

Each and every year, before the High Holy Days, I spend the month of Elul trying to prepare myself, literally and spiritually for these days of Awe. I try to engage in self reflection and prayer and as the month goes on, I find that sure enough, I am more ready for the High Holy Days. And now as we are here on October 12th, I am finding that as I peer into my November calendar to book appointments and events, I immediately close it. I'm not ready for November yet- particularly November 5th, Election Day. There is a lot at stake in this election and that is really scary. And yes, we have sent over 1500 postcards to encourage people to get out the vote. And many of us have canvassed and phonebanked. We are doing what we can in these days leading up to the election in the hopes that it will make a difference- that we will get the results we want.

But still, I am finding myself nervous to peer into November, to make plans and develop curriculum for classes not knowing what the next few weeks hold.

And so, as is my way, I look to Jewish tradition to help prepare me for this next month, and really this next year.

In the Torah portion we read earlier, on this holiest day of the year, Moses gathers the Israelites poised to enter the land of Canaan. He brings this new generation, the children of those who stood at Sinai, into the brit, the covenant with God. Moses urges the Israelites to follow God's commandments: "Behold, I place before you today life and good and death and evil... I call on Heaven and Earth to witness to you that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse—choose life!" (30:15, 19).

The sages ask- Isn't it obvious that people will choose life over death? What kind of choice is Moses being offered? What does Choose life actually mean?

In our Machzor Mishkan Hanefesh, we have a beautiful interpretation from Rabbi Eliezer Davidovits as told by Rabbi Joshua Zweibek:

There are two ways to "choose life," he says.

"The first way is the "I" way. If we want, we can choose to think of ourselves first. We can worry about our needs and our desires and our wishes, and only later will we consider the needs, desires, and wishes of others.

But there is another way to "choose life," another way to live our lives. This is the "you" way. Before we act, before we decide, before we speak, we can choose to think about how our actions, decisions, and words will affect others. We can think about how our behavior will affect future generations, including our own children and grandchildren.

A real choice is in fact being offered. Do we live in a way that supports life in the broadest sense, or do we live in a way that serves only ourselves, only our own narrow interests? The narrow way, this second choice, ultimately leads not to life but to death."

During this year we have seen this play out. We have witnessed so many people, especially our leaders, political leaders and communal leaders prioritize “I” and “me” and try to get others to do so as well. We have witnessed horrible rhetoric and behavior during this election season. We have seen complete lies told just to stoke fear. In Israel and Gaza too, we have watched as political leaders have made decisions to protect only themselves and not their citizens. And on a communal level too, we have leaders on college campuses and in schools creating environments where students, whether Jewish or Muslim are afraid to go to school, where harassment of all kinds has become the norm.

And there will continue to be relentless efforts to stoke fear, anger, cynicism so that we wall ourselves off in the belief that it’s every person for themselves, that life is a zero sum game. They will use fearful rhetoric to turn us against each other.

But as Rabbi Davidovits explains, our actions and our well being are completely tied into the well being of others. I would actually call this the “us” way. It is not just you or me, but rather this way recognizes that my life is interconnected with yours - that your benefit is my benefit and my benefit is your benefit. Choosing life here asks us to imagine and then create the world where we, as a collective, are thriving.

This is the work that we need to be doing as we go into this next year. It has been a challenging year and this fear and uncertainty continue. But we have a choice in how we respond to this anxiety and fear.

We must keep going, we must keep trying. Choose Life the Torah reminds us. We can respond to this hate filled rhetoric with abounding chesed, with loving kindness. We can choose to be in it together, caring for one another, and working together.

So: how do we do this work? We can start by recognizing that each day of our life is made up of different choices. We might not even notice them. There are things that we habitually do and that are ingrained in us. We may call the same loved one each day to check in. We always eat breakfast before we leave the house. We may wake up and immediately check our phones and begin doom scrolling. For some of us, these are just natural and don't even feel like choices at this point.

Yet each and every day there are countless decisions where we are faced with a hard choice- one choice that is perhaps better for me as an individual or for us as a community and one that might be easier.

In Mussar practice, a Jewish framework for ethical living, this moment of struggle to make a choice is called a Bechirah point or literally a choice point. It is the precise moment where we are faced with making a choice that will take us down a certain path. What are we going to do? These decisions range from acts of kindness like deciding to pick up a cup of coffee for a coworker, to decisions that support our mental or physical health like deciding to call a friend or go for a walk instead of doom scrolling, to decisions that hit at the core of our identity- like should I continue to wear my Kippah or my Jewish star necklace in public right now?

