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Drawing from The Well

During the Days of Awe, we are reminded that life does not just happen to us or around us. Rather at this season, we acknowledge how our choices shape our lives. In the words of Dr. Sherwin Nuland, the noted author and physician, "We have free will, whether we believe it to have been granted by God or granted by the very nature of the human mind. We are, in fact, capable of choosing how we respond to the circumstances of our lives and in this way we are capable of changing them for the better- even when our initial impulse is counterproductive."

This message is one that we must remind ourselves of, especially now. The High Holy days are our chance to reflect on our lives and change courses if we need to or re-commit to choices we've made if that is what is called for. In this process of self examination we may also become aware of areas that we have not made any choices about, and we can reconsider this decision as well.

Over the next ten days, we will explore five areas of choices that we will face in the coming year. Tonight, on Erev Rosh Hashanah we will look at choices implicit in our society. Tomorrow, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah we will turn our attention to personal choices. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah our focus will be on choices about Israel. For Kol Nidre we will consider choices of group association and on Yom Kippur we will reflect on the choices we face as we grow older. I offer these sermons with the hope they will awaken within all of us the empowering, scary, wonderful, sacred, at times overwhelming message that we have choices in our lives.

So let us begin by examining the paradox of American society today. We live in a country that in theory celebrates the notion of freedom of choice and offers us a dizzying array of choices in everything from lifestyles to political opinions to consumer goods. America is not suffering from a lack of choices; some might argue just the opposite. However, although our lives appear to be full of choices on the one hand, ironically on the other hand, I am concerned that we are losing the ability to exercise our free will. Tonight, let us examine five current trends that have become dominant in our country and apply some uniquely Jewish perspectives to them in order that we can decide whether or not to accept them as our own frame of reference for living.

The first one we'll consider is fear. One of the biggest changes in our nation since 9/11 is that a thick layer of apprehension hovers over us. Since then, Americans have become increasingly anxious about enemy attacks on our soil, losing our jobs and homes, and the devastation of our environment just to name a few things. Fear is helpful to our survival as a species- it causes us to fight or flee when a specific situation arises. But when fear becomes a constant in our lives we simply shut down after awhile. Our curiosity dries up, our hearts shrivel and our souls turn inward. In this hunkered down position it is hard to make any kind of progress. It is easy to feel alienated and to be manipulated. This dread is contagious and nowadays has infected many parts of our society.

We may not have a choice about the events unfolding around us, but we do have a choice about how we respond. Judaism's understanding of fear is best expressed by the words of the 18th century Chasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslov, which were later set to a tune that became a popular Israeli melody. *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar meod ve ha ikar lo le fached klal*. The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid at all. This perspective recognizes the precarious nature of life as a given. Therefore, it suggests, we must not let fear consume us. The power of fear is greatly diminished once we put it in its proper perspective and stop treating it as highly exceptional.

Fear may feel unusual for Americans if we thought we were invincible. But the truth is that fear is normal; thinking we're indestructible is abnormal. Once we accept that fear is a common, universal response to the vulnerability of being human, we have a choice- will we allow fear to define us or will we face our fears, deal with them rationally and keep on going. Judaism reminds us that the decision is ours.

The second trait that has become a part of our society is a sense of victimization. Again, this is new for us. Americans have rarely felt like victims, in fact just the opposite. Throughout our history, we have usually been in a position of power, perhaps making others feel victimized. Nowadays, we feel like the victims of others' hatred, greed, or misunderstanding. We are quick to point out how our lives are negatively impacted by a bad economy which we did not cause, or an oil spill which we had no part in, or a war which we did not support. We talk about the rise in obesity in our country or the drop in academic test scores, as if they were plagues inflicted upon us by a powerful enemy. The danger of seeing ourselves as victims is that it renders us weak and strips us of any responsibility for improving our lives.

The ancient Israelites had a totally different view of why bad things happened to good people. We might find it ridiculous, but when the Israelites were defeated by their enemies, the reason was never something as simple as the enemies were stronger or better prepared. Rather, our ancestors believed that the enemy was simply God's tool to get our attention. They saw each defeat as an opportunity to review their own behavior and turn back to a lifestyle that was more in keeping with how they knew they should be living. So in this version of reality, The First Temple and the united kingdom of King Solomon fell not because the Babylonians were militarily stronger, but because the Jews had stopped living by high ethical standards. Similarly, the destruction of the Second Temple and Rome's conquest of Jerusalem was not because the Roman Empire was greater, but because Jews had become mired in *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred towards one another.

Although one may take exception with the issue of causality, imagine if we applied this thinking to some of the current events that have left us feeling so defeated. It would suggest that we are not victims of a polluted environment; rather we have a choice to stop destroying our world. The oil spill is just the means to wake us up. We are not victims of a broken economy; rather we have a choice to practice fiscal discipline. The current recession is just a means to get us to realize this. Some might say this is naïve thinking, but what an empowering reminder of our responsibilities and the choices we have in our lives if we don't fall prey to seeing ourselves as victims.

A third trait that is gaining popularity in our country that we should be wary of is an anti intellectualist tendency. America prides itself on being an equalitarian society. Although the

truth may be otherwise, culturally we embrace a non-elitist narrative that speaks of accessibility to all socio-economic levels for those who are willing to work hard. This recent trend is potentially dangerous for Jews and certainly threatening to anyone who values an open mind. Whether or not we see ourselves personally as intellectuals, we as a people are associated as such. An essential value of our heritage is the critical, inquiring use of one's mind.

