

The Conservative Synagogue
of the Hamptons
@The Jewish Theological Seminary

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וּבַחֲרַת בַּחַיִּים
CHOOSE LIFE

ימים נוראים תשס"ו
DAYS OF AWE 5766

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1. ROSH HASHANAH EVENING

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמּוֹת וְאֶת־הָרָע: . . . הַחַיִּים
וְהַמּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בַחַיִּים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Choose life. It is hard to make choices. We make so many of them, and it seems like more every day. We spend so much time and energy making such trivial choices -- researching endlessly which new camera or computer or toothpaste to buy. But we so rarely stop to think about the most fundamental choice there is: choose life.

These ten days -- these Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe -- are a particularly good time to be focusing on the question of choosing life. Among the many intertwining themes of these days, the single most salient is the question of life, which recurs with great frequency throughout the liturgy. We pray to be remembered for life (zokhreinu l'chayim), and to be inscribed in the book of life (b'sefer chayim). And we ask, in the Unetanneh Tokef, mi yichye umi yamut -- who will live and who will die.

However, when we contemplate the commandment to choose life within the context of the Yamim Noraim, we immediately encounter a contradiction. We will spend the next ten days pleading for our lives, pleading for God's compassion and mercy, and confronting the inevitable fact that each of us will one day die. All of which implies that life is not something we can choose. So also the mishnah (Pirkei Avot 4:29) teaches us, in the name of Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar:

שָׁעַל כָּרְחַךְ אֶתָּה נּוֹצֵר, וְעַל כָּרְחַךְ אֶתָּה נוֹלָד, וְעַל כָּרְחַךְ אֶתָּה חַי, וְעַל כָּרְחַךְ אֶתָּה מֵת,
וְעַל כָּרְחַךְ אֶתָּה עֲתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֲשׂבוֹן לְפָנַי מִלְּךָ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא:

It was not your will that formed you, not was it your will that gave you birth; it is not your will that makes you live, and it is not your will that brings you death; nor is it your will that some day in the future you will have to give an accounting and a reckoning before the Sovereign of sovereigns, the Holy blessed One.

And yet, the Torah commands us to choose life, suggesting -- indeed more than suggesting -- that life is within the realm of our choice.

So which is it? In whose hands sits the choice of life and death -- our own, or a force beyond us we call God? Clearly, it is a combination of the two.

The mishnah and much of the High Holy Day liturgy speak to one level of human experience: we are born and we die, and we are placed into a system that we have no hand in creating. Indeed, many things are not of our choosing, at least not that we know of. This is true not only regarding our literal birth and death, but also with respect to the way we live. Part of our being is composed of chemical processes, which, as we know, affect our physical, emotional, intellectual, and even our spiritual lives. We do not choose the level of pre-natal care we received, and we do not choose the kind of upbringing we received as children. We do not choose whether we are encultured into a world with seemingly infinite opportunities, or whether we are raised in a society of severe constriction. We don't choose our natural talents or natural weaknesses. So I certainly will not make the claim that everything is within our choice; it's simply not true.

However, the Torah challenges us to push past that aspect of experience so that we can encounter another -- perhaps deeper -- reality:

רֵאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע: . . . הַחַיִּים
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See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Life and death are placed before us today -- literally today, Rosh Hashanah -- and we are told to choose life. If the Torah is to mean something, there must be some essential way, in which life and death are handed over to our choice. We live in both realities: in the knowledge that there are things which are beyond our choice, and with the deep understanding that so much is within the power of our choice.

So one very basic implication of this commandment to choose life is that each of us has to choose whether to focus on those aspects of life which are not within the realm of our choice, or on those aspects which are. The Torah advises us -- commands us -- to use our energies in areas of life in which we do have choice. And that is where I want to begin tonight.

Where is the line? It is tempting to posit a distinction between physical life and death (which we would say is not within our choice) and spiritual life and death (which we want to say is). In traditional rabbinic language, this distinction is sometimes framed as the distinction between this life and life in the world to come.

It is an appealing, but overly facile, distinction. First, physical and spiritual life are intimately intertwined. They are interdependent, the each one influencing and enabling the other. Second, while it is generally true that we have less choice in areas of pure physicality (e.g., the formation, health and aging of our bodies) and more choice in the realm of the spirit, that is not always the case.

For example, there are times (perhaps more often than we want to take responsibility for) when even the question of physical life and death lies within the purview of our choice. It is true that all living things die. But as individuals and as societies, we make choices which can prolong life or hasten death, choices which are conducive to life or to death. We make choices about caring for our bodies, caring for each other, caring for our environment. An individual may not choose the society into which he or she is born, but each society chooses what kind of life, and death, it can offer to the citizens born into it. Our recent horrific experience with Hurricane Katrina, for example, should certainly cause us to question the extent to which the policies of our government and society fulfill the Biblical command to choose life. The commandment to choose life does place upon us both personal and political responsibility to make life-affirming, life-supporting decisions wherever possible --literal, *mamash*, physical life.

Now, on the whole (not *always*, but most often), because those choices involve sacrifice, they can be difficult to implement. But on the whole, they are not all that difficult to understand. We *know* that it is completely unacceptable for a society to tolerate the kind of poverty and powerlessness that has been revealed to us (as though it was not readily apparent before) in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. We *know* that that's a choice -- an unacceptable choice, a sinful choice -- that our society has made. I don't think anyone in this room needs help understanding the wrongness of that choice. And most of the choices which place physical life and death in our hands are those kinds of choices, in which we know what to do, but we don't do it. Mostly, it's not that they're complicated choices; they're just not comfortable choices. Because when it

comes to choosing physical life, our instincts are usually pretty good; our will is sometimes weak.

Admittedly, there are times when choosing physical life does get complicated, as for example, when there are competing life claims on limited resources, or when one life impinges on another.

And here, I need to offer a disclaimer. It is not my intention on these Yamim Noraim to speak about specific political issues. Most notably, despite my selection of "choose life" as a topic, I will not be speaking about the issues surrounding what has come to be considered under a rubric called "right to life." They are not my subject not because they're not important; they *are* important. And not because they're not "Jewish issues;" they *are* Jewish issues. And not because I don't have an opinion; I can assure you that I most certainly do. They are not my subject because they are not really the work of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Debating a political issue is too comfortable; it is too ready a refuge from the more challenging work of confronting one's own soul. So I'll leave those issues for another day, except to say this.

Whenever a verse from the Torah is co-opted as a slogan -- whenever the infinite, eternal word of God is reduced to a single, simplistic meaning -- we should be suspicious, indeed more than suspicious. Because that is not choosing life. That it is a choice which saps the Torah of its life force, of its life-affirming power and its truth; it is a choice which turns God's word into a dangerous weapon in the service of cowardice. "Choose life" is not a political slogan. It is a subtle, complex opening -- an invitation as well as a command -- into an infinite number of ever-deepening realms of meaning. And I intend to spend our time together over these *Yamim Noraim* delving more deeply into those meanings, and into the nature of our choices.

So to come back to our subject. I've said that when it comes to choosing physical life, our instincts are pretty good, but our will is often weak. But when it comes to choosing spiritual life, meaningful life, even our instincts often fail us. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great theologian of the 20th century who wrote and taught in these halls:

Shakespeare's Hamlet said: "To be or not to be, that is the question." But that is no problem. We all want to be. The real problem, biblically speaking, is *how to be* and how *not to be*; that is our challenge, and it is what makes the difference between the human and the animal. ("No Religion Is an Island," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 252).

How to be, and how not to be? That is the question. Obviously, it is one we cannot answer fully tonight, but we can at least begin.

Today is *Yom HaDin* -- the day of judgment. The Talmud teaches:

אמר רבי כרוספדאי אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה ספרים נפתחין בראש השנה, אחד של רשעים גמורין, ואחד של צדיקים גמורין, ואחד של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים, רשעים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה, בינוניים - תלויין ועומדין מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים. זכו - נכתבין לחיים, לא זכו - נכתבין למיתה.

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the *beinonim* (intermediates). The thoroughly righteous

are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the *beinonim* (intermediates) -- they are suspended, and stand from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not merit, they are inscribed in the book of death (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

Traditionally, this is most often understood to mean that we are judged for our prior deeds. The text presents an image of God reviewing our record over the past year, or beyond, and making a determination about whether we qualify as righteous. Based on that determination, God writes us into one book or another. Most of us, of course, are *beinonim* (intermediates), not righteous enough to be sealed directly into the book of life, but not so far gone as to be judged immediately for death. And so we have the next ten days until Yom Kippur -- or, some say, until Hoshana Rabbah -- to correct the record and win a favorable verdict.

But there is a hasidic understanding of the nature of these books, from Netivot Shalom, the teachings of the Slonimer Rebbe¹, based on the teachings of a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. He says as follows:

היינו שפותחים שלשה ספרים חדשים שכל אחד רושם את עצמו לשנה החדשה
באיזה שרוצה.

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe himself for the coming year.

The books are open, and we have to choose. The issue is not reward or punishment for the past; the issue is our commitment today for the future. We have to choose: what direction will our lives take?

I'm aware as I say this that we are sitting in an academic institution, with many students among us. Most of us remember, fondly or otherwise, registration period, in which we have to sign up for courses. The students among us have just been through that process, with all of its issues and questions: What's required, what's elective? What do I need to learn, what do I *want* to learn? Do I choose by subject, or go with the best professor? Can I handle the workload?

It's actually a pretty good parallel. Our question today is, what course will we sign up for? It is not a decision to be made lightly; it involves a commitment to a path which, for many if not all of us, might involve making some changes in our lives.

I hope to spend the coming days exploring the contours of this decision. What does it mean to choose, and specifically to choose life? How do we write ourselves into the book of life? The first step is to fully enter these *Yamim Noraim* -- to open ourselves to the possibility that we may come to see the need for different choices.

