

# Yom Kippur Shacharit

## Real Life Choices

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There is a certain folk story from our tradition that guides my understanding of the Jewish concept of partnership or covenant between humanity and God. In it, the main character calls out to God, “There is so much suffering in the world, God. So much pain and cruelty. Why don’t you help your creatures?”

God responds, “I did help my creatures; I sent you.”

This morning’s Torah reading places us at the River Jordan, waiting to cross into the land God has promised our ancestors. During the final moments before entry into the land, God speaks to the Israelites through Moses.

*Atem n’tzavim hayom kulchem...You stand this day, all of you...  
V’lo itchem l’vadchem... And not you alone...*

*Ki et asher yeshno po... but with those who are here today...*

*V’et asher aynaynu po imanu hayom...and with those who are not here with us today.*

God speaks not merely to the ancient Israelites, but even to us. And this is what God wants to say:

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you hachayim v’hamavet – life and death, hab’racha v’hak’lala – blessing and curse;*

*Uvacharta bachayim – Please, please, choose life so that you and your descendents may live.*

This passage, which may on the surface appear to be simplistic rhetoric, is actually quite complex and opens us up to some very real choices that, in our end, will define whether or not we have met our purpose in life.

Let’s begin with the beginning...the authors’ assertion that the wisdom contained in the teaching will withstand time and place. I am not sure if the biblical authors were brilliant or arrogant in their assertion. But I am curious, very curious.

How is it possible that an agreement made between two parties can extend to others who are not present when the contract, or covenant, is signed, sealed, and delivered? Well, I suppose it happens all the time.

If I were to drive recklessly through the streets of Wellington, I would be breaking the law. I was not there when the laws about conduct in motor vehicles were drafted. I did not approve of them in any sort of ballot initiative or public vote. And yet, I am bound to the local laws when I drive within any given jurisdiction whether or not it is the jurisdiction in which I accepted my driver’s license.

Now, the choice presented to the audience of this speech, whether or not they are actually present and engaged in the discourse, is the choice between life and death.

Back to the text:

*See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.*

Here I will paraphrase so as to move my sermon along:

Pay attention and try to understand what I am offering you as a lesson and you will live and increase. Don't pay attention, forget about what I am trying to teach you, and you will perish.

The traditional reading of this passage understands that if we follow *mitzvot*, we will live and increase and if we engage in idolatry we will perish. I don't believe the narrative is quite so limited in scope.

Those who do not stand with the ancient Israelites on the banks of the Jordan are clearly included in the message the biblical authors convey through God's teaching. It is therefore impossible that the lesson is merely about keeping Jewish law, as fulfilling as that practice is to many Jews.

How do we get at a deeper message that could in fact withstand time and place?

I am interested in the fact that God places before the people, before us, life and good and death and evil, and only then calls on us to make a choice. And for the sake of our children, God suggests in the narrative, *uvacharta bachayim*, that we should choose life so that we may live and our children may live in the land.

In essence, the narrative calls on us to consider the future implications of our actions so that we affirm life and blessing rather than death and curse.

Usually, we look to our ancestors, to the past, for guidance here and now and in the future. In this passage we are called to look to the future, to consider those who will come after us, those who will know about our particular arrangement with the Divine right alongside those who have no idea what the Torah is, or once was. If so, the central message of this morning's reading reverses the direction of causality for us.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi teaches, "it is as if God is the voice of what could and ought to be, calling us from the future and moving us toward the fulfillment of our possibilities" (Jewish Renewal, p. 36-37).

We can use up our resources and deplete the earth's capacity to sustain us. Or we can affirm life by considering the impact of our use of resources and modifying that use in a manner that does not threaten our existence in the future, our future or that of our descendents.

We can practice our Judaism by doing what we're supposed to do because we were told to do so. Or, we can practice our Judaism in a meaningful way. We can celebrate milestones along the journey of our lives with rituals, giving them meaning beyond our present experience. We can glean insight and guidance from our literary and legal traditions, interpreting that insight into our own language and inviting it to support us where and when we need support. Therein we teach our children, by our example, that religious pursuits are formulas, recipes, tools that can be utilized in an infinite number of modes and methods for the purpose of recognizing purpose in our being, depth in our presence, here and now.