Studying and interpreting texts, questioning assumptions and articulating positions in both oral and written form are prized skills amongst us even to this day. As an example of this mentality we read in the Talmud, "Who is a praise worthy student?" Looking at today's school population, one might consider - would it be the student with the most Facebook friends, the one with the greatest technological savvy, the one who lettered in the most sports, or the kid with the highest GPA?

You might be surprised to learn that the Talmud's answer is the one who can give 70 reasons why an oven is kosher, and 70 reasons why the same oven is not kosher. In a society that is becoming increasingly suspicious of intellectual discourse and mental agility we have a choice whether to challenge this attitude or mindlessly drift towards this direction.

The fourth trend that goes hand and hand with the one mentioned above is an increase in reactionary behavior as culturally acceptable. Driven by busier schedules and technological innovations, how we think and how we communicate is changing. With fewer contexts and less time to process, our tendency is to instinctively react rather than intentionally respond. Reactions are rapid and emotion driven, whereas responses allow for deeper and broader consideration.

Judaism has much to say on this subject, especially when it comes to how judges are to evaluate cases and by extension how all of us should make fair, well reasoned decisions. I'd like to share this midrashic interpretation of the Tower of Babel which summarizes the Jewish teaching on reacting vs. responding. In Gen 11:5 we read "*Vayared adonai lirot...*" And the Lord came down to see. The classical commentators think this is a strange expression. Why does the Torah say God has to "come down" to see what is going on with the construction of this tower. Can't God see what is happening from up above?

This same phrase is used in Gen 18:21 when God "comes down" to see what is taking place in Sodom and Gemorrah. The rabbis reason that the word *vayared* "come down" indicates that God chose not to simply react to a situation, but to further investigate the full range of its complexities and nuances before taking action. God models for us how to respond rather than react to circumstances even though it takes more time and effort. We can live in today's reactionary mode, zipping off emails and texting right and left, formulating our deepest convictions after listening to one sound bite, and multi tasking from the moment we wake up, our attention spread thin over all we do. Or we can choose a more reflective, patient and intentional path. We'll all get to the same place in the end. How we choose to take the journey is ours.

The fifth and final tendency I'd like to highlight is the general air of pessimism that abounds these days. For the first time in America we are told that the younger generation cannot look forward to doing better than their parents. Many of our youth are not hopeful about finding a job or a mate, establishing a home or creating financial wealth.

Their elders are also pessimistic. They are worried about affordable health care, lost investments, and forced retirement. People of all ages are not optimistic about the outcome of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our status in the international arena, the prospect of peace for Israel or the future of the environment. The overall impact is a pervasive pessimism that has become normative in our society. But pessimism like optimism is not a given. It is a choice, a response to a set of facts and perceptions.

We have resources other than popular culture to draw upon as we consider how we want to frame our own lives. For example, in spite of a history of oppression and atrocities, lingering anti-Semitism and the reality of being a tiny minority, Judaism maintains a persistent sense of optimism and a conviction that goodness ultimately triumphs. While acknowledging that bad things do happen, we remain hopeful about humanity's potential for decency and God's willingness to forgive. We believe that justice and compassion are worthy values and that even the evil inclination, present in all human beings, can be harnessed for the good. We are taught that it is not up to us to complete the work of repairing this world, but neither are we free to desist from it. These are the enduring beliefs that inform our lives, more powerful than any fleeting trend.

Every year, at this time, we re-affirm this eternal optimism through the rituals of the High Holy days. In spite of our busyness, we gather together. Mindful of how deaf we have become, we still sound the shofar. Knowing the many transgressions we have committed, we persevere in searching our souls, determined to do teshuvah and mend our ways. Aware of who we are, we dare to stand before God and our community, hopeful of a positive judgment. And at the end of ten days, we will go forth confident that our names are inscribed in the Book of Life. Call it chutzpah, call it stupidity, call it faith. We have an option other than pessimism to frame our lives.

This evening, we assemble at a local auditorium in a small town in Connecticut on a late summer's eve to welcome the new year. This is one view of what is happening right now. But let me offer you another image.

Imagine that we have gathered at the lush oasis of our ancestors, deep in a desert landscape. Around us arid sand dunes, above us a black velvet sky speckled with diamond stars. By the smallest sliver of a moon, the people arrive, as families, as couples, with friends, alone, old ones, young ones, all have come to this place. We spread out our carpets and settle into the night.

At the center of the oasis, hidden by tall date palms is a well. By the side of the well, a woman and a man work to draw up buckets from the depths. Cups of cool water are passed from hand to hand, till all have drunk their fill. The fire is lit and the children scoot forward. Leaning in, the people sit together listening to the old stories, of how it was, how it is and how it will always be -of trials and heroes, of God and his people, of exile and return, of life and death. We remember and we are nourished. We grow calm listening to the words; the hyenas' cries in the distance fade away. In ten days the caravans will leave, each clan heading their own way, carrying the stories and memories from what they heard at the well.

For tonight, we remember that we are doubly blessed - to live in this modern nation of such great resources and still to be able to draw from our ancient well of wisdom. God you

have brought us into life, granted us these abundant gifts, and even more than that, given us the free will to use them. With the deepest of gratitude, we that pray this awareness grows each year that we might choose to make our lives a blessing.

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