The Netivot Shalom continues:

The books are open with a view toward the future. Indeed, even when a person does an accounting -- cheshbon hanefesh -- of his soul and knows that according to his sins, there is no way for him to enter the Day of Judgment, indeed the book of the wholly righteous is open before him from this point forward, to write himself in it from today on.

1. Netivot Shalom, on Rosh Hashanah, "Hayom Harat Olam," quoting Toldot Yaakov Yosef.

רָאָה נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם -- I have set before you *today* life and death; choose life. One of the most radical, hopeful, loving extraordinary gifts within this command to choose life is that it can be chosen at any moment, it can be chosen today.

I began this evening by distinguishing between that which is within our choice, and that which is not. And I suggested that the command to choose life contains within it the fundamental exhortation to choose to focus on that which we can choose. We have no choice about the past. We all come here today with different histories, different track records, different challenges, strengths and weaknesses, different physiological makeups. We are of different ages, different levels of experience. There is not much we can do about all of that. But we all have choices about our futures.

Now, I'm not saying that examining the past has no role here. We do need to look at our past, so that we can learn from it. We also need to repair whatever wrongs we have committed, and heal what we have broken. Part of our commitment for the future has to be to take responsibility for our actions, and we can begin doing that right now. These days are of course centered around the process of *teshuvah* -- repentance, return, response -- when we are called to engage in an accounting of our soul (*cheshbon hanefesh*). But the point of our *teshuvah* is not to simply regret the past, to dwell on our mistakes and feel guilty about them. The point is to change the future.

All the *teshuvah* that we do -- the regret, and shame, the *cheshbon hanefesh*, the confession -- can easily become an excuse for not changing, a cover for staying with the same behavior. "Well," we tell ourselves, "at least I feel really bad about it." I went to shul, I felt guilty, isn't that enough? Actually, no, it's not enough. The purpose of our time together here, of our *teshuvah*, is to ready ourselves to sign one of the books. That is the choice we have to make.

The books are open. We have until Yom Kippur to make our decisions, to gather our strength, to deepen our understanding and commitment, and then -- to affix our signatures. I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.

2. ROSH HASHANAH DAY 1

We are focusing our study this year on a section from Deuteronomy:

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע: . . . החיים
והמוות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בְּחַיִּים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Last night, we ended our discussion with a Talmudic passage about three books which are opened before God on Rosh Hashanah:

אמר רבי כרוספדאי אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה ספרים נפתחין בראש השנה, אחד של רשעים גמורים, ואחד של צדיקים גמורים, ואחד של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורים - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים, רשעים גמורים - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה, בינוניים - תלויין ועומדין מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים. זכו - נכתבין לחיים, לא זכו - נכתבין למיתה.

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the *beinonim* (intermediates). The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the *beinonim* (intermediates) -- they are suspended, and stand from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not merit, they are inscribed in the book of death (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

And as I noted last night, we usually understand this text to mean that we are judged for our previous year's deeds. The image is of God reviewing the record of our days, and making a determination regarding the particular book into which each one of us will be inscribed.

But then we began to read the text differently. We looked at a hasidic understanding of these books, from the teachings of the Slonimer Rebbe², based on the teachings of a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov:

היינו שפותחים שלשה ספרים חדשים שכל אחד רושם את עצמו לשנה החדשה באיזה שרוצה. ואם מקבל עליו לשנה החדשה להיות נמנה בין הצדיקים ושימלא יעודו ותפקידו בעולמו מעתה.

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe himself for the coming year.

So the Netivot Shalom is reading our verse thus: "I have set before you today, i.e. Rosh Hashanah, life and death, i.e., these books that are open. Choose life -- that is, write yourself into the book of life."

It's very nice, but we have to ask, what's the issue here? Who among us wouldn't choose to write ourselves into the book of life? Isn't that what we all want? Isn't that what all our prayers are about?

2. Netivot Shalom, on Rosh Hashanah, "Hayom Harat Olam," quoting Toldot Yaakov Yosef.

Well, maybe yes, and maybe no. We human beings do have, I believe, an inherent longing for life; indeed, so much of our pain in life is related to our mortality, to the fact we are finite, limited. But when we speak of “the desire for life,” of an instinctual will to live, we are actually conflating two fundamentally different drives. These two drives sometimes manifest in similar behaviors, but they derive from diametrically opposed sources. And this commandment to choose life -- to write ourselves into the book of life -- challenges us to distinguish and choose between them.

What are these two different desires, which we lump together under the rubric of longing for life?

The first is the desire for immortality. We don't want to die. It is virtually impossible for the ego to contemplate its own non-existence. And not only do we not want to die, but we don't want to deteriorate. We don't want to lose our power, our strength, our health, our sense of self. We don't want to get closer to death.

On the surface, this desire for immortality seems to be “choosing life.” In reality, however, it is a desire grounded in the ego -- in the simple desire for self-perpetuation -- and in the fear of death and “not being.”

Admittedly, this yearning for immortality can sometimes be channeled in very constructive ways. People do a lot of useful things in an effort to ward off death. Indeed, the *yetzer hara* (the evil urge) -- of which the yearning for immortality is a subtle form -- often does lead to socially useful behavior. As the midrash (Gen. R. 9:7) teaches, if not for the *yetzer hara* a person would not build a house, marry, have children or engage in commerce.

But fundamentally, the desire for immortality is not on the “choose life” side of the equation. Therefore, not surprisingly, as often as it yields constructive behavior, it equally often -- if allowed to go unnoticed and unchecked -- lies at the root of behaviors which create a form of death in life.

Our inability or unwillingness to accept the limitations of the self, to come to terms with the inevitability of our own decline and deaths, manifests in such as behavior as:

- spending a fortune on products to mask our age, even undergoing surgery;
- an inability to love our children as themselves, treating them instead as extension of ourselves, imposing on them our unfulfilled desires and goals;
- wasting our energy accumulating excessive wealth and stuff, as though money or material goods could provide some protection;
- wasting our resources pursuing professional success, status, prestige -- as though if only we are well enough known, important enough -- we will be spared the fate that all humans share.

Ultimately, of course, the quest for immortality is fruitless. There is no protection from mortality, and there is nothing that a human being can do, or say, or create, which will, in and of itself, last forever.

And actually, it is worse than fruitless, because the desire for immortality is focused on the self, and its petty needs. The life which we are commanded to choose is a life of goodness, as we have been reading, “See, I set before you today life and *good*” (רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם) (אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב). There is nothing inherently *good* -- morally good -- about a life lived for the sole purpose of living longer, or even living forever.

So much for craving immortality.

Ah, but then there is the yearning for eternity. The yearning for eternity is a very different thing, and it comes from a very different place. The yearning for eternity is not about having endless days, more time, and everlasting ego. The yearning for eternity is an expression of the soul's deep desire for connection with its Source. It stems from our noblest strivings to surpass ourselves, to live our days in such a way that our deeds make an impact beyond the inevitable end of our own lives. The yearning for eternity is a yearning for transcendence.

This type of longing is the voice which knows deeply that there must be more to life than eating, sleeping and earning a living, avoiding pain, and having as good a time as we can along the way.

The longing for eternity manifests as a desire to heal the world in some small way, to heal another human being. To help someone in need. To right a wrong. To fight for justice. To advocate for the silent. To feed those who are hungry. To grow in wisdom and depth. To elevate and sanctify all of life. To make a difference.

The yearning for immortality is the voice of the ego. The yearning for eternity is a form of Divine call. It is the inner expression of the commanding voice of God, the intuitive understanding that, in Heschel's words,

Living is not a private affair of the individual. Living is what man does with God's time, what man does with God's world. (*God In Search of Man*, p. 356).

We have to choose: which voice will we allow ourselves to hear? Which voice will we attend to, respond to? Which voice will govern our decisions and our actions?

There is nothing inherently terrible about desiring immortality. It's just that when we choose that as a prime motivator in life -- or more accurately, when we fail to choose something else -- we spend our days chasing a phantom. So too, it is human to fear death; but letting that fear dictate our choices is a waste of life.

So, we are told which voice to heed: choose life. Seek eternity, not immortality.

Surely, though -- one may object -- we are supposed to value simple physical life too! Doesn't the command to choose life teach us to value physical life, life in this world? Isn't saving a life the highest Jewish value, which trumps almost all other mitzvot? Aren't we supposed to push off death as long as we can, and treasure every moment?

Generally, yes, of course. And it is certainly not my intention to devalue or denigrate literal physical life. But, life is precious precisely *because* every moment of life is an opportunity for eternity, not because we have any hope of immortality. If anything, we experience the beauty of life most intensely when life is poignantly juxtaposed with mortality. We value physical life most when we confront the impossibility of immortality while embracing the potential for eternity.

Indeed, life is most truly joyful -- not merely fun or free from pain or anxiety, but *really* joyful -- when we sense that possibility of touching eternity. The things that give us the greatest joy in life are the things that point to the possibility of transcendence: love, beauty, kindness. Moreover, when lived properly, every aspect of life -- not only the "nice" parts -- reveals that potential.

So how do we seek eternity? How do we follow the soul's soft urging to transcend itself? The answer is at the same time very simple, and of course, quite challenging.

The simple part (not easy, but simple) is: we respond to the command. And this issue of command points to one of the most amazing things about our verse directing us to choose life:

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע: . . . החיים
והמוות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

On the one hand, we are told that God has set before us life and death, blessing and curse, and it is up to us to choose. But, in the very same breath we are told what to choose, i.e., life. What kind of choice is that, if we are told what to choose? And, of course, this isn't just good advice, such as a friend would offer when we're making a decision. This is God speaking, *commanding*. So we seem to have a paradox.

Now, it is possible to understand this paradox as simply highlighting the difference between commandedness and compulsion. We human beings are commanded, we are not existentially compelled. In this respect we are unique among all created beings. An angel is existentially compelled to fulfill its mission. A tree is existentially compelled to fulfill its mission. It has no real choice but to be the tree that the Divine Will commands it to be. It is the same with all that is created; God commands "let there be light," and there is light. Only we humans are created with the capacity to fail to fulfill what God demands of us.

