

Nitzavim – 5782

“I call heaven & earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you are your offspring would live – by loving the Lord your God, heeding his commands, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the Lord swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.” Thus ends our parsha this week, mere days before Rosh Hashanah as determined by the rabbis so that we hear this message immediately before the High Holy Days. But why was this so important to the rabbis and what is meant to be its message to us this very Shabbat, days before we begin the new year?

In ancient times, unlike today, it was easy to understand what birth was all about. One could observe birth constantly in nature. One could see the cycle of the seasons and understand that birth of certain plants happens every year. When it came to animals, us included, it is indisputable that the ancients knew what birth was. They just might not have known how it came about. It was one of the mysteries that existed and that the ancients sought an explanation for. That mystery waited until science could provide them and us with the proper explanation but that didn't mean the ancients didn't try to explain how it came about. What was hard to deal with however was the fact of death and what happens after death. Man has always wanted to understand the meaning and purpose of life and looked to the sun and its cycles in the sky, the stars and their changing positions, the sunrise and sunset and the phases of the moon as indications of some greater force in the world that, to them, obviously had to play a role in life and death in man. How else could they make sense of what was happening. So, rebirth and

immortality became the focus of all these ancient civilizations. Life was secondary to the afterlife. The pyramids in Egypt, the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, the statuary of Persia and Egypt, the myths of the gods of the Greeks and the giant temples of the Romans all are indications of this preoccupation and pointed to a panoply of celestial beings controlling the cycle of life.

Imagine how revolutionary it was then for the Israelites to hear Moses tell them to choose life. Moses refers in our parsha this week to the blessings and the curses that are an inevitable part of the life cycle of man. He once again refers to the choice between good and evil but reminds his listeners that HaShem has promised them and promises those who come after them, those who are not there with him that day, that life is good and meant to be lived, no matter what. He reminds his listeners that it is inevitable that they will err. It is in our nature to make mistakes, to commit sins of various kinds, those we know about and commit intentionally, and those we are not aware of at the time but upon reflection know that they were mistakes. HaShem promises them and through them, us, future generations, that we can return and try again. The concept of Tshuva, which is central to the holidays soon to be upon us, is ours to enable us to refocus on what is good and right in our lives and with the world. Our life therefore has meaning because of the good that we do. We remind each other that our life has meaning in this way because we say that the memory of those who have left us should be a blessing. And above all else, that we have free will. We are the instruments of our own destiny.

It sounds so simple, and easy, doesn't it, to say those things and believe them. But how did the average person then, how do we now come to understand what it means to choose life? Without a lifetime of in-depth

Torah study, how does the average man or woman operationalize what choosing life looks like? Well, you think about it, there are examples all around us and that not only make them the proof of this no sequitur but help us to understand what it really means to CHOOSE LIFE. We here today can just think about the example of our own, newly deceased monarch, Elizabeth II who proclaimed the day she found out about the death of her father that she would choose life, a life that proved to be one of service and devotion to her family and her nation. Think about the fact that she was born into the happy household of the royal family, wealthy, privileged, close, only to be thrust into the limelight because of her uncle's decision to abdicate so he could marry the woman he loved, or so he thought. Then her beloved father had to cope with his country going to war and his own fight with cancer, which he lost at a very young age. However, instead of being bitter, she chose life, one in keeping with all the same elements that our Torah dictates we as Jews should adhere to. And so, she passed away, not only beloved but admired universally not for what she was but for who she was and how she chose to live her life.

Then we have the example of Nelson Mandela who fought for equality and fraternity between the whites and the blacks in South Africa, spent years in isolation in a single roomed cell on Robben Island and only after almost 25 years, was he given his freedom. Instead of being bitter and trying to grab life by the tail, he returned to his quest for freedom and democracy in his homeland and he too died a noble and admired man. We could also cite the life of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great grandson of an aristocratic Rabbinic family, who forsakes the life he was born into for academia and then struggles in the face of German restrictions to complete his PhD and then sought a way to the United States where he became a role model for a

generation of Conservative rabbis in training at the Jewish Theological Seminar. He also embodies the spirit of choosing life.

Lastly, our own dearly departed Leon Possen, the brother-in-law of a former rabbi in our pulpit, who escaped Germany in a tiny little boat with his beloved wife Ruth and his baby son Uri and sailed to Denmark and thusly survived the war. Like our Rebbetzin Judith's father, he came to Canada and rebuilt a life of service and devotion. And lastly, we are reading about the last days of Moshe Rabeinu who was born a slave, raised as a member of the court of the Pharaoh of Egypt, accepted a challenge from HaShem almost blindly and spent the rest of his life trying to understand and satisfy the whims of His people. And his reward – even after begging for the decree to be reversed – not to enter the promised land, the goal of his travels from Egypt to the borders of the Holy Land, despite his leadership and his goodness.

In each and every instance, choosing life didn't just mean finding a way to survive the vicissitudes and precariousness of life, but to thrive, to grab life by the tail and live it to its fullest. So, to choose life refers to the manner in which we live our lives, to what end and for whom. Hopefully, these thoughts resonate with you as much as with me as we prepare for the beginning of the new year 5783. Shana Tova U'Metukah. A Happy and a Sweet New Year and may you and yours be inscribed not just for a life of breathing and eating, waking, and sleeping, but of fulfillment and dedication to being a partner in the covenant with HaShem renewed at Sinai.