

Parashot Netzavim and Va-Yelekh

"Jewish Church"

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Two and a half weeks ago, shortly after I signed a document stating that I accept Judaism to the exclusion of all other religions, faiths, and practices and pledge my loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people under all circumstances, Rabbi Lisa took me aside and handed me a folded-up dollar bill. "There's a tradition," she said, "of giving someone who's going on journey a dollar. The only catch is that you have to give it to someone else before they go on a journey." It was a very poignant gift at a very poignant--and in many ways vulnerable--moment in my life.

A couple of nights later I realized I had forgotten about the dollar bill, and I searched frantically for it, finally coming to the pitiful conclusion that I had spent it at the Del Taco drive-thru on Santa Monica and Highland. "My rabbi gave me one of the most meaningful gifts of my life," I thought, "and I spent it on a Spicy Jack Quesadilla."

Fortunately, I checked the pockets of the pants I had worn that day, and there was the dollar bill, tucked deep inside. "Phew," I thought, "if I wasn't a Jew, I would have gone to hell for that."

The day of my bet din and mikveh, August 13, was a destination I'd had my eyes on for a long time. But Rabbi Lisa knew that my real journey was just beginning. There's a popular phrase that's grown into somewhat of a cliché these days: The point is the journey, not the destination. Call me an idealist, but I believe it. In many ways I've been on a "Jewish journey" my whole life. When I look back now, I can see so many signs that pointed toward my ultimately choosing Judaism. First of all, I was born in a place called The Jewish Hospital. That was actually its name: The Jewish Hospital. My brother and sister weren't born there. And they haven't become Jewish...yet. Second, I grew up in a predominantly Jewish area of St. Louis. When the winter holidays rolled around, in school we were as likely to sing "The Dreidl Song" as "Jingle Bell Rock." And there was always plenty of matzoh and hard-boiled eggs to be had in the high school cafeteria during Passover. Third, for the past few years, whenever I've gone home for Christmas, for some mysterious reason we've always

eaten at a place called Mandarin Delight. To top all that, in third grade each student in our class had to read a biography of a historical figure and then dress up as that person and perform an account of their life. Who did I end up choosing? Harry Houdini. Not only a Jew, but a man. In my top hat and orange corduroy sports coat, I was the only kid in the class to choose a Jewish historical figure, and the only one to cross-dress--which pointed toward another inclination that would rear its head right around the time I discovered Sabrina on Charlie's Angels.

A few weeks ago I went out to dinner with BCC board member Vanessa Eisemann and her

girlfriend Cate Whiting. We were talking about how children who are different or unpopular usually grow up to be very interesting and exceptional people. For sure I was a different and unpopular kid. In junior high I wore boys' tube socks up to my knees, spent much of my time collecting butterflies and insects and then methodically labeling them and pinning them to boards, and at lunchtime I'd quickly eat a packet of salted almonds, then dash to the library so no one would know I didn't have any friends to sit with. Yes, I was unpopular and unusual. But I told Vanessa and Cate that I had no idea how I became the person I am today. I'm not saying I always like that girl, but I get along with her most of the time.

I told them it was strange that I evolved into who I am, considering the family I grew up with. My father was a Baptist minister who was a prominent leader in the anti-Communist movement in Missouri in the 1950s. He was also a country-western singer, a radio evangelist, and the publisher of *The Soldiers of the Cross Gazette*, a Christian newspaper that boasted lunatic headlines like "The Beatles Are the Anti-Christ." In that same paper, he sold b.b. guns and tear gas in case of a race riot. My mother, on the other hand, dropped out of high school, high-tailed it from her small farming town at the age of 16, got a job waiting tables in St. Louis--which she did for 50 years--and stopped attending church in the 1960s (which explains why I was, thankfully, never baptized).

Although she imparted to me the values of hard work, integrity, and honesty at all cost, and although I love her with all my heart, sometimes I think we're as different as night and day. One afternoon on the phone, for example, in her thick Southern drawl, she said that my brother had told her I was going to church. "What?" I said. "Church?" "You've been going to church," she repeated. There was a long pause, and then she finally said, "Jewish church!"

The night I had dinner with Cate and Vanessa, on the drive home I thought some more about our discussion, about how people become who they are, and I realized how I had come to be the person I am: I chose her. Nearly every decision I've made in my life--both good and bad--has brought me to where I am. When I was in grade school, we had to write an essay on how we envisioned ourselves in the year 2000. I would be 30 then. The only 30-year-old I knew was our next-door neighbor, Sandy Martin: a very large Greek-Orthodox mother of three who wore floral-print housedresses and sat in front of her kitchen TV for hours watching *Mannix* reruns. That's who I would become, I thought. But I didn't become Sandy Martin. I often remember that story when I think about who I am now, and I think about how back in 1979 in the suburbs of St. Louis I never could have imagined that I would become a Jewish lesbian, comic-strip-drawing, cello-playing, West Hollywood-dwelling pescovegetarian gay-and-lesbian book editor with an unrestrained passion for Zionism, social change, Torah, and yes, *Mannix* reruns. But besides the lesbian part, these were all things I chose. I suppose I could have chosen not to act on my lesbianism, but I didn't. Whether consciously or subconsciously, I chose the life I'm living today. And I've been very fortunate to have in my life teachers who are friends and friends who are teachers to help guide me. Each day that I make my choices, I steer my life--and the lives of others--in new directions.