So yes, we are commanded to choose, and to choose a particular path -- but we have the power to refuse. God commands us to choose life, and we have a choice as to whether to obey that commandment. We are commanded, but not existentially compelled, to choose life. That is one way of resolving the seeming paradox in our verse, in which we are given a choice, while being commanded to make a particular choice.

But it is not a complete resolution. I believe that the structure of our verse points to an even deeper truth. The fact that the core issue of life is framed exactly in this way -- as a combination of choice and command in one utterance -- teaches us that life, choice, and commandedness are intertwined and interdependent.

We've said that the yearning for eternity is a form of Divine call, the inner expression of the commanding voice of God. Why have a *commandment* to choose life? Because the only real life is a life lived in response to commandment, in response to that Divine demand.

What is commandment, really? Commandment is an expression of God's desire, and of God's stake in us and in our choices. The language of commandment is the language of relationship and investment. The only way for a human deed to taste of eternity is if it is in relationship with, responsive to the Eternal. We touch eternity by allowing the Divine Will to shape our lives and guide our choices. When we do that, we make choices which have the capacity to extend beyond our own limited lifespans, and even beyond the lifespans of all those who know us and are influenced by us.

And this is one way of understanding what our tradition refers to as life in the world to come. As Heschel says:

The greatest problem is not how to continue but how to exalt our existence. The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending to the grave. Eternity is not perpetual future, but perpetual presence. He has planted in us the seed of our eternal life. The world to come is not only a hereafter but also a *herenow*. (*Man Is Not Alone*, pp. 295-96).

It's not about getting a reward in some subsequent realm or mode of being. It's about transcending one's own existence in the here and now

That's the simple part - choose to respond. Then it gets more challenging. Because of course, the sense of God's call, an intuitive understanding of a Divine demand, is only a beginning. Once we choose to heed that call, we are choosing a life-long path of struggling to better understand the Divine demand, to spell out its contours, to attune ourselves to its sensitivities, to more accurately approximate what choices we are called to make when. Our instinct is capable of detecting that there is a Divine voice calling to us; it is not always so accurate in figuring out what that voice is saying. For that we need learning, we need community, we need commitment to paths proven to lead to transcendence.

The Hebrew term for beings with free will is *ba'alei bechira*, literally "masters of choice." It is an idiom -- Hebrew often uses the word *ba'al* to refer to the concept of being possessed of a certain trait or characteristic. But here I think the term carries weight beyond its idiomatic meaning. Our verse challenges us to train ourselves to be literally *ba'alei bechira*, masters of choice -- that is, wise and skilled in exercising our capacity to choose. It's a lot of work, and sometimes it requires sacrifice.

Once we say yes, I choose to live a life of service, in response to the Divine Will, then we are obligated to make choices to acquire the skills and insight necessary to do that. We are obligated to learn more about ourselves in some serious disciplined way. We are obligated to learn more about God in some serious disciplined way, that is, through the study of Torah. We are obligated to develop practices which help us discipline ourselves to make the right choices. And we are obligated to actively participate in communities which will support us in making the right choices, even when those choices are difficult. To become true *ba'alei bechira* -- masters of choice -- we need to refine our will. We have to educate our minds and sensitize our spirits so that we know what to choose. We have to choose place ourselves in situations which will assist us in following through on those choices

And so we come back to our original question: Who wouldn't choose to write themselves into the book of life? What's the issue? The issue is, in order to write ourselves into the book of life, we have to choose between chasing immortality and touching eternity. We have to give up the ego's illusion of a sovereign self and not only verbally crown God as Sovereign, but do the work necessary to live that way. Put another way, each of us has to ask: Is my life going to be only about myself -- in service solely to my own interests and my own desires -- or is it going to be responsive to something beyond myself? Will I allow myself to sense a Divine demand, a Divine claim, God's investment in me, or not? Will I respond, or not?

Choosing life *means* choosing to respond; it *means* linking one's life to something beyond one's own existence, needs, and desires. This is what we learn from the paradox in our verse -- a commandment to choose and a commandment what to choose: to choose life is to choose beyond one's own life.

3. ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2

דאמר ר' יהושע בן לוי: כל מעשה בראשית - בקומתן נבראו, בדעתן נבראו, בצביונם
נבראו.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All the animals of the creation -- were created in their full-grown stature, they were created with their consent, and they were created according to the shape of their own choice (Rosh Hashanah 11a).

This is a powerful text for us today. Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of creation; specifically, it is the anniversary of the sixth day of creation, the day that humanity was created. And it is more than just an anniversary. We pray today "*Hayom Harat Olam*," today the world is born. It is actually happening today. The world is being created today. Humanity is being created today. We -- each of us individually -- is being created today. So what are the implications for us today, on Rosh Hashanah, of this brief teaching Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: "All the animals of the creation -- were created . . . with their consent, . . . according to the shape of their own choice"?

We know that creativity involves making choices. Now we see that the creature -- the product of creation -- has a choice in its own formation. This idea will be familiar to any one here who has ever engaged in truly creative work of any kind, whether it be writing or the visual arts, building a business, or any creative enterprise. At some point in the creative process, the thing being created begins to direct its own form. The same is true of us. So to say that we are created today isn't fully accurate; that's too passive a phrase, and this is not a passive process. We create ourselves today, and we do so by choosing.

Fundamentally, *all choices are creative acts*. Our choices create reality. And not only do they create a reality out there, they create a reality in here, in our hearts and minds and souls; they create us. Each and every one of us creates ourselves constantly through the choices we make. In the end, we are the sum total of our choices; we are beings freely created according to the form we choose, not only at creation, but at every moment. Like now.

Now, we have been grappling on these *Yamim Noraim* with a passage from the Torah:

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע: . . . הַחַיִּים
וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבְחִרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching that we choose our own form suggests a particular understanding of this commandment to choose life.

To choose life we have to choose to actively, consciously, continually choose who we will become. We have to create ourselves and our lives, and not simply allow ourselves to be shaped. At the most basic level, we have to choose to choose.

The command to choose life expresses a reality that life energy comes from the exercise and expression of the will, from making choices. We are most fully alive when we are actively, consciously engaged in the process of choosing who to be. The moment that we allow ourselves to be a certain way simply because we have always been that way, or we're comfortable that way, or society pressures us to be that way, or a particular person wants us to

be that way, or any other reason other than a conscious, thoughtful decision to be a certain way -- we have died a little. We have chosen death, not life.

And this choice itself -- to embrace our power to choose, to actively consciously create ourselves -- is neither intuitively obvious, nor easy.

This opportunity on Rosh Hashanah to create ourselves anew is a tremendous privilege. It is also a tremendous responsibility, and sometimes a terrifying or burdensome one.

We have been speaking of the three books open on Rosh Hashanah:

אמר רבי כרוספדאי אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה ספרים נפתחין בראש השנה, אחד של רשעים גמורין, ואחד של צדיקים גמורין, ואחד של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים, רשעים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה, בינוניים - תלויין ועומדין מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים. זכו - נכתבין לחיים, לא זכו - נכתבין למיתה.

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the *beinonim*, intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the *beinonim*, intermediates -- they are suspended, and stand from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not merit, they are inscribed in the book of death (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

And we spoke about the hasidic interpretation (Told Yaakov Yosef quoted in Netivot Shalom), that:

היינו שפותחים שלשה ספרים חדשים שכל אחד רושם את עצמו לשנה החדשה באיזה שרוצה.

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe himself for the coming year.

This is a beautiful reading of a difficult text. Many of us uncomfortable with the idea of God sitting in judgment and decreeing life or death, even apart from the anthropomorphism. But as beautiful as this reading is, it may (and perhaps should) make us even more uncomfortable: because it puts the responsibility squarely on us. We have to choose

This is perhaps one reason why we need to be *commanded* to choose life. Otherwise, we might not choose at all, because it is so very tempting to avoid actively choosing our own lives -- our own selves -- either by simply reacting, or by being passive.

Indeed, all too often, we readily relinquish our power to choose, and we do it for many reasons. Sometimes we don't want to bear the responsibility for our choices. Other times, we simply don't know what to choose. Often, however, we *do* know what to choose, but the right choice feels too demanding; it involves too much work, or loss, too much change, too much risk.

And we have many strategies to avoid choosing. Some of us are passive, and simply allow life to happen to us. Other times we avoid choosing by being reactive and reflexive, acting on

impulse without discipline and analysis. And often -- in a particularly subtle and seductive avoidance mechanism -- we avoid having to make choices today by simply sticking with the choice we made yesterday, for no other reason than that we made it. This particular strategy is especially dangerous because it carries with it the risk of idolatry; we pledge our primary allegiance, we even worship, our own choices and commitments.

In fact, as I alluded to earlier, the Torah's account of the Akeidah presents precisely this issue. If Abraham had not been actively listening, continuing to re-choose at every moment, he would have sacrificed his son on the altar of his previous decisions. We do it all the time. To choose life means that we don't make a choice today simply because it was the choice we made yesterday, and for no other reason.

And of course, when we fail to make choices -- when we slough off our responsibility to choose who we will become -- that is also a choice. We are free to choose, but we are not free from the burden of having to choose. And it is not the choice of life; it is the choice of evil, curse, death.

Now, I mentioned that sometimes we avoid choosing because we don't know what or how to choose. This is real; it is not easy to know what to choose. But the fact that we don't know how to choose doesn't let us off the hook. We have to choose to become people who *will* know how to choose. Each choice that we make changes us a little, and changes the way we perceive and decide the next choice. With each life decision we make, we become someone else, and it is that new person who will make the next choice. So our question is not only, who will I be if I make this choice, but, will making this choice turn me into someone who is better able to make the next choice? What will this choice teach me? Will it increase my courage, my strength? Will it deepen my capacity to love, sensitize me, educate me? Will it help me to tolerate greater depth, rise to the next challenge? Will it shore up my moral footing, or will it make me more susceptible to ever greater ethical compromise?

