility is to save your own life.

There is an important caveat: this case is one that involves inaction, not action. Elsewhere in the Talmud, it raises the question, "What if you were told to actively kill someone who is not threatening you in order to avoid being killed yourself?" Here, "It is preferable that you should allow yourself to be killed and you should not kill another person. Who is to say that your blood is redder than his, that your life is worth more than the one he wants you to kill?"

It seems to me that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – either in a literal sense or in a metaphorical sense, are all about this idea of choosing life.

On Rosh Hashanah, we ask God to seal us in the Book of Life. During these 10 days of repentance, we add in an 11-word phrase into the first section of the Amidah – and among those 11 words, we see the word Chayim – life – mentioned 4 times:

זְכֵרְנוּ לְחַיִּים. מֶלֶךְ חַפֵּץ בְּחַיִּים. וְנִכְתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים. לְמַעַן אֲלֵהִים חַיִּים:.

Remember us for LIFE, our Ruler Who delights in LIFE,

and write us into the Book of LIFE for Your sake, O God of LIFE

But our tradition tells us that prayer is an important aspect, but it is not sufficient. It is not based on our words, but upon our action that we are judged.

The Talmud that there are "Three books ... opened on Rosh Hashana. One of absolute sinners, one of absolute *tzadikim*, and one of *beinonim* (in-betweeners). ... Absolute *tzadikim*--written and sealed immediately for life. Absolute sinners--written and sealed immediately for death. *Beinonim* are held in the balance and stand from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. ... If they succeed--written for life. If they do not succeed--written for death.

Most of us - likely all of us - are *beinonim*, in-betweeners. And therefore, the Talmud and RAMBAM teach us to think of the scales of our righteousness and misdeeds as if they were always in perfect balance. Therefore, each action we take, whether large or small, has the opportunity to tip the balance of the scale towards righteousness and life or towards transgression and death. And we are commanded to choose life.

This is a metaphor. But we use metaphors to teach important life lessons. Imagine If you could hold this idea that your life is in an exact balance on the scale. How would it impact your decisions?

What would you do differently to choose life?

The decisions that we make matter.

Our actions have the potential to save lives – sometimes our own, sometime someone else’s.

But what if that choice is no longer ours? Let’s take a look at the not-so-distant future.

As technology of artificial intelligence continues to advance, we need to address the questions and the ethics of what this will mean. Consider the case of the autonomous car.

Autonomous cars are one of the most promising and most challenging areas of technological growth. Most of the major car manufacturers are in the final stages of preparing their line of fully autonomous cars to hit the mass markets. According to many predications, self-driving cars will hit our roads in a noticeable way by 2020, and industry experts predict that by 2040, 95% of new vehicles sold will be fully autonomous. On the aggregate, the expectation is that by reducing human error, these cars will be far safer and that the number of automobile related deaths is expected to be reduced by 90% by the middle of this century, **saving approximately 30,000 lives each year in America alone.**

The Torah’s command to choose life should make support for autonomous vehicles an easy call, right?

But one of the last sticking points in making autonomous cars a reality is that they must be programmed with a series of algorithms for the very rare case where a computer would need to make a split-second determination of what type of evasive action to take when something unexpected happens. In this case, the machine must be programmed to literally choose who will live and who will die. Does it swerve into oncoming traffic to protect a pedestrian who crossed the street illegally or does it kill the pedestrian?

Not such an easy call.

To help our society think about these issues, MIT developed a website called the moralmachine.com, in which you can answer a series of questions regarding different scenarios and what you think the car should do in each situation. To what extent do you give priority to the people in the car versus the people in a crosswalk? Does it matter what the age, race or health conditions of the person may be? To the extent that a machine could be taught to recognize the difference, does it matter if the person is a CEO or a factory worker or even homeless? Whose life would you choose?

From the Talmud’s point of view, if the car belongs to you, is it similar to the bottle of water and, therefore, you should protect yourself first? Or, perhaps it is it more like the case of someone forcing you to choose between being killed and killing another, in which case who is to say that your blood is redder? These are not easy questions and do not have easy answers.