This issue of choice appears in this week's two Torah portions, *Netzavim* and *Va-Yelekh*, in which one of the most famous passages in the entire Tanakh appears, a passage that is also read on the morning of Yom Kippur. In his final discourse with the Israelites before his death, Moses says:

I call heaven and earth to record this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life, that both you and your offspring may live. To love Adonai your God, listen to God, and cleave to God, for God is your Life and the length of your days.

Cleave to God. I think that phrase is so lovely. But what exactly does it mean to "choose life"? In this passage, Moses says, "God is your Life," so I suppose to choose life means to choose God. That makes sense, on a very simple level.

But I also think the instruction to choose life means that we must choose our lives, choose the path we take, the direction we go in. To choose our life so that we may live. But we can't just wake up one day and say, "Okay, this is how I want my life to be" and then it magically appears. Life is more complicated than that. It's made up of millions of choices we make over the course of our lifetime, from whether we say hello to our colleagues and neighbors, to whether we speak honestly and with an open heart to each other, to whether we live with integrity and courage.

Everyday we make choices that affect ourselves and the people in our lives, as well as those scattered around the globe. We make choices that are big and choices that are smaller. We choose who we spend our time with. We choose who we love. We choose where we work, how we make our living. We decide whether we will devote eight or more hours a day to work we believe in or work that merely brings a lot of money into our checking account. Frequently we make choices out of fear or shame or apathy. Sometimes we choose what we think is best for us and not what we really want or need. Other times we choose what we think society at large--and our peers--expects of us. And often we're so accustomed to our lives that we don't even realize we make choices. But we do...constantly. We choose our lives.

We also choose whether we'll close our eyes to what goes on in the world--or whether we'll speak out and take action. Closing our eyes, in fact, can be very appealing; it can be what we consider a means to self-preservation. There's a lot of beauty in the world, but it can also be a truly ugly place. It's a world where thousands of black African women and children are bought and sold as inheritable property in Sudan and Mauritania, largely ignored by those of us who claim to inhabit the "civilized" world. In fact, all over the world--in countries such as India, Cambodia, Brazil, Thailand, Japan, Bosnia, and a dozen others--upwards of four million people annually are kidnapped and sold for profit, 50,000 of whom are trafficked into the United States for use as sex slaves, garment and agricultural workers, and domestics. We live in a world in which five-year-old children are tied to rug looms in countries such as Pakistan, where they are subjected to physical abuse and spend years in bonded labor. And right now in Western Europe--an area we Americans often uphold as a beacon of democracy and freedom--synagogues are regularly torched, Jews terrorized, their cemeteries profaned. It's easy to close our eyes to these horrors. It's more comfortable. But if we do close our eyes, it's a choice we make.

The name of the first of this week's two Torah portions, Netzavim, means "standing." I assume it's called that because the Israelites were standing when Moses delivered his final speech. But "to stand" has other connotations. When you stand for something, you make a choice to uphold what's close to your heart, to fight what you believe is wrong or cruel or

inhumane, to make decisions that are in alignment with Jewish values.

To take a stand means being adamant, to have an educated and fervent opinion and to speak out about it. A friend of mine recently called me a fanatic when we were debating a hot issue. It didn't offend me. "A fanatic?" I said. "That's great! At least I'm passionate about something, which is more than a lot of people can say."

What do you stand for? What do we as Jews collectively stand for? What kind of person do you want to be? How can we, as Moses asks, choose life, choose to live our lives in ways that are in harmony with our beliefs and with Torah? How can we make meaningful choices when what is right is neither obvious nor ours alone to define?

Another well-known passage--and one that is also read on Yom Kippur morning--appears in Netzavim and addresses this issue and the nature of Torah itself: "Surely, this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day is not too extraordinary for you, nor is it beyond reach," Moses tells us. "It is not in the heavens, that you should say 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us that we may observe it?'.... No, the thing is very close to you--in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it."

Are we listening with our hearts? Do we feel the words in our mouth as they roll off our tongue? Or do we just let them fall out? What is buried in our hearts? Is it what we publicly take a stand on? Is it what we choose to live? The choice, ultimately, is up to us, whether we'll make our choices out of fear and shame and comfort, or whether we'll listen to our hearts, be true to ourselves, take difficult risks, and choose to live life so that we--and others--may live.

I think that's what's so great about calling myself a Jew by Choice. I chose to be Jewish, meaning I chose life. When I decided to become Jewish, so many people--Jews especially--asked me why in the world would I want to do something like that. I couldn't believe Jews would ask me that. "How can they not know?" I thought. "Don't they feel it? Isn't it close to their hearts?" In this drash, I didn't go into why I chose to become Jewish, because I think you all already know, because if you listen closely, you'll hear the answer in your mouths and in your hearts.

Earlier tonight, before Shabbat services began, I placed the folded-up dollar bill Lisa gave me in the BCC tzedekah box on the wall over there. Partly because I didn't want to accidentally spend it on, I don't know, a Twix bar, but really because I wanted to give it in honor of everyone here tonight, and all BCC members, as I wish for you a journey into the New Year filled with choices that come from your heart and from cleaving to God, and from allowing yourself to choose life so that you--and others--may fully live.

Shabbat Shalom. Shana Tova.