Yesterday we spoke of becoming *ba'alei bechira*, masters of choice, through the study of Torah, through deepening our understanding of ourselves, through participation in community, and through discipline in our deeds. True free will is not simply granted, it has to be acquired. We have been comparing this moment of creation on Rosh Hashanah to the original creation. And we remember Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching: All the animals of the creation were created in their full-grown stature, they were created with their consent, and they were created according to the shape of their own choice. There is one fundamental difference between the original creation and now, between the animals and humans: they were created full-grown, in their final form. We are not. We grow into who we are meant to be. And we have to grow also into our capacity to choose, we have to grow into *ba'alei bechira*, masters of choice.

Now I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that every aspect of who we are is chosen, and that we have complete free-reign to "self-create." It's not true. There are two ways in which that is not the case, in which our choices to create ourselves are in some ways limited. We spoke about the first way on Monday night: there are things which are not given over to our choice. We are all born with certain physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics -- particular strengths, talents and abilities, weaknesses, challenges, and limitations. We are all born into certain social and familial structures. And as I said on Monday night, with respect to these kinds of issues, we must choose to focus on those aspects of our being which are within the realm of our choice.

But the second way in which our choices about self-creation are limited is more complex. Although we are commanded to choose to create a self, we do not choose in a vacuum. The

question is not merely who we want to be, but who are meant to be. As Heschel says:

Who is man? *A being in travail with God's dreams*, with God's dream of a world redeemed, of reconciliation of heaven and earth. God's dream is not to be alone, to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. (*Who Is Man?* p. 119).

We are partners with God in the drama of continuous creation, and first and foremost in the continuous creation of *ourselves*. We are formed as a result of creative dialogue between ourselves and the Divine. Between our own hopes and dreams, and God's hopes and dreams. Between our desires, and our sense of mission

We began with the teaching of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: "All the animals of the creation -- were created in their full-grown stature, they were created with their consent, and they were created according to the shape of their own choice" And what form did we humans choose?

Here is what the Sfat Emet says. At Creation, *l'da-atan nivru* -- all creations chose for themselves -- each one -- its own particular form. And we humans, he says, chose "a special kind of life," with a Divine portion from above -- that is, a soul. In other words, we chose to be this wonderful, challenging, grand, tragic combination of earth and heaven, of body and soul, of being dust and in the image of God. And every Rosh Hashanah, we have to choose it again. We have to choose first and foremost to become fully human, and, in the most general, universal way, to fulfill humanity's purpose in creation. For the Sfat Emet, that means everything we spoke about yesterday: choosing again to receive the Sovereignty of Heaven, choosing to respond to the Divine demand. That, according to the Sfat Emet, is exactly what the commandment "choose life" means, and it applies most specifically today, Rosh Hashanah.

But I want to take the Sfat Emet's idea of reconfirming on Rosh Hashanah the soul's choice, and go a step further. We not only have to choose to become fully human in a general way, but we have to choose to become in a very particular way who we are meant to be. We human beings are created unique among all creatures in many ways. One of the ways in which humanity stands out is our individual uniqueness, one from another. Each one of us has a particular soul, a particular purpose. And this idea of our having a role in choosing our own created form applies not only to Humanity as a whole, but to each one of us as individuals.

We have each, jointly with God, chosen a mission. It is a form of contract.

Now here, I want to be very clear. I am not suggesting that every aspect of our lives is chosen. In the face of certain kinds of suffering and pain, it would be an inexcusable affront to claim that that kind of suffering is chosen. I don't believe that.

But some things are chosen. Our core purpose, I believe, is chosen. So when we choose who to create ourselves to be, our choice is, at the deepest level, a process of recovering. It is a remembering, a reconnecting, reaffirming a choice our souls and God made long ago.

We spoke earlier about the difficulties of choosing, and about the many reasons why we avoid choosing. But there is one reason we haven't discussed: choosing raises existential angst. This complicated creation called humanity that we and God have chosen for us to be is a being in pain. We suffer the pain of being able to conceive of an all-encompassing, universal unlimited reality, while being ourselves limited and finite, unable to contain it all. We feel pain at being able to envision seemingly incompatible things coexisting -- we can think

it, feel it, imagine it -- without being able to live that way. We have to choose, and it hurts. Choosing, for us, means giving something up. And therefore, there are those who say that having to choose is a form of exile -- exile from the part of the self that is of God, from our own infinite, eternal soul.

It is not a problem that can be solved. It is a dilemma that can only be managed. And the way to manage it is not by avoiding choice, but by choosing to be who we and God meant us to be. When we choose to return to who we are supposed to be, we heal some of that sense of exile.

We come back to the teaching of the Netivot Shalom on the three books open on Rosh Hashanah:

היינו שפותחים שלשה ספרים חדשים שכל אחד רושם את עצמו לשנה החדשה באיזה שרוצה. ואם מקבל עליו לשנה החדשה להיות נמנה בין הצדיקים ושימלא יעודו ותפקידו בעולמו מעתה.

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe himself for the coming year. And if one accepts upon one's self for the new year to be placed among the tzaddikim (the righteous), and *that one will fulfill one's purpose and assigned role in the world from now on*, by means of this, he or she is written and inscribed immediately for life. "And the intermediates and the wicked ones . . .": these are those who do not accept upon themselves to fulfill their goal and role in the coming year, obviously, of itself (ממילא), they have no further role in the world.

This is the essence of teshuvah: seizing the opportunity -- at every moment, but especially now -- to return to one's purpose and role in the world, to re-attune one's self to the soul's true destiny and choice, and to make life choices which will turn us into the people we were meant to be. Choosing life, then, is combination of creation and discovery.

And how do we know who we are meant to be? Well, through all the processes we spoke of yesterday and this morning. And then some other intangible thing, some ineffable, deep knowing. Very often, when it comes to really big decisions, we know which choice is consistent with who we were meant to be. Think about the times that you really have felt you have no choice, and go a bit deeper. Was there really no choice, or did you just know that choosing another option would turn you into someone you don't want to be, someone you weren't meant to be?

In those moments, at times of really significant decisions, when we make the right choice we have a sense of coming home. There is a feeling of inevitably, of compulsion by something or someone to whom we must be true. That is true *teshuvah*, that is choosing life. The challenge is to make the effort to get to that depth of connection with ourselves, and our purpose. The challenge is to get all the other stuff out of the way. It takes time, discipline, and most of all, it takes courage.

So we have to take a deep breath, embrace our power and our responsibility, and begin to ask the question: In the coming year, who shall I create myself to be? Who am I meant to be? Choose accordingly.

5. KOL NIDRE

We have been speaking on these Yamim Noraim of the verses from Deut. 30:

רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע: . . . הַחַיִּים
וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בַחַיִּים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . life and death I place before you, blessing and curse: choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

We have been focusing on the command, “choose life,” and we have asked already, a fundamental question: why is this a commandment? Generally, the Torah commands behavior which is not otherwise intuitive. Surely living is something we do without being commanded. Why do we have to be commanded to choose life?

We have thus far answered that question in a couple of different ways. We have spoken not only of the substance of the choice (that is, life), but of being commanded to choose -- to actively create one's self, rather than be passively formed. And we've spoken of the idea that to choose life *means* to live in response to Divine command. That Divine investment, God's demand, is an essential part of meaningful life -- without a command to choose life, to which we can respond, we would exist, yes, but never really fulfill what a human life is meant to be. And we spoke of the commandment to choose life as challenging us to distinguish between our desire for immortality, and our desire for eternity. In that context, we spoke at length about the dangers of allowing our desire for immortality -- our fear of death -- to govern our choices in life.

Tonight I want to offer yet another answer to why we need a commandment to choose life.

Yom Kippur is very much a confrontation with death. Physically, we are enacting death. We dress as we will dress, or as we will be dressed, when we are buried -- in white linen, in a kittel. We deny our bodily needs and pleasures. It is an attempt to experience ourselves as pure spirit -- without a body, as we will be in death.

The liturgy also places us face to face with death. Tomorrow we will once again pray the Unetanneh Tokef, that terrifying, awe-inspiring prayer. The imagery is that we pass before God the judge, as a flock of sheep passing beneath the shepherd's staff, one by one, counted, evaluated, judged:

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִפְתָּבוּן, וּבַיּוֹם צוּם כְּפֹר יִחְתַּמוּן

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass away, how many shall be born, who will live, and who will die. Who will attain the full measure of his or her days, and who will not.

On one level, all of this is about confronting our mortality, our actual physical death, and there is some value in that. None of us knows what will happen in the coming year. None of us knows who will live to see another Yom HaKippurim, and who will not. And in confronting our eventual death, hopefully, we increase our sense for the value of life.

But of course, as we have been saying, the main focus is really not the issue of physical death. When we pray the Unetanneh Tokef, most of us don't really believe that our physical life or death this year depends upon how successfully we pray on Yom Kippur. We all die at some point. We don't have control over that. And do we really believe that whenever that happens,

that particular year, we were ineffective in our praying on Yom Kippur? Of course not.

Ultimately, Yom Kippur is not primarily about confronting our fear of death. We confront death, we enact our own deaths not to confront our fear of dying, but to face the fear of death so that we can get it out of the way and address the deeper fear -- the fear of living. The issue today is not how to avoid death, but our tendency to avoid life. And our task is to learn how to avoid death in life.

I am not denying that we human beings fear death, or that the fear of death is significant. But I suggest that our fear of death is not really that we will die, but that we will die without having really lived. And it turns out that real life is much more frightening than death.

So why are we so afraid of living? Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

Man's plight . . . is not due to the fear of non-being, to the fear of death, but to the fear of living, because all living is branded with the unerasable shock at absurdity, cruelty, and callousness experienced in the past. A human being is a being in fear of pain, in fear of being put to shame. . . . The fear of living arises most commonly out of experiences of failure or insult, of having gone astray or having been rebuffed. It is rooted not in being but in living of our being, in the encounter with other human beings, in not knowing how to be with other beings, in the inability or refusal to communicate. . . .