When surveyed, the vast majority of people believe that autonomous cars should be programmed to kill the fewest people, regardless of whether they are passengers in the car or not.

However, a similar percentage of people expressed a high reluctance of buying an autonomous car because they don't want a machine to decide if they will live or die, even if it means reducing automobile deaths by 30,000 aggregate.

In theory, we want what's best for society. In reality, we often choose to protect ourselves above all others. Which one better fits the dictum to choose life? It's not clear.

Returning to today's Torah reading, this question of whose life to preserve and our obligation to preserve life is front and center. We read of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, who are sent out into the desert with the provisions that Abraham had provided them. But it was not long before their supplies ran out and as the final water was emptied from their casks, Hagar places Ishmael under a tree, separating herself from him so that she would not watch him die. The boy Ishmael cries out and we are told God hears him *ba'asher hu sham* – where he was at that moment – and points them to a well that will provide for them, saving their lives. But according to the Midrash, just before God steps in to save them, an argument takes place between the ministering angels and God. The angels question God, asking "Given that you can see the future, why are you going to save this boy, whose descendants are going to refuse to give water to the Israelites later down the line." God rebukes the angels, asking them "What is the boy at this moment, Evil or Righteous?" The angels admit that Ishmael has not yet done anything wrong. God replies - *אֵינִי דֹן אֶת הָאָדָם אֶלָּא בְּשַׁעֲתוֹ* - I can only judge a person at the current moment.

Would it have been better to allow Ishmael to die then and prevent the future trouble between Isaac and Ishmael's descendants? Wouldn't that be a better application of preserving life? But God, who knows the future, will only act on the facts of the present. And, therefore, the midrash teaches, we who don't know what will happen in the future, should also focus on saving save the life that is immediately in front of us at that moment. Doctors and surgeons know this all too well – their job is to save whoever is on that operating table, regardless of whether the person is a shooter or a shooting victim.

But most of us – well many of us – are not doctors or surgeons. Most of us will not face situations as dramatic as the ones that I have described. But I think that we still face many decisions where this notion of *U'vcharta bachayim* can help guide our actions.

Consider the difficult issue of Sudanese asylum seekers in Israel today, which has become a major point of division in Israeli society. Some argue that as a Jewish state, Israel has an obligation to help take in or to safely resettle the refugees in other countries because the Torah commands us not to oppress the stranger, having been strangers in the land of Egypt. Others argue that, as the world's only Jewish state, Israel has an obligation to maintain the Jewish nature of the state and the asylum seekers should be returned to African nations who can take care of them. In the meantime, however, everyone agreed that the asylum seekers are living in

squalor conditions in South Tel Aviv, one of Israel's poorer neighborhoods, and the animosity between the residents and the refugees keeps rising.

While this debate was going on, one man decided to do something to help. Working with the Kibbutz Movement, Avi Ofer helped move two asylum-seeking families to Kibbutz Sasa in the north of Israel. The members of the Kibbutz warmly welcomed these families and easily were able to set them up with temporary jobs, housing, food and education. Avi Ofer didn't get involved in the politics – he saw a chance to make a difference for these families in the here and now, in a way that everybody wins. From these initial two families the Kibbutz Resettlement project was created. This project does not focus on the public policy questions that must be debated. It is about saving lives, perhaps literally, or at the very least improving the quality of life during the time that it will take to make those policy decisions.

This is what it means to use *u'vcharta bachayim* as a guiding principle. Let the politicians and policy experts debate the long-term answers. In the meantime, we have the obligation to look at people – *ba-asher hu sham* – and find ways to help improve their life situation and perhaps even save their lives.

But now let's take it a step closer to home – what are the ways where *u'vcharta bachayim* can help guide our daily lives? And here, I believe the notion of quality of life comes into play. When the late Senator John McCain first learned that the prognosis for his cancer was not good, he said "I understand. Now we're going to do what we can, get the best doctors we can find and do the best we can, and at the same time celebrate with gratitude a life well lived."

"To celebrate with gratitude a life well lived" is, in my view, another way that we fulfill the command *U'vcharta bachayim* to choose life.

