

Yom Kippur morning, 5763 - September 16, 2002

"She's moving, she's moving"

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One of you recently sent me this thought-provoking reflection on comparative religions:

When you are in your casket, and friends, family, and congregates are mourning over you, what would you like to hear them say?

Episcopal Priest:

"I would like to hear them say that I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man."

Catholic Priest:

"I would like to hear that I was a wonderful teacher and a servant of God who made a huge difference in people's lives."

Rabbi:

"I would like to hear them say, 'Look, she's moving!'"

It's funny and it's also true, I think. Judaism opts for humor even at sad and scary times. And Judaism opts for life, at all times. We're mostly not inclined to fantasize about what will happen after we die. Even on Yom Kippur, when we emulate the condition of death by not eating, not drinking, etc. we do so not to imagine what death will be like, but rather to ask all the questions we might ask ourselves if we knew this really were the last day of our life. We emulate death on YK in order to spend a day truly focused on our lives: on how we've lived until now and perhaps more importantly, how we want to live as soon as this day ends and we return to life. The symbolism of Yom Kippur really does, in fact, allow us to be moving in our coffin – to stand up at the end of the day and return to life renewed.

Jews are life focused: "Therefore choose life," it says on our table cover for the Days of Awe, quoting the passage from Deuteronomy that we'll read shortly in the Torah portion for this Day of Atonement. "I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse: choose life therefore that you may live, you and your descendants." [Deut. 30:11?]

Of course, this exhortation to choose life does not mean that we get a real say in when we die. We don't have to look far to know the truth of that. The wonderful Jewish Journal columnist, Marlene Adler Marks, who died just before Rosh

Hashanah, has been chronicling for a couple of years now her journey through the lung cancer that took her life. In her last column, just a couple of weeks ago, she talked about her own teshuvah, repentance: This year, however, as I contemplate in yet a new way the impact of lung cancer, there's no one to whom I owe apology more than myself. Yes, many of my apologies go to me.

. . . .

[But] it's different to pardon myself. At the base of the apologies I owe myself, is a youth spent trying to stay in control. I thought I had it covered. I didn't know anything. S'lach lanu. Forgive us. Forgive me for thinking I had anything under control. In that same column, Marlene apologized to herself for not eating more hot dogs in her life...for depriving herself of things she enjoyed for the sake of her health and well-being.

It put me in mind of the opposite remark the musician Ubie Blake is said to have made on his 100th birthday: "if I knew I was going to live this long I'd have taken better care of myself."

Forgive us for thinking we have anything under control. When God, through Moses, tells us to choose life – they are not talking about choosing how long we will live nor how we will die. I do think God and Moses are talking about what we do with our lives for as long as we have them. I think they're talking, among other things, about attitudes and choices.

Last week, at services for our 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah, we heard read a quotation from the Maimonides, the Jewish scholar and medical doctor of the 12th century.

Do not imagine that character is determined at birth. We have been given free will. ...We ourselves decide whether to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly. No one forces us, no one decides for us, no one drags us along one path or the other; we ourselves, by our own volition, choose our own way.

Maimonides, 12th century, Hilchot Teshuva 5.1f

Maimonides writes much on this subject – he is a firm believer that free will is given to every human being. Only humans have the ability to distinguish between good and evil and the power to choose one or the other is always in our hands. [Gates of Repentance, p. 7, Hilchot Teshuva 5.1]

I wonder if Maimonides is right – I want him to be. I want to be able to say to those of you who confide in me about your struggles that the choice is yours. In fact, I often do say so. But I am not convinced that so much is up to us – some certainly. But haven't you seen what I've seen? – a propensity in some people for bitterness, for blame – and others --equally challenged by the randomness of life –

exude true sweetness and appreciation for life, for their particular life. True learning comes to them from what life has brought them.

We can easily see too what attitude brings to people by way of other people. Those who are bitter turn people away from them—sometimes deliberately, sometimes innocently – they wonder why people seem to avoid them, do not come around.

And those who are sweeteners of life? people flock to them – no matter their circumstance, no matter the challenge, there are people standing by ready, eager to help.

If only what draws us to such people could be bottled. It has been I guess – it is a kind of honey.

But what makes one person bitter and another a sweetener of life? Clearly some people do have choice in this – we know because we've seen them turn around, make a different choice, decide to change their attitude. It's a marvelous sight to see – I'm grateful to have been witness to such transformations in people. But although I certainly advocate for such change in people, I also don't feel I have much influence in the matter. I don't have the key to unlock the secret attitude panel of the soul, of the heart.

I remember many years ago hearing of a poll taken of people who live in Iowa. It seems that 64% of them claimed they would like to be reincarnated as themselves. [Harper Index 1991] I don't know why I remember that poll – probably because Tracy and I used to live in Iowa – in fact, that's where we met, 17 years ago. And I don't have any other information about the poll which leaves us free to speculate on what it means. Are we worried about those folks who want to be reincarnated as themselves or do we admire them? or perhaps we're among them. Think about it for a moment. Maybe it's not a sign of smugness or of naiveté or of a lack of self-knowledge--all of which are possible explanations. Maybe what we have there is a lot of people who are working hard to make their lives what they want them to be. Maybe what we have are people who appreciate how far they've come, and who simply want to keep going now that they've gained such self-awareness.

Clearly they are people who choose life, and I suspect they are also among the sweeteners of life. What a gift I think, not only to live your life appreciatively, but to think "who I am is who I want to be." Which is not to say they think they are perfect, or that their lives are perfect, but only to say "I am working on it." Presumably these are people who love life; more to the point, they love their life.