Very simply -- we are afraid to really live because we've been hurt. Because real living exposes us to real pain

To really live means to acknowledge how desperately we want to encounter other human beings, to really be with other people, to really communicate -- to know and be known. But if we acknowledge how much we want and need that, then we will be confronted with how rarely we achieve it. We will have to face the fact that we're often not very good at being with each other, that we don't have the skills to really communicate. If we begin to really live -- to nurture our need for genuine encounter with other human beings -- we will begin to feel how overwhelmingly lonely we often are. And, my God, how that hurts.

We have encountered so much callousness and cruelty, that it is easier to become ourselves a little bit callous and cruel, to convince ourselves that life is tough, and that is as it should be. It is too hard to persist in the effort to be gentle, sensitive, open.

So today, on Yom Kippur, we have to confront -- face to face -- our fear of living. And what is the nature of that fear? How does it manifest itself? It manifests in questions that we seldom articulate, but which I believe lie at the core of lives:

- If I take the risk of showing that I am vulnerable, will I be taken advantage of?
- If I take the risk of revealing my reverence, will I be mocked?
- If I allow myself not to be perfect, if people see that I'm flawed, will I be rejected?
- If I love, will I be hurt?
- If I let others know what it is I really care about, will those people also value and protect the things I care about, or will they denigrate them?
- If I am tender, gentle, sensitive, will I be considered weak?
- If I allow myself to feel more deeply, will I have some feelings I don't want to feel?
- Is it safe to acknowledge that I love more than I am loved in return?

Is it safe to acknowledge that I am not fully in control of my emotions, or my actions?
Is it safe to acknowledge that sometimes I lose my way, do something inappropriate, feel something disproportionate?
Is it safe to acknowledge that I'm afraid?
Is it safe to acknowledge that I don't have it all together?
Can I risk being who I really am, instead of who people expect me to be?
Can I afford to have values that are not in keeping with mainstream society?
Can I afford for there to be some things that I don't know, that I'm not good at, that I still need to learn?
If I reveal the core of who I am, will I be understood and accepted, or will I be judged, rejected, criticized?

The answers to these questions aren't always the answers we'd want them to be. If we love, sometimes we are hurt. When we are vulnerable, reverent, open, sometimes we are mocked, taken advantage of, rejected. We live in a world in which it is not entirely safe to be fully alive. But we have to do it anyway. Because the fear of living is paralyzing -- it strips away our humanity, it deprives us of meaning in life. We have to risk meaningful life, because playing it safe -- avoiding real living -- is a form of death in life.

But confronting our own fear of living -- and taking the risk of living more deeply -- is only part of the work of Yom Kippur. Because we are the ones responsible for each other's fear of living. Who has created a world that is not safe for meaningful living? Who has created a world in which the authentic expression of the deepest parts of our souls is often met with ridicule or derision or disregard?

We have.

We have been hurt? We have hurt others.
We have been judged and misunderstood? We have judged and misunderstood others.
We have been ignored and disregarded? We have ignored and disregarded others.
We have been used to meet the needs of others? We have used others for our own needs.
We have not been heard? We don't listen to the people we claim to love the most.

So the other piece of our work today is not just to confront our own fear of life, and to choose life for ourselves, but to examine and change the way we respond to the people around us who are also struggling to live deeply, and who are afraid, because of us.

Do I turn away from genuine expressions of emotion or spirit -- change the subject, make a joke, deny or belittle the other person's experience?
Do I use others' vulnerability to competitive advantage?
Am I sensitive to opportunities in life to help or heal other people?
Do I encourage gentleness, or toughness, in the people around me?
Do I nurture and cherish others' dreams, or do I help to create an environment in which no one in their right mind would ever reveal their dreams?

This is one of the core reasons why we must do teshuvah with each other, why we do this private process in community. Why do we confess in the plural? What exactly are we doing?

What we are doing is agreeing with each other that in the future we will all try harder to make it safe to be a human being in this world. We are entering into a social contract of sorts.

Walter Brueggemann once said, "The job of a parent is to teach a child that the world is safe for souls." I believe that the the job of a Jew is to make the world safe for souls. On Yom Kippur we are asked to accept the job. To contract with each other -- with all humility, realizing that we won't be perfect -- that this year we will do better. To look each other in the face and say, "I'm going to be vulnerable with you. I'm going to speak truth about myself to you. And I want you to know that from now on, I will be someone with whom you can be vulnerable too. Your dreams are safe with me. Your heart and soul are safe with me."

Now this process which we do with each other -- confronting our fear of living, making this covenant, working to make the world a safe place for others to risk choosing life -- this process also operates on a higher level. And that is the level with God. Our willingness to take the risk of choosing life, and our efforts to make the world safe for living, affect God.

Because as much as we hurt -- God hurts too. What kind of world have we created with God's creation? To the extent that it is inhospitable to souls, it is also inhospitable to God. If it is not safe for us to be reverent, to express the best parts of our soul, to remain open and sensitive to the holy, then God is less present in the world. Our callousness and cruelty not only drive our humanity underground, but our callousness and cruelty banish God from our world. But as we open ourselves to others, and become people before whom others' souls are safe, we invite God's presence back to the world.

The job of a parent is to teach a child that the world is safe for souls. The job of a Jew is not only to make the world safe for our souls, it is to make the world safe for God. The job of a Jew is to show God that the world is safe for God's presence.

זָכְרֵנוּ לְחַיִּים, מִלֶּךְ חַיָּי בְּחַיִּים, וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים, לְמַעַן אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים.

Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the book of life for your sake, living God.

"Living God" -- we have to choose life not only for ourselves, but for God. This is, I believe, the essence of meaningful living, and what it means to be spiritually alive, rather than dead. That is what we pray for in the Unetanneh Tokef. And that is the kind of life that most of us are so afraid to live. So much so, that we have to be commanded to choose it.

On Yom Kippur, we reenact the service of the Kohen Gadol, which was performed in the Temple. There are many names for the Temple. One of my favorites, appropriate to my theme on these Yamim Noraim, is *Beit HaBechira*, "the house of choice." The name comes from the idea that it is the place where God will choose to dwell.

We no longer have a Temple. Now the place where God will choose to dwell is based on a different kind of choice, not God's choice but ours. Our task is to make every place where we dwell -- the entire world -- into *Beit HaBechira*: a home where life, and God, are chosen.

6. YOM KIPPUR MORNING

We have been speaking throughout these Yamim Noraim of two verses from Deut. 30:

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע: . . . החיים
והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בַחַיִּים

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . life and death I place before you, blessing and curse, choose life.

This morning I want to focus on a particular midrash, from the eighth century midrash, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (chapter 15):

. . . ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע. אמר הקב"ה
הרי שני דרכים הללו נתתי לכם לישראל אחת של טובה ואחת של רעה. של טובה
של חיים של רעה של מות.

. . . "See, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil" (Deut. 30:15). The Holy Blessed One said [to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus]: Behold, these two ways have I given to Israel, one is good, the other is evil. The one which is good, is of life; and the one which is evil, is of death.

The midrash deals initially with the path of life, but for our purposes today, I want to take them out of order, and deal first with the path of death:

ושל רעה יש בה ארבעה פתחים. על כל פתח ופתח שבעה שומרים מלאכים
עומדים. ארבעה מבחוץ ושלושה מבפנים. אלו שבחוץ רחמנים ואלו שבפנים
אכזרים הם. וכשיבא אדם להכנס בפתח הראשון הרחמנים מקדימין אותו ואומרים
לו, מה לך לכנס בתוך האש הזו? ומה לך לכנס בתוך הגחלים הללו? שמע לנו
ושוב בתשובה. אם שמע להם מוטב. ואם לאו אומר להם בהם חיי. ואמרו לו הרי
נכנסת לפתח ראשון אל תכנס לפתח שני. אם רוצה לכנס לפתח שני הרחמנים
מקדימין ואומרים לו, מה לך להיות מרוחק מתורת אלהים, שיהו קוראין אותך טמא
וברחים ממך? שמע לנו ושוב. אם שומע להם מוטב. ואם לאו הרי הוא אומר להם
בהם חיי. אמר לו הרי נכנסת לפתח שני אל תכנס לפתח שלישי. בא להכנס בפתח
השלישי הרחמנים מקדימין אותו ואומרים לו, מה לך להיות מְחֻק מספר חיים? לא
טוב לך שתהיה מְחֻק מהיותך מְחֻק? שמע לנו ושוב. אם שמע להן הרי מוטב. ואם
לאו הוא אומר להם בהם חיי אמרו הרי נכנסת לפתח שלישי אל תכנס לפתח רביעי.
בא ליכנס בפתח הרביעי הרחמנים מקדימין אותו ואומרים לו, הרי נְכַנְסְתָּ בכל
הפתחים הללו ולא שמעת ושבַּתְּ תשובה. עד עכשיו הב"ה מקבל השבים ועד עכשיו
הב"ה מוחל לעונות וסולח ואומר בכל יום שובו בני אדם שנ' תשוב אנוש עד דכא
אמרו אכזריים הואיל ולא שמע לראשונים יוציא רוחו שנ' תצא רוחו ישוב לאדמתו.

The way of evil. It has four doors (פתחים). At each and every door stand seven guardian angels -- four outside, and three inside. The (angels) outside are merciful; those within are cruel. When a person comes to enter the first door, the merciful angels go to meet him and say to him: "What have you to do with the fire beyond? What have you to do with those glowing coals? Listen to us and turn

in teshuvah.” If he listens to them, good. If not, he says to them: “My life is with them.”³ They say to him: “You have entered the first door; do not enter the second door.”

If he wants to enter the second door, the merciful angels go to meet him and say to him: “What benefit is it to you to be removed [distanced] from God’s Torah, so that they call you ‘impure’ and flee from you? Listen to us and repent.” If he listens to them and repents, it is well; and if not, he says to them: “My life is with them.” They say to him: “Behold you have entered the second door, do not enter the third door.”