This is a choice that each of us can make. Do we look at our lives and only see the struggles? Or do we acknowledge the reality of the struggles but focus on the blessings? And it turns out that which way we look at life does not depend on our economic situation, our health, or our marital relations – all of these might impact us in the short term. But they don't determine whether we appreciate the good in our lives so that we can "celebrate with gratitude a life well-lived." If we compare again the situation of Coach Ake and Kate Spade, there is no question that Kate Spade was in a much better financial situation and from every outward measure, had every reason to feel that she had a life well-lived. Coach Ake could have easily given up, believing that their lives wouldn't matter. But she gave up and he didn't.

I won't sit here and speculate for why that might be the case. But it is enough to say that these outward matters are not what brings an appreciation of life.

It is easy to look at others and judge the ways they may choose life or not. But the real work that we are called to do at this time of year is to look inwardly and to examine our own life and the decisions that we make.

Do our behaviors reflect a priority for immediate enjoyment or do we focus on decisions that will make us healthier and live longer? How often do we try and defy the odds because somehow we fool ourselves into thinking that “it won’t happen to us.”

Choosing life in this way might be the most difficult aspect of this concept because it forces us to look in the mirror and consider whether our behaviors reflect our values.

- Are we getting enough exercise?
- Are we eating healthy?
- Do we get enough sleep?
- Can we stop thinking about work and pay attention to the needs of our family?
- Are we paying enough attention to our mental health and seeking assistance when we need it?

I’m guessing most of us can say no to at least one of those questions – and lots of us, myself included, would say no to many of those questions.

It’s not because we don’t know better – we do. But the reality is that as simple as a notion as it may seem, the idea of trying to choose life at each moment challenges the very core of who we are and what we do.

These Yamim Noraim, when the metaphorical Book of Life is open, is the time for us to look in that mirror and admit our shortcomings to God, to one another, and most importantly, but most difficultly, to ourselves. Choosing life is not about what anyone else is doing – it is the decisions that each one of us must make, each day. It is a decision that only you can make for yourself.

There is a story that is told...Nearly 250 years ago in Eastern Europe many Jewish communities divided into two groups – the Chasidim, who emphasized the importance of joy and celebrating Judaism and the Mitnagim, who emphasized a strict adherence to halakha. It was in such a town on a particular Yom Kippur that the Mitnaged rabbi heard that the Hassidic Rebbe and his followers were dancing and singing on Yom Kippur. The Mitnaged rabbi was distraught - ‘Oy! Celebrating on Yom Kippur? Doesn’t he realize that the book of Life & Death is open and we must be solemn before God? I must go and confront this Rebbe!’ So he secretly went and looked into the window of the synagogue of the Hassidim. And he sees the Rebbe dancing and singing with joy the usually solemn prayers of Yom Kippur. After watching for a while, he finally burst in and yells at the Rebbe, “Don’t you realize that you are all going to be inscribed in the book of death?” And the rebbe looked at him with much compassion. He puts his hands on his shoulders, to calm him down. He said, “My friend just stop for a moment and look around the room. Just stop and look and tell me what you see.” The Mitnaged rabbi reluctantly looked around and finally admitted that he saw joy, and light and life. And then the Chassidic rebbe told his friend to look at himself in the mirror and tell him what he saw. And after a while, the Mitnaged admitted he could only see anger and darkness. The Chassidic rebbe told his Mitnaged friend, “You see, we dance and we sing because doing so brings us life. And then we dance and sing more because we realize that this is the very essence of what we are asking God

to give us – to give us life. How can we ask God to give us life if we don't celebrate the life that we have?"

And so I would ask you on this Rosh Hashanah to think about:

In what ways do you celebrate life and help spread life to others?

What would you change about yourself to be choosing life more often?

Because in the end, no one can choose life for us. Perhaps this is the reason that the command *u'vacharta bachayim* is given in the singular. It is something that each of us must do, a path that each of us must find in our own way. Our Torah, our Jewish tradition give us markers to guides us along the path, but ultimately it is each one of us – not a machine, not any other outside forces – that must decide how we choose life.

I pray that each of us will be written and sealed in the Book of Life, Health, Blessing and Goodness for the year ahead.

Shanah tovah.