God puts it all before us: blessing and curse, good and evil, life and death. And God instructs: "*Uvacharta bachayim*, choose life."

The call this Yom Kippur morning is Reb Zalman's voice of God "calling us from the future and moving us toward the fulfillment of our possibilities."

Reb Zalman's notion suggests "to be in tune with the divine voice is to reject any idolization of that which is" (ibid, p. 38). What does he

mean? When we recognize the fact that *that* which *is* can be transformed into something else, we open ourselves up to hearing the divine call. Conversely, when we fail to recognize, appreciate, and support the ongoing processes of change and transformation of matter and energy, we deny not merely the *possibility* of evolution and growth, but the observed *truth* of evolution and growth.

Well, when you put it like that, rabbi...

And I do. I suggest that religious quest, faith, purpose in our very being, is not unlike matter and energy. The laws of physics apply.

Judaism cannot simply be about maintaining traditions, upholding laws and statutes. It must also be about *becoming*. This means cultivating a certain flexibility that is rooted in shared experiences.

Within our sacred texts and commentaries, prophetic, priestly, and philosophically minded teachings are tools for transforming attitudes, aspirations, and hopes. Jewish institutions have the responsibility of fostering and engendering human beings to engage in the work of participating in an ongoing process of creation in which we, the created, manifest and reflect a divine affirmation of life.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi reminds us that there was once a time when we imagined God as a Being who could be softened up and put in a good mood by our offering Him the right foods and smells, so we roasted him lamb chops and offered up incense from the Temple in Jerusalem. Later we thought that certain words would put God in the right mood, so we constructed prayers that at once praised God and reminded Him of Biblical promises He should be living up to.

Today we are moving toward a conception of God that is based more on a conception of a Force that both includes all Being as we know and surpasses all that we can ever know thanks to our limited sensory apparatus. We are a part of God, and therefore a part of God's process of becoming self-conscious and God's process of healing and transforming the world.

Yom Kippur provides us with an opportunity to stop and to listen for the voice that calls, "*Uvacharta bachayim*, choose life so that you and your children may live." This day gives us pause to consider those who stand with us here and now as well as those who are not present among us. How do we affirm life and being and becoming for ourselves and for them?

From Rosh Hashanah until this day, Yom Kippur, we considered our failures and mistakes of the past year. During this moment we are called by our tradition to look to the future for guidance in making choices. We do not want a future world with the same pain, suffering, and evil that exists in our time. We don't want to pass on to future generations the cruelty and violence that permeate our society today. We therefore must act to transmute it into something else.

We must rework our acts of greed and selfishness into acts of generosity and gift giving. We must transform our fear into heightened awareness and courage, our knowing into humility and a willingness to learn more, our hate into love and compassion even for people who have wronged us in the past.

If we fail to do this ourselves, what can we expect among those who kill in the name of God, who torture people in the name of Justice, who

exploit the desire of the poor to become rich by spending what they don't have?

Our synagogue must be a place in which it is safe for people to remain emotionally and spiritually alive, to be real, to be responsive and caring individuals. It is our responsibility to provide space and support for the spiritual evolution that must occur if our species is to survive itself. Our success is a starting point for real change in the world. Our failure is yet another reason to stop trying.

Each generation must accept its own responsibility for cultivating new approaches to Jewish life and learning that will adequately replace the deadening orthodoxies that the previous generation found enlivening.

And so, God's call, "*Uvacharta bachayim*," belongs to those who stood there on the banks of the Jordan River with the ancient Israelites and those who were not there at all. God's call, "*Uvacharta bachayim*, choose life so that you and your children may live" becomes an obligation to transform that which *is* to that which *ought to be*.

And therein, lies our opportunity as individuals to participate in the evolution of our species. Therein, lies the gift we Jews ought to share with our neighbors, our affirmation of the possibility of healing the pain and suffering of humanity and transforming the exploitation and cruelty toward others into mutual recognition and acts of compassion and loving-kindness.

Fortunately, our sages teach us in Pirkei Avot, "*Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*, It is not up to us, alone, to finish the work; *v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena*, nor are we free to desist from it."

*Ken y'hi ratzon*, may we accept the task at hand, accept our failures and move forward from them, and rejoice in our advances, big and small, here and abroad, in politics and in the privacy of our homes. Let us say, *Amen*.