When he is about to enter the third door the merciful angels go to meet him and say to him: “Why would you be erased from the book of life? Is it not better to be inscribed than to be erased? Listen to us and repent.” If he listens to them, good; and if not, he says to them: “My life is with them.” They say to him: “Behold you have entered the third door; do not enter the fourth door!”

When he comes to enter the fourth door the merciful angels go to meet him and say to him: “Behold, you have entered all these doors, and you have neither listened nor returned. Thus far the Holy Blessed One receives the penitent; thus far the Holy Blessed One pardons and forgives, and every day says: “Return, you children of man, as it is said, ‘You turn man to contrition’ (Psalm 90:8).”

The cruel angels say: “Since he would not listen to the first (angels), let us cause his spirit to depart,” as it is said, “Let his spirit go forth, let him return to his earth” (Psalm 146:4). . . .

The wrong path involves several stopping points, each of which is an opportunity to turn back. Moreover, there is help along the way; there are compassionate angels -- messengers, warnings -- to urge us to take a different path. In and of itself, this portion of the midrash is lovely, but not so very surprising nor earth-shatteringly original.

And what of the path of life?

של טובה יש בה שני דרכים אחת של צדקה ואחת של חסד. ואליהו זכרונו לברכה
ממוצע ביניהם וכשיבא אדם להכנס אליהו מכריז ואומר פתחו שערים ויבא גוי
צדיק שומר אמונים. בא שמואל הנביא ועמד לו בין שני דרכים הללו. ואמר באיזו
דרך אלך? אם אלך בשל חסד של צדקה טובה ממנה. ואם אלך בשל צדקה של
חסד טובה ממנה. אלא מעיד אני עלי שמים וארץ שאיני מניח את שתיהן ואקחם
לעצמי.

The good way itself has two ways, one of righteousness (צדקה) and the other of love (חסד). Eliyahu, may his memory be for a blessing, is placed exactly between these two ways. When a person comes to enter, Eliyahu declares: “Open you gates, and let a righteous nation, which keeps faith (אמונים), enter” (Isa. 26:2). Samuel the Prophet comes, and he stations himself between these two ways. He says: “On which of these paths shall I go? If I go on the way of

3. Alt. They say to him, “Among them there is no life.”

love, that of righteousness is better; if I go on the way of righteousness, that of love is better; I call heaven and earth to be my witnesses that I will not give up either of them, but will take them both for myself.”

Here, too, we are presented with a beautiful, but perhaps unsurprising image: when we seek to journey down the path of goodness and life, we are welcomed by Eliyahu, the harbinger of the Messiah and the world to come, who invites us and eases the way.

In juxtaposing these two images, however, we encounter a less traditional understanding of the of the path of life and the path of death. Most naturally, were we to imagine for ourselves the challenges of choosing life, we would likely come up with the scenario expressed by the classic rabbinic midrash:

משל לזקן שהיה יושב על הדרך והיו לפניו שתי דרכים אחת תחלתה קוצים וסופה
מישור ואחת תחלתה מישור וסופה קוצים והיה יושב בראש שתיהן ומזהיר
העוברים ואומר להם אע"פ שאתם רואים תחלתה של זו קוצים לכו בה שסופה
מישור וכל מי שהיה חכם שומע לו והיה מהלך בה ומתיגע קמעא הלך בשלום ובא
בשלום אבל אותן שלא היו שומעין לו היו הולכים ונכשלין בסוף. כך היה משה
פירש לבני ישראל ואמר להם הרי דרך החיים ודרך המות ברכה וקללה ובחרת
בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך

A parable of an old man seated on a highway from which there branched two roads, [one full of thorns at the beginning but level at the end], and the other level at the beginning but full of thorns at the end. So he sat at the fork of the road and cautioned passersby, saying, “Even though the beginning of this road is full of thorns, follow it, for it will turn level in the end.” Whoever sensibly heeded the old man and followed that road did get a bit weary at first, to be sure, but went on in peace and arrived in peace. Those who did not heed the old man set out on the other road and stumbled in the end. So it was with Moses, who explicitly said to Israel, “Behold the way of life and the way of death, the blessing and the curse. ‘Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed’” (Deut. 30:19). (Tanchuma Reeh Perek Gimel, see also Sifrei Reeh Piska Alef.)

The path of life and good is a difficult one at first -- its beginning is covered in brambles and thorns -- but ends up being easier. The path of death, and evil, is the opposite; it is seductive and easy at first, but in the end it becomes impassable.

Our midrash seems to set forth the opposite, and counterintuitive, image. On the path of life, one is welcomed. There are no real obstacles nor barriers, no problems needing to be solved. There is no guardian at the gate. The path of death is the opposite. We encounter barrier after barrier, gate after gate. If you want to go down that path, there will be obstacles -- compassionate angels, warning you to turn back. Surprisingly, the path of life looks -- at one level -- easier.

However, if we look deeper at the structure of each of these paths, something much more profound is revealed. The path of life is itself a fork in the road. On one side is *hesed*: love, compassion, free-flowing generosity and grace. On the other side is *tzedakah*: justice, righteousness, boundedness, judgment. Both are aspects of the way God manifests in our world, and both are attributes we are called to cultivate as we strive to imitate God. Unfortunately, in any given moment these two are often irreconcilable. Structurally, then, the

midrash presents to us a path of life that is defined as paradox, dialectic.

In contrast, the path of death is linear. True, there are more barriers on the path of death. But these barriers are easily surmounted: as soon as the traveller asserts his or her desire to enter, the guardian angels yield. The path *seems* difficult, but is in fact quite easy. At the very least, because it is linear, it is simple and uncomplicated. One goes from gate to gate to gate, in order, each gate yielding to our will and leading us directly to the next.

On the path of death, there are problems which can be solved and overcome. On the path of life, there is dilemma which can never be resolved, it can only be managed.

Why? Because real life is a dilemma; to be human is a dilemma. We are made of the dust of the earth, and we are made in the image of God. We are part animal, part divinity; at our very essence there is dialectic. To be a human being is to know deeply that truth lies in the embrace of irresolvable tensions, in holding extremes which can neither be reconciled nor released. To be a human being is to experience the pain of having to choose between two goods, two needs, two expressions of the Divine, two authentic expressions of the self. To be a human being -- to be fully alive -- is to long for "both/and" in a world that constantly pushes us to choose "either/or." There's no way to push through, or go around, the dilemma of being a human being; it is not something to be gotten over, shoved out of the way, or ignored. The dilemma of being human can only be embraced, it can only be chosen.

We have been focusing on choice, and we have spoken of the commandment to choose life as being, in part, a commandment to *choose*. Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, we studied the Talmudic passage teaching that all created beings were created according to the form of their choosing. We derived from that the idea that all choices as creative acts, and that we as human beings are required to consciously choose who to be, who we were meant to be. We spoke also of the many reasons why we so readily, albeit wrongly, relinquish our power of choice. Sometimes we fail to choose because we don't want responsibility for our choices, or because we simply don't know what to choose. Other times, we do know what to choose, but the right choice feels too demanding; it is too much work, or too much loss, or entails too much risk and change. On Rosh Hashanah, we rejected those reasons, because we cannot avoid responsibility for choosing who we will become.

But now here is Samuel the prophet -- *Shmuel haNavi*, the account of whose birth we read in the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah -- refusing to choose. Doesn't this refusal to choose undermine everything we've been saying?

No. This is a different kind of choice, and a different reason for not choosing. Samuel's refusal to make a choice is not grounded in indecisiveness; he doesn't have commitment issues. It comes not from a lack of understanding, nor because the right choice is too demanding. This is neither a refusal to take responsibility, nor a form of paralysis.

This refusal to choose is a profound form of humility. It is a holy reluctance to choose one truth at the expense of another, to give up on that which is dear to God, on that which is good, which is holy. It comes from a deep understanding of an existential truth about humanity, and about our relationship to truth and to God. That is: things that really matter -- truth, the right path, the path of life, justice, love, holiness -- express themselves most fully as dialectics.

Now, when I speak of dialectic, I speak first of the fact that there are things -- values, goals, needs -- that we can't choose among. And when we do have to choose, it is a source of great

pain. Appropriate pain. Holy pain. But this idea that the path of life is the path of dialectic expresses an even deeper truth. Justice without love is less just; love without justice is less loving. The pure ideal is actually truer, and purer, when lived in balance with its opposite

Samuel's refusal to choose -- Eliyahu's stationing himself right at the center -- comes from a deep understanding of one of the many paradoxes that lie at the heart of being human. Free will -- the capacity to choose -- is one of the ways in which we are made in the image of God. At the same time, the necessity of choosing -- stemming as it does from our finitude -- is one of the things which separates us from God. Because we are limited and finite, in our daily lives we have to make choices between things which are a unity from God's perspective, but which are incompatible from ours. This is the dilemma of dilemmas. When we choose, we draw away from some aspect of the Divine. But when we do not choose -- when we do not exercise our will -- we are less than fully human and less fully in the image of God.

It is a dilemma which cannot be solved, it can only be managed, that is, embraced: chosen for itself. This is the fine nobility in Samuel's refusing to choose, and in his embrace of the pain of paradox. It is a saying "yes" to dilemma. That is what it means to choose life.