A lot of factors go into our decision making at any given moment. And the work of Mussar is creating spiritual practices meant to help us move towards our yetzer tov- our good inclinations. This is when we are embodying our best selves- making decisions that are good for me as an individual and us as a collective. Or in other words, we can choose life. We do have a choice and how are we making these choices? Are we turning towards what is life giving or do we keep turning away from one another. Are we letting our love or our fear guide us?

This framework of “us” recognizes that we don't need to completely negate the self in order to become oriented towards the community. The point is that these choices actually do benefit all of us.

Over this last year, each and every day I have thought about Rachel and Jon Goldberg Polin. I have been in awe of them and feel that they have exemplified what it means to “choose life” day in and day out during this horrific, unimaginable year.

They knew their son Hersh had been taken hostage by Hamas and that he had been badly injured in the process. He was suffering, stolen from his home, and kept there for months and months. The Goldberg Polins have had a nightmarish year of hellish grief, when selfishness, bitterness, a desire for vengeance would be at least understandable. But they did not call for bloodshed, they did not even demonize their son's captors, and they did not withdraw from public life.

Instead, they chose to use their energy to rally their community. They shared their grief with the world, inviting people to hope with them, to pray with them. They used every opportunity to demand that leaders prioritize the lives of the people- that the hostages needed to be brought home NOW, and that increased fighting was not the answer.

Did they hope that their activism would also help them bring their own child home? Of course. But they also marshaled their personal desires into a broader message that they also hoped would help everybody.

Even after Hersh Goldberg Polin was murdered, a little over a month ago, the Goldberg Polins could have easily changed their tone, sought revenge, given up, as their world shattered. For 11 months, they chose life at each and every turn, and yet, they were met with death. How could it be?

And still, as Rachel and Jon emerged from the shloshim period after Hersh's death, this week they have again returned to their activism. They continue to use their platform to bring more good into this world. They are demanding that any person in power and decision maker recognize the urgency of this situation and that they prioritize life and an immediate return of all the hostages. It's hard to fathom, making such a choice. But their example shows us what is possible even when things are at their bleakest- To embody what it means to choose life in the face of despair. Even when we cannot see our most desperately desired outcomes – even when it feels completely unrealistic to expect lasting peace to arrive tomorrow – we can still address the decisions that are before us.

In an interview this week, on the anniversary of October 7th, Rachel Goldberg Polin shared, “There are people who walked out of Auschwitz and went on to have a good life. They never forgot their parents and their siblings and their spouses and their children who they lost there. But they went out and they decided — and it took tremendous effort — and they had good lives.”

“And there are people who walked out of Auschwitz and never left Auschwitz,” she added.

Jon polin added, “We’re in mourning. We’re suffering, but we are making a choice personally that we are going to live life. We need to do it for ourselves. We need to do it for our daughters, and we need to do it because Hersh would want us to, so we will live life,”

Somehow again and again, amidst an impossible reality they continue to choose life.

I pray that none of us ever have to face a choice like that with such literal life and death urgency- their pain is unbearable. I look to them as models for what is possible- for what choosing life can look like. And as hard as it is to think of others when our own troubles feel so pressing – and it is hard – I hope we can think about their example to help guide us through even just one of the decisions, big or small, that we face every day.

My hope for this year is that amidst the toxicity and polarization everywhere, that we can turn towards each other; that we turn towards chesed-loving kindness; towards rachamim- compassion; towards kavod-respect. We are inherently empathetic and compassionate community oriented people. We do care about our own well being AND the well being of others. We must recognize that it is literally impossible to continue living as humans as one single person. Barriers, both external and internal, get in the way- fear, anxiety, trauma, a culture of individualism and scarcity and more.

But even with these barriers, we have a choice. We can choose life. We can try to bring out the best in ourselves, and work towards bringing out the best in others as well. We can make individual choices that affirm what we are trying to do as a collective and similarly we make collective choices that affirm the dignity of the individual. Every day we are given a miraculous opportunity, dozens, hundreds of opportunities, to do this – they all matter. Believe that whatever happens, you have a choice of what to do next:

U'varchata b'chaim- Choose life and this year may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Shanah Tovah