Clearly Judaism argues that we have choice in this matter attitude toward life. Our haftarot on Yom Kippur morning and afternoon insist that choice is ours.

Obviously, so does the “choose life” Torah text that we read this morning, as well as the Torah for this afternoon –which includes the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. These Torah texts were chosen for Yom Kippur over a hundred years ago by our Reform Judaism ancestors. Texts that exhort us to be our best selves, and that call on us to encourage others to be their best selves as well. The haftarot complement them perfectly (it’s what the word haftarah means afterall). This morning’s haftarah from Isaiah tells us that God desires us to “unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain” [Isaiah haftarah for YK morning]. Come afternoon we will learn from Jonah --the prototype curmudgeon -- that tshuvah, repentance, is part of tikkun olam, part of our responsibility to help repair the world, whether we want to do so or not. It’s a choose life stance, however begrudgingly Jonah finally takes that stance.

Our Yom Kippur texts come to tell us what Yom Kippur itself comes to teach: that the world is incomplete, BUT that we can help to make it whole. As Rabbi Harold Schulweis teaches, “Torah is not concerned with what is, but with what ought to be.” And never more so, I think, than on YK do we see Torah’s concern for what ought to be, both on the Torah page and in the Torah (“the teaching”) of our self-examined lives. Rabbi Schulweis elaborates on Judaism’s betzelim elohim image – the central Jewish notion that Jennifer Clayman spoke to us about here on Rosh Hashanah morning last week – the notion that every human being is made in the image of God. Rabbi Schulweis suggests that the image of God in each human being is potential, not actual. There is in each of us an evolving tselim (image), he says, but it is up to us to grow that image, to enable it to reach its full potential. And how do we get there? how fulfill our potential? There is, I think, a recipe for reaching our potential to be found in our liturgy for the Days of Awe.

Last night I spoke some about our Jewish values – But I left out the recipe which contains 3 big Jewish values (I left them out because I was saving them for this morning): the 3 we hear a lot about during the Days of Awe. Heard about again a few minutes ago during the unetaneh tokef prayer. Anyone?

tshuvah tefilah tzedakah a frequently repeated recipe: Judaism’s trinity, Judaism’s triptik – the kind you get from Triple A – the collection of maps personalized for your trip -- that show you exactly how to get where you are going from the very place you choose to begin. Each of the 3 values is a wonderful blend of self reflection/introspection and a facing outward to the world – Repentance, prayer, just action – all 3 require that you neither ignore yourself nor wallow in your lot in life. They require you to turn inward, but only in order to turn outward.

Take Tshuva – “repentance” – “turning,” a value and an action that can be done any time of the year, but is particularly encouraged just before and during the Days of Awe. The sages of Midrash Rabbah speculate that God actually created

and/or thought up a few things prior to creating the heaven and the earth, and included as one of these early inventions on God's part was tshuvah (repentance). The great contemporary Talmud scholar, Adin Steinsaltz, commented on this theory that repentance was "among the entities created before the world itself," saying: before we were created, we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives. In this ... sense repentance is the highest expression of our capacity to choose freely – it is a manifestation of the divine in us. By repenting, we can extricate ourselves from the binding web of our lives, from the chain of causality that otherwise compels us to follow a path of no return.

[Furthermore,] even though the past is 'fixed,' repentance [allows the] possibility of changing the significance of the past in the context of the present and the future.

[Adin Steinsaltz from *The Strife of the Spirit*, p. 102-103, as reprinted in *Kol Haneshamah - Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* from the Reconstructionist Press, 1999, p.8]

Repentance allows us not only to change ourselves –in the future I will not do this again – it also allows us to change the significance of the past – when we seek and receive forgiveness for a past action from another human being, we change the impact of that action on that person's future as well as on our own. And perhaps most importantly, teshuvah, repentance, tells us that change is possible. We are not stuck.

Tefilah – prayer. The root of the word comes from judgment. Some say prayer is about judging our own self. On Yom Kippur, we pray for God to judge us from the throne of mercy rather than justice. On Yom Kippur we keep a delicate balance of humility and optimism – we affirm our own goodness through the humility with which we pray. We reflect on our choices, our wrongdoing, our relationship with God, and we do that in the company of others – in fact we all pray for each other. We agreed to do so last night in the permission to pray recitation just before Kol Nidre. Prayer is both a team sport and an individual event...well not quite individual – we do it in partnership with God. Through prayer we look inside – we look outward – we look up – we connect. It's hard to "sport a tude" during sincere prayer. Done sincerely, prayer can help us change our attitude.

Tzedakah – last but not least. Often defined as "charity," we tend to prefer the translation of "just action," or justice. This one too cannot be done alone – or at least not for oneself alone. By definition tzedakah calls us to tikkun olam – to help repair the world by putting more justice into it.

If you're ever going to take these values seriously, today would be a good day to start (or continue). It is a day designed for tshuvah tefilah and tzedaka – turning,

prayer, just action. It is a day in fact to get into the habit of them. And Yom Kippur is a day in which reincarnation is promised, and if we've upheld our values, if we've honed our skills in tshuvah tefilah and tzedaka, then we will indeed be reincarnated – reborn – as ourselves – as our better selves.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy and theology insist that the choice is ours – to be the persons we want to be. Shall we give it a try?

This year, this day, let us seal ourselves into the book of life – for good. g'mar tov