So, we have to learn to make the distinction between the two different kinds of forks in the road. On Rosh Hashanah we spoke of one type of error: running from our responsibility to choose when we need to make a choice. But just as often, we make the other kind of error: choosing one of two sides of a dialectic when we need to claim them both. It is a mistake we make in our society at large, in politics, in our religious lives, in our personal lives

Justice or compassion, righteousness or love -- how can we choose? No matter which choice we make we become less than human. When it comes to this second kind of choice -- deep paradoxes that lie at the core of authentic living -- we need to follow teaching of Yogi Berra: "when you come to the fork in the road, take it." Take it. This is itself a kind of choice; really choosing both is to choose active engagement with paradox, constant wrestling with conflicting values

And I want to suggest that this is often the most difficult part of the work. In most cases, the first crossroads -- choosing life over death, good over evil -- is relatively easy. In very particular circumstances, it is sometimes hard. But as a way of living, most of the time, it's not really all that hard. Most of us don't regularly choose overt evil. But more evil is perpetrated by our wrongfully choosing one path when what is needed is to embrace dialectic, than by our choosing an evil path in the first place. This kind of evil is more difficult because it is subtler, it masquerades as good. Choosing love or justice in and of itself always *seems* good -- how could it not? Only when that choice is viewed in context -- when we see that we have chosen justice *at the expense of* love, or love *at the expense of* justice -- that we begin to be sensitized to the potential of evil within our choice of one good.

Unfortunately, choosing paradox -- choosing irresolvable dialectic as a path of life -- is quite hard. To stand at the fulcrum of competing demands and values and choose both -- that is a lot of work. It means uncertainty. It means not knowing what to do, how to be, which path I should take, and living with that uncertainty. It means constant self-evaluation and readjustment. It means taking the time to delve deeply into complexity knowing that it will never really be resolved. It means always feeling inadequate -- not loving enough, not righteous and just enough, not human enough, not holy enough -- and tolerating that inadequacy. It means living with the pain of having had to act, requiring us to make a decision that couldn't quite fully hold both poles.

Fortunately, the reward is very great:

אמר ה"ה שמואל אתה נתת את עצמך על שני דרכים הטובות הללו וחייך אף אני
נותן לך שלש מתנות טובות ללמדך שכל מי שהוא רוצה ועושה צדקה וגמילות
חסדים יורש שלשה מתנות טובות ואלו הן חיים וצדקה וכבוד שנאמר רודף צדקה
וחסד ימצא חיים צדקה וכבוד

The Holy blessed One said to him: "Samuel! You have placed yourself between these two good ways. By your life! I will give to you three good gifts. This teaches you that everyone who wants and does righteousness and deeds of lovingkindness, shall inherit three good gifts, and they are: life, righteousness, and glory (חיים וצדקה וכבוד), as it is said, "One who pursues righteousness and love, finds life, righteousness, and glory" (Prov. 21:21).

And what is the reward? Life, righteousness and *kavod*. Life and righteousness, *tzedakah*, we can understand. But *kavod*? Honor? We are taught to flee from honor! However, I don't believe we should read *kavod* as simple "honor." The word *kavod* comes from a root meaning "weight," and that is what we are talking about here. The reward for choosing paradox is a life of weightiness, *gravitas*; the reward is a sense of meaning, of mattering. The import of the midrash is to convey a sense of really grabbing on to life. Samuel stands in this midrash like Jacob -- wrestling with beings human and divine, holding on and not letting go until the struggle yields its blessing. That wrestling, that staying in dialectic, is the source of all real creativity. It is the source of meaning, of *kavod*, weightiness, mattering, of a life of substance.

Now it is obvious that the issue is not limited to the tension between *chesed* and *tzedakah*. That is but one dialectic of many. To be fully human, to choose life, is to dwell at the crossroads of countless such dilemmas, and choosing the struggle, all the while *knowing* that there will be no reconciliation, no final achievement of balance, no possibility of real stasis.

But the particular dialectic which the midrash focuses on, *chesed* and *tzedakah*, has special resonance for us today. We are here in the midst of the process of *teshuvah*, *cheshbon ha-nefesh*. And for our *teshuvah* to be successful it must emanate from that balance between compassion and judgment, love and justice. In dealing with others, and in dealing with ourselves, we must have a sense of justice and judgment: there must be accountability, responsibility, and a commitment to change and to repair what we have harmed. At the same time, there must be *chesed*: forgiveness, compassion, love, unearned grace. If we held to pure justice, none of us could stand; if we dwelt in pure compassion, few of us would change. The process of *teshuvah* is precisely the process of choosing both.

Indeed, that is exactly what we have been praying for in the *Avinu Malkeinu*:

אֲבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְעַתָּה, כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים, עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנו.
Avinu malkeinu, be gracious to us and answer us, for we have no deeds. Treat us with justice and compassion, and save us.

The word *tzedakah* seems out of place here. We are throwing ourselves on God's mercy, acknowledging our lack of merit. We can readily understand our need for *chesed*, but why would we pray for righteousness? Perhaps because real salvation resides only in that embrace of paradox. We are asking, subtly, for help in managing that paradox. We are asking that God deal with us in the perfect balance of justice and mercy, that we may learn to act that way ourselves, that we may learn how to manage that dilemma and thereby choose life.

We have been focusing on Deuteronomy 30:19, “I set before you life and death, blessing and curse, choose life.” Now I want to look at the rest of that verse, and the one that follows:

וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תְּחַיֶּה אֶתְּךָ וְזַרְעֶךָ: לְאַהֲבֶה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Choose life, in order that you and your descendants shall live, to love Adonai your God (Deut. 30:19-20).

It is so tempting to say, that the purpose of life is to love. Period. But actually, the purpose of life is to love God, and to love God means to love what God loves. And that means to choose dialectic, to choose paradox. That in itself -- the embrace of paradox -- Samuel's stance of refusing to give up either pole -- is a form of loving and cleaving to God. Why?

How can we love God and reject one of two good paths which are both manifestations of the Divine? Love of God includes loving judgment as well as compassion, righteousness as well as lovingkindness. And not just this particular dialectic -- *chesed* and *tzedakah* -- but choosing dialectic in general, is a way of loving God. To refuse to choose -- to claim both paths as our own -- is to reach beyond our own limitations and strive for a God's-eye view, knowing all the while we will never fully achieve it, but neither can we simply stop striving. It constitutes a refusal to accept the distance that having to choose puts between us and God. Or sometimes, it is comprised of our willingness to dwell in the pain of the distance, rather than deny its existence, all the while knowing deeply that our capacity to choose reflects the image of God.

That is what it means to choose life: to choose dialectic, to choose dilemma, to choose to be fully human.

7. NEILAH

The Sfat Emet -- the great 19th century hasidic master -- teaches:

... דכתיב נותן לפניכם היום בו"ק. פ' שבכל עת וזמן יש ב' הדרכים לפני האדם. . .
נמצא הצדיק ג"כ עומד תמיד באמצעיות ב' הדרכים ימין ושמאל. וז"ש הגדול
מחבירו יצרו גדול כו'.

The Torah says: "Behold, I place before you today blessing and curse" (Deut. 11:26). Meaning, these two paths stand before a person at all times. . . .⁴ The *tsaddik* also stands always between two paths that branch off right and left. That is why they said: "Whoever is greater than his companion, his [evil] urge is also greater." (Sfat Emet, Reeh [תרל"ז], tr. by Arthur Green).

We spoke on Rosh Hashanah about the word *hayom* -- today -- which also appears in our Torah passage:

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע: . . .
See, I place before you *today* life and good, death and evil . . . (Deut. 30:15)

We spoke also about the three books which are open before God on Rosh Hashanah: the book of life, for the wholly righteous, the book of death, for the wholly wicked, and the book for the intermediates, which is not sealed until today, Yom Kippur. And we studied the interpretation of the Netivot Shalom, that it is not the case that God reviews the past record of our deeds and writes each of us into one of the books. Rather, each one of us writes ourselves into whichever book we choose, and our inscribing of ourselves is not about our past deeds, but our present commitment for the future. In that context, we highlighted the blessing inherent in the word *hayom* (today): that is, the opportunity to choose life lies before us today -- each day -- at any moment, regardless of our history.

Now we have a somewhat different read of that word, *hayom*. That is, not only is there an opportunity to choose life today, but there is an *obligation* to choose life today. The choice of life -- of good and blessing -- is not made once and for all; rather it is a choose that must be made *hayom*, today, every day, day after day.

Every moment of life is a moment of choice; every moment bears a weight. The idea is not merely to come to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -- or even to do the work of teshuvah throughout the ten days or during the whole period of Elul -- and then say, "I've done teshuvah." No, whatever transformation we are able to achieve on these days is merely a beginning. The transformational process -- choosing the right path -- must then be carried beyond the High Holy Days and beyond the synagogue into our everyday lives, every day.

Indeed, as the the Sfat Emet points out, even the greatest tzaddik -- the fully righteous person -- must constantly choose the good, and choose life. Looking at such a person, we might think that he or she has conquered the yetzer hara, and is no longer tempted by it. Not so. No human being can accomplish that.

4. The *Sifre* offers a parable of an elder standing at the crossroads and warning those who pass, saying: "This path that begins in brambles ends up being straight [whereas the path that looks straight will end up in brambles]."

The Sfat Emet continues:

ואמרו חכמים לעתיד לבא הקב"ה מביא יצה"ר ושוחטו צדיקים נדמה להם כהר ובוכין איך יכלנו להלחם בו. ורשעים נדמה להם כחוט השערה ובוכין איך לא יכלנו לכבוש חוט שערה כזה. והענין כי לעולם יש רק חוט השערה. והצדיקים שגוברים עליו פוגעין אח"כ בחוט השערה אחרת וכן לעולם עד שמתרבה ונעשה כהר. אבל זה הרשע הנשאר עומד. הרי הוא עומד בחוט השערה אחת. וזה ענין הצדיקים אין להם מנוחה כו'.

The sages further said: "In the future, the Holy blessed One will bring forth the evil urge and slaughter it. To the righteous it will appear as a great mountain, and they will weep, saying: 'How were we ever able to battle it!' But to the wicked it will appear as a hairbreadth, and they will weep: 'How were we never able to conquer it!'"

The fact is that there is always only a hairbreadth. But the righteous, as they overcome each hairbreadth, go on to encounter another. They keep doing so forever, until they accumulate so many as to seem like a mountain. But the wicked is one who stands still, always facing that same hairbreadth.

