

### **Teshuvah, T'fillah, Tzedkah: Jewish Choices**

A religious young man made a visit to his sweetheart's family to ask her father for her hand in marriage. The father questioned him, "So young man, you are a full time student. When will you graduate?"

"The young man replied: "God will provide the answer."

The father continued, "Well, how will you afford to go to school?"

"God will provide," responded the young man.

"What line of work will you do when do graduate?"

"God will provide."

Finally, the father told him, "Look, my daughter was never denied anything her heart desired. How will you be able to provide for her and make her happy?"

"God will provide," answered the young man.

The father then went back to report to his wife. She asked him, "Nu, so how did it go? Is he a good match for our daughter?" The father sighed, paused for a moment to think and then said, "Well, on one hand, he has no money, no plans for the future, and no job prospects. On the other hand, he thinks I'm God."

Isn't that the way it is? A young couple, their future unknown are nevertheless giddy with hopes and aspirations. They're not sure how they'll get by, but they just know in their hearts that somehow they will make it. The older couple share a nostalgic smile at the youthful belief that love and future happiness are *besheret*, part of God's Divine plan. But the parents are also wizened by experience. They know that miraculous help from God starts right here. It requires our own choices, our own actions.

During these High Holy Days we have read new translations of the *Untaneh Tokef* prayers that have presented such a vexing challenge to Jews for generations. The list of “Who shall live and who shall die” in the coming year used to be burdened by a literal translation that contains a confusing and even upsetting contradiction. On one hand it says: “On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed.” But then it concludes that no matter what was written and what was sealed, all can be overcome through our actions: *teshuvah*, *t’fillah*, and *tzedakah*, through repentance (returning to the right path), through prayer and through charity (righteous giving).

So what is it? Is our destiny all in God’s hands, *beshert*, unknowable, unfathomable, and mysterious? Or has God empowered us so that our lives are governed by our choices and our actions? The Torah and 3,500 years of Jewish teaching give a clear and unequivocal answer, an answer we just read this morning from the Torah:

*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants will live!* (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Of course, this does not mean that everything is in our control. From birth to death, through health and sickness, successes and failures, triumphs and disappointments, we have come to expect the unexpected. In our hyper-connected, hyper kinetic world news travels fast. The overload of information can heighten the sense of our vulnerability, our frailty, and our mortality. So who are we to speak so confidently about our choices!? And yet, note that the Torah and Judaism do not teach that our choices will shield us with some kind of Divine immunity from sickness, strife, or setbacks. At the very beginning of the story of our family, Abraham and Sarah were

promised by God that they and their descendants will be blessed if they choose to move to a new land, the Promised Land, the land that would one day be named after their grandson Jacob-Israel. They chose to go. However, immediately after entering the Promised Land and receiving God's blessings, a severe famine broke out that forced Avram and Sarai to flee to Egypt (Genesis 12). So, did they choose wrongly? No! The father and mother of our people made a brave choice that is honored as a seminal event, a positive turning point for all of human civilization. But what about God's promises to them. Were those false? No! God's promise was that future nations around the world would bless themselves through Abraham and Sarah. God promised that their descendants would be blessed, numerous, talented and prosperous, out-lasting even the largest and strongest of empires. At the time of that promise it must have seemed too far-fetched for our ancestors to fathom. In fact, well over a thousand years afterwards, the Greeks and then the Romans mocked our Torah and poked fun at the ludicrous idea that nations around the world would bless themselves through Abraham and Sarah and hold sacred the teachings of the Jewish people. And yet, today 2-billion Christians and a billion Muslims bless themselves through Abraham and Sarah. Christians, from its Jewish founders on, have held sacred the Hebrew Bible.

Today, God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is so clearly evident to us and to the rest of the world. However, in their own days, they experienced tremendous challenges, set-backs, and times of strife and deprivation. And yet, regardless of how difficult things were, they never gave up. They never quit. Their determination, their faith, their vision that the future of their family would indeed be blessed has established a template for all of us. Jews in every generation faced challenges that boggle our

imaginations. And in every generation we have utilized our God-given talent, determination and resources to respond heroically.

Today we look back with awe and deep respect at the responses and choices made by our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and so on going back hundreds of generations. We are here today, safe, secure, and relatively prosperous in great part because those who came before us made the blessed choice to ensure the well-being of the future generations. They survived exile, pogroms, and the Holocaust. They endured church sponsored and state sanctioned oppression. They came half-way around the world to this country with little or no money, speaking little or no English, living in tenements, working in sweat shops, starving and sacrificing and saving whatever they could so the *kinder* and the *kinder's kinder* could have a better life. What joy they felt when the kids came home with good grades or got a decent job. Oh, and what *naches* they felt when we were all together in *shul*. Imagine how proud they would be to see us here today, thousands of Jewish families in a beautiful synagogue, safe, secure and strong. And what pride we all felt when, 50 years ago this Yom Kippur, Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in the World Series in respect for our holiest of days.

Perhaps it is precisely because of our long and sometimes difficult history that we never take for granted that any one family or, for that matter, an entire generation will make the right choice. And because we are people that takes the time to reflect, repent, and learn, we note our poor choices, correct our mistakes and improve our lives.

Tradition has it that on this very day, on Yom Kippur, the generation of our ancestors that was freed from Egypt made the terrible choice to build and then worship a Golden Calf. At the very moment Moses was receiving a Divine revelation at Sinai,

some chose to worship an idol. Of course when Moses found out he gave everyone the business and then some. And later, on this very day of Yom Kippur, Moses prayed for forgiveness. And through our ancestor's sincere acts of reflection, repentance, and *tzedakah* they felt forgiven. They felt God's grace.