Choosing life, choosing good -- transforming self and world -- can be overwhelming. We have spoken on these days of grand and lofty ideals. The challenge of teshuvah, of embarking on a path of Divine Service can feel like a mountain in front of us

The fact is there is always only a hairbreadth. And this thought is both comforting, and a little scary. It is scary because the difference between choosing life and not choosing life is often as minute as a hair's breadth. For example, we do the right thing, but we do it with an attitude, with resentment. We have missed the choice of life by a hair. We are generous, but secretly expect reward or recompense. Or, we give tzedakah to someone in need on the street, but we cannot bring ourselves to look that person in the eye, to extend a greeting. We have missed choosing life by a hair. We forgive, but not without drawing just the tiniest drop of blood, inflicting just a touch of pain, evoking the smallest bit of shame and inadequacy in the other. So much of what it means to choose life rests in the details, in the kavannah, and it is so easy to miss the mark.

But it is also comforting, because a wrong choice can be corrected by a shift as small as a hair's breadth. What is teshuvah? It is an act of turning. Sometimes we don't have to move very much -- a simple shift in perspective or direction, a small turn, can make an enormous difference. We begin to engage in *lashon hara* -- perhaps saying, as we so often do, "This is *lashon hara* but . . ." -- and we stop ourselves and don't say it. We begin to get angry and vent, then hold back and apologize. We take one moment out of a day to express gratitude to God -- whether it's a formal *berakhah*, if we know them, or just an expression of thanks and blessing in our own words. Life presents an infinite number of opportunities for redemption, for healing, and for positive change, many no more difficult than a hair's breadth.

"The fact is there is always only a hairbreadth."

This is both comforting and scary because it is not only the big things, the major choices, that matter. In our study on Rosh Hashanah, I said that in the end, we are the sum total of our choices. In saying that, I was speaking not only or even primarily about peak experiences and the grand gestures -- the decisions and choices that we *know* are life-changing, momentous. Who we create our selves to be, what we create our world to be, is the sum total of all the minute, seemingly insignificant decisions we make at every moment, every day. Gathered

together, all those small hairsbreadth choices form a mountain. The Torah teaches:

רְאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה: . . . אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה עַל־הַר גְּרִזִים
וְאֶת־הַקְּלָלָה עַל־הַר עֵיבָל:

See I set before you today a blessing and curse . . . the blessing on Mt. Gerizim and the curse on Mt. Eival (Deut. 11:26, 29).

Those mountains, from which emanate blessing or curse, life or death, are created by us. They are the accumulation of the small choices we make daily, throughout our lives: choices about how we spend our time, how we spend our money, what goes into our mouths, what comes out of our mouths, what ideas and emotions we allow to take root and blossom within our minds and hearts, ethical choices, ritual choices, social/political choices, emotional choices.

Those mountains are comprised of all our small decisions about how we view the world and other people, and how we treat the world and other people, not just in general, but in very particular moments:

- Do I choose to really see the people I encounter each day? To greet them, learn their names, find out something about them?
- When I walk down the street, do I take the opportunity to meet a need, even something so small as holding a door?
- Do I choose to see others in the best light -- to judge *l'chaf z'khut*, on the scale of merit, to assume the best, rather than the worst?
- Do I choose to celebrate another's success, or to experience it as a diminishment of myself?
- Do I choose to be grateful for what is, or resentful of what is not? Do I openly express my gratitude, to other people and to God?
- Do I choose to approach a new experience in a critical or in an appreciative mode?

These choices are neither momentous nor mountainous -- they are often as small as a hair's breadth -- but when accumulated, they change us, and they change the world.

"The fact is that there is always only a hairbreadth."

Even the big choices -- life's major decisions -- are neither as large nor as difficult as we make them out to be. The Sfat Emet continues:

והצדיקים שגוברים עליו פוגעין אח"כ בחוט השערה אחרת וכן לעולם עד שמתרבה
ונעשה כהר. אבל זה הרשע הנשאר עומד. הרי הוא עומד בחוט השערה אחת. וזה
ענין הצדיקים אין להם מנוחה כו'.

The righteous, as they overcome each hairbreadth, go on to encounter another. They keep doing so forever, until they accumulate so many as to seem like a mountain. But the wicked is one who stands still, always facing that same hairbreadth.

Do I choose to see an obstacle as a hair's breadth which can be worked through, or do I choose to see it as a mountain, impossible to scale?

When our will is weak -- when we see the choice we know is the right one, or the changes we know we need to make, and we don't want to -- we turn hairs breadths into mountains. *Yitgadal v'yitkadash* -- we magnify and sanctify the barrier, the challenge, and convince ourselves we

can't overcome it. We turn it into a mountain and then stand stuck before it, always facing that same tiny hairbreadth which we have disguised as a mountain.

This is a choice we have to make, too: whether we will see a mountain or a hair's breadth. And in that choice, according to the Sfat Emet, lies the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who choose life and those who don't.

"In the world to come, the evil urge will appear to the righteous as a great mountain, but to the wicked it will appear as a hairbreadth." Why? Because in this world, it is the opposite. The righteous see choosing the good, choosing life, as being as easy as a hairbreadth. The wicked turn it into a huge mountain, and stand facing the same impasse always.

"The fact is that there is always only a hairbreadth."

It can be overwhelming to have to choose life every day, to have to be conscious of the impact of our choices at every moment. On the other hand, it is comforting to know that really, we only have to choose today. One way to avoid making mountains out of hair's breadths is to focus on making the choice *hayom*, today. We don't have to fix everything -- repair ourselves, repair our lives, repair the world, scale the whole mountain -- at this moment. All we need to do is make the right choice today: to focus on what we have a choice about today, respond to what is asked of us today, decide who we want to be today, take a risk of living deeply today, hold paradox today, choose life today.

And then do it again tomorrow.

Ultimately, choosing life really is simply a choice -- it is an act of will. Whatever is keeping me from being who I want to be and who I am meant to be, whatever is keeping me from doing what I know is right, from choosing the good and the holy, from choosing life -- that obstacle will grow or shrink in direct response to the intensity of my will to overcome it

The Sfat Emet concludes:

והצדיקים שגוברים עליו פוגעין אח"כ בחוט השערה אחרת וכן לעולם עד שמתרבה ונעשה כהר. אבל זה הרשע הנשאר עומד. הרי הוא עומד בחוט השערה אחת. וזה ענין הצדיקים אין להם מנוחה כו'. וז"ש שלא יתגאה האדם בהיותו נתעלה באיזה מדרגה. כי גם שם יש לפניו שני הדרכים כנ"ל. אמנם עי"ז מרויחין הצדיקים הברכה בהיותם מניחין דרך הרע ובוחרים בדרך הטוב. והוא השכר שלעתיד. . . .

The righteous, as they overcome each hairbreadth, go on to encounter another. They keep doing so forever, until they accumulate so many as to seem like a mountain. But the wicked is one who stands still, always facing that same hairbreadth. This is why "the righteous have no rest in this world." This is also the reason no one should become too proud for having ascended some rung. For in that place, too, there will be two paths. But this is how the righteous earn their blessing, by ever leaving the wicked path and choosing the good. This is their reward for the future....

We tend to associate blessing with ease, with things going well in life. I wish it were so. Shouldn't this path of choosing life, of responding to the Divine demand, of actively creating one's self, of taking the risk of living deeply and being vulnerable, of holding paradox and tension, of constantly choosing -- shouldn't it be rewarded with some measure of ease?

It's exhausting!

But it isn't so. Blessing isn't the same as ease and comfort. Another hasidic master, the Maor vaShemesh teaches that to be a human being is to be always in the aspect of moving (בבחינת), unlike the angels who stand still (בבחינת עומד). Each day, he says, we have to make another choice, to conquer the yetzer hara in another small area, and thereby to serve in greater ways each day. And so "the righteous have no rest in the world."

In other words, the "righteous have no rest in the world" because it is not in human nature to be static; for us, to stop growing and learning is a form of death. "This is how the righteous earn their blessing." *S'char mitzvah mitzvah* -- the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah. The reward for choosing life and blessing is life and blessing, meaning, more choice, more freedom, *real* freedom. The reward is growth and challenge; the reward *is* being fully human, and fully alive.

We have, from the first night of Rosh Hashanah, been focusing on these verses:

רֵאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע: . . . הַחַיִּים
וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָ בְּחַיִּים.

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . life and death I place before you, blessing and curse: choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

These verses continue:

וּבַחֲרָתָ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה אִתָּהּ וְזָרַעְךָ: לְאַהֲבָהּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׁמְעַע בְּקוֹלוֹ
וּלְדַבְּקָהּ בּוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיִּידָ וְאַרְךָ יָמֶיךָ.

[C]hoose life in order that you and your children may live, to love Adonai your God and to hear [God's] voice and to cling to the Divine, for that is your life and length of days.

The reward for choosing life is life, but not a life of rest and ease. It is a life of attachment to God, of love of God and service to God. And that means a life of constant choosing between good and evil, of constant growth and moving forward, of dwelling in irresolvable dialectic, of confronting challenge, of responding to God's command.

This morning I said that to love God, we have to love what God loves. We have been saying over and over, in every Amidah since Rosh Hashanah:

זְכַרְנוּ לְחַיִּים, מֶלֶךְ חַיִּים, וְכַתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים, לְמַעַן אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים.

Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the book of life for your sake, living God.

"Sovereign who delights in life." To love God means to love life: life in its fullest and all of its realness. Not some pretty picture that we wish to paint, but the totality of this wonderful, painful, delightful, horrifying, funny, sad and joyful mess. To love God is to fully embrace the grand tragic dilemma of being human -- of straddling two worlds, of battling our yetzer hara, of struggling to hear and respond to God's call, of confronting our fears of death, and of life, so that we can -- at moments -- touch eternity. To love God is to love all of that. That is what we have to choose.

The books are still open -- in reality, they are open all the time.

And the fact is, there is always only a hairsbreadth.

I set before you life and death, blessing and curse -- choose life.