So what happened on the very next day, the day after that first Yom Kippur at Mount Sinai? Well, on that next day, Moses created a congregation. I suppose it was the very first Temple Sinai! How did he create the first Temple Sinai? It is written, "*Va-yakhel Moshe et kol adat B'nei Yisrael, Moses congregated all the Israelite community*" (Exodus 35). He instructed them that instead of building statues and idols to worship, they should build a House of Worship. He taught them to build a Temple where we can all gather to pray and study and reflect and create an awareness of our personal and communal connection to God. Moses taught them the value of creating a place where we could both celebrate life's joys together, as well as support and nurture each other through times of grief and sorrow. He assembled talented artists, architects and craftsmen and they provided a long list of the necessary materials and resources to build that first Temple Sinai. And he initiated our people's first building campaign, exhorting the people, saying: "*K'chu mei'eet'khem terumah la'Adonai, kol n'deev libo, Take from among you contributions for Adonai, from all who have a willing heart.*"

Moses had no way of knowing how the people would respond. The day before they had melted gold to build a Golden Calf. Now, after the idol was ground into dust and bitterly consumed, would the people step-up and make contributions to build a House of Worship? The list of required materials and resources was long and costly. What would the people choose to do?

Well, you know the answer. The people gave willingly and unstintingly. They contributed, knowing that this first Temple Sinai was to be a sacred home for their friends and loved ones today and for generations to come. Day after day, week after week, month after month they contributed. Their generosity was so great that they had supplied more than enough. In fact, the people brought so much so that the builders told Moses, "Tell the people not to bring any more. We have more than enough!" (Apparently, some of our ancestors were bringing to that first Temple Sinai their old prayerbooks and a few of the *tzachkees* they had collected along the way and which none of the kids or grandkids wanted. Alas, the Temple was not collecting those old books, which caused a bit of drama that thankfully was not recorded in the Torah!)

Well, as you know, our Denver Temple Sinai embarked on a vital campaign which the members called "Building Our Future." It was an ambitious plan that addressed a critical need to replace a crumbling school with a safe and wonderful new Learning Center that would meet and even exceed the modern codes and standards. Our new Learning Center has earned glowing praise from parents and students and represents our proud commitment to the coming generations of our people.

Building Our Future also enabled our community to renovate this Zwerin Sanctuary, along with the surrounding Social Halls and Study. Though we still have a tweak here and there, the new lighting, carpeting, seating, and sound system were essential to meet the needs of our families. By all accounts, the renovation has been a success! And very dear to my heart is the fabulous Abrahams Family Chapel, our newest and exquisitely beautiful worship space. It too is still a work in progress, as the stained glass windows, lectern and *bimah* furniture are still being completed. But just a

few days ago, hundreds of you joined together as we celebrated its *Chanukat ha-bayit*, its dedication. What a thrilling, memorable and historically significant day that was!

As Wendy Vean, our Temple President, shared with you, we have done remarkably well raising the voluntary contributions for Building Our Future, but we still have a ways to go. I know in my heart that we will be able to raise all the necessary funds. But we just can't wait for God to provide all that we need! No, we have to do our part. Indeed, Judaism has long cherished the democratic tradition of every person contributing to the Temple so that all will know that the Temple belongs to them. As in every generation, some will contribute more substantially because they are blessed with the means to do so. Some will donate anonymously and Temple Sinai was especially blessed when one of our members contributed \$1.5 million and requested to remain anonymous. By the way, all of those pledged funds which initiated a successful matching grant have all been received and have greatly reduced our debt service.

While anonymous donations are extraordinary, there is also a great deal to say about having one's family name associated with the building of a synagogue. When you go to Israel and tour the remains of ancient synagogues, the names of those who contributed to the building are still evidenced. "So & so donated the doorway. This one donated the social hall. That one donated the mural." Two-thousand years later we are still reading the names of those families. Likewise, Temple Sinai also still has a few naming rights available to honor your family's gift to Building Our Future! And just like it was in ancient Israel, in addition to large gifts, everyone is urged to contribute in order to express proudly that: "I helped to build this Temple, this synagogue, this spiritual home for our people." That, too, is our goal because Temple Sinai belongs to all of us.

On Yom Kippur our fate is not sealed. Rather, we are presented again with the opportunities to express our finest qualities, our noblest values. Things happen, circumstances change beyond our control. But how we respond is fully in our hands.

*Teshuvah:* We learn from our mistakes, we grow and return to a better path.

*T'fillah:* We pray and rediscover our considerable spiritual powers and the need to express them.

*Tzedakah:* we fulfill the sacred act of charity and thereby lift up the lives of all those around us and establish a home for the future generations of our people.

This is not a trifling matter. Who we are is directly reflected in what we do. The prominent place of *teshuvah*, *t'fillah*, and *tzekakah* on these, the holiest days of the year, is not mere lip service. No, these are the very core of who we are. The holy actions of repentance, prayer and charity define us and challenge us. Status quo, standing pat, being self-satisfied are not qualities to be proud of. Rather, we seek to better our lives, our lot, and the well-being of all those around us.

We define ourselves and challenge ourselves by learning from our mistakes. We define ourselves and challenge ourselves by reflecting on the meaning and purpose of our lives, a process we call prayer. And we define ourselves and challenge ourselves by acts of charity, sacred giving because each of us is personally empowered to make a positive difference in this world for those who are with us today and for those who will follow us tomorrow. Let us do what we can to build a better world. Let us do what we can to Build Our Future!