



Yom Kippur 5783: Writing in the Book of Life **Rabbi Grushcow**

“Some years ago,” Rabbi Harold Kushner writes,

I was called on to officiate at two funerals of elderly women in my congregation during the same week in January. I set out to visit both families one afternoon to offer my condolences. At the first home, the eldest son of the deceased woman said to me, “I feel it’s my fault that Momma died. I should have insisted on her going to Florida, get her out of this miserable cold weather where you can’t even walk outside. If I had done that, she would still be alive today.” I tried to console him, then made my way to the second family’s home, where the eldest son said to me, “I feel it’s my fault that Mother died. If only I hadn’t insisted on her going to Florida. That long plane ride, the abrupt change of climate, was too much for her.”

“If a story has an unhappy ending,” Kushner observes, “we will berate ourselves endlessly with the “what-ifs,” blaming ourselves for not having made a wiser choice.”¹

God, being human is hard. When I was a kid, I loved Choose Your Own Adventure books. Specifically, I loved being able to hold my finger at one place in the book, and flip ahead to see which of the two choices would go well. But in real life, you can’t flip ahead to explore your options, and the decisions matter so much more.

The last two and a half years? *Al achat kama v’chama*, as they say in the Talmud – how much more is that the case. A *New Yorker* cartoon from earlier this year shows a family standing together, with the following question overhead:

If Dr. Chan has a schoolteacher husband, a diabetic mother-in-law, twins in preschool, and a daughter who stays with her father across town on alternate weekends, and one twin and the daughter have colds, how many free rapid COVID

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness* (New York, 1996), pp.58-59.

tests are required to alleviate Dr. Chan's breaking-point levels of despair? a) fewer than four b) four c) more than four.²

Sound familiar? To eat in restaurants or stick to patios, to take a vacation or stay at home, to mask or not to mask, to come on the high holy days in person or online, the list goes on. Decision fatigue is real. And alas, there is no COVID Choose Your Own Adventure book, where you can check before you do something what the consequence will be.

I am sorry to say I don't have the answers for you; that's a sermon I *wish* I could give. But I do think there is wisdom in words that we read on this day. Decades ago, the Reform movement decided to change the traditional Yom Kippur morning Torah reading. We moved away from Leviticus 16 with its description of the Yom Kippur ritual in biblical times, replete with priests and sacrifices and a scapegoat carrying away our sins. Instead, we chose Deuteronomy 29, in keeping with the themes of Yom Kippur: life and death; our relationship with each other and with God; and yes, trying to make good choices.

This brings us to the line that I want to focus on. Because I believe that six Hebrew words that we will read from the Torah today can help guide our decisions in the year to come. Here they are:

וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֲךָ

Choose life, that you and your descendants may live.³

In fine Jewish tradition, I'm going to whittle those six Hebrew words down to three ideas, three touchstones for how we should decide:

1. Choose
2. Life
3. Descendants

First, choose – *u'vcharta*. I'm not sure if it counts as a Jewish text, but I often think of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics in Sunday in the Park with George: "The choice may have been mistaken/The choosing was not." The risk of decision fatigue is that we either make impulsive decisions out of sheer exhaustion – say, buying the chocolate at the checkout counter after we've gone up and down the aisles with our grocery lists, or

² New Yorker Daily Cartoon: Friday, January 21st 2022, by Zoe Si.

³ Deut. 30:19.

we avoid making decisions altogether.⁴ But there is something more which can keep us from making good choices: namely, the delusion that as long as we don't commit to anything, everything is possible. The French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, calls this "the temptation of temptation."⁵ Because we want to experience everything, he says, we do not want to close off any possibility. But without making a commitment, without making a choice, we cannot fully live. Think of the person who swipes through endless matches on a dating app, because no one real partner can be as alluring as an infinite parade of possibility.

There's a wonderful, albeit sobering, book by Oliver Burkeman called *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, based on the reality that if you live to the age of 80, you will have approximately four thousand weeks on this earth. To do everything is impossible – and this is precisely what gives meaning to what we choose. Instead of the "fear of missing out," Burkeman argues, we should embrace "the joy of missing out," recognizing that our choices, and our commitments, show our values:

In this state of mind, you can embrace the fact that you're forgoing certain pleasures, or neglecting certain obligations, because whatever you've decided to do instead – earn money to support your family, write your novel, bathe the toddler, pause on a hiking trail to watch a pale winter sun sink below the horizon at dusk – is how you've chosen to spend [your] time...⁶

Oliver Burkeman, Stephen Sondheim, and the Torah all agree: we have to make choices. But how do we decide what to choose?

Here's where we come to our second touchstone: *chayim*, life. *Uvacharta b'chayim* – choose life, in order that you may live. This seems, well, obvious. You don't want to choose the adventure with the unhappy ending. And indeed, so many of our choices lately have been guided by the simple principle of *pikuach nefesh*, preserving life.

I want to suggest today that this is necessary, but not sufficient. It falls short of the full meaning of choosing life. Interpreting this verse, Ibn Ezra in the 12th century says, *hechayim hem l'ahavah* – life is for love. Love your neighbour as yourself – which is to say, value your neighbour's life like your own. Love the stranger – which is to say, all our lives are intertwined.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?r=0>. See also, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/too-many-choices-decision-fatigue/2021/09/21/2dffce74-1b22-11ec-bcb8-0cb135811007_story.html.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, 2019), p.47.

⁶ Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (New York, 2021), p.69.

Last year, a book with a very provocative title came out: *People Love Dead Jews*,⁷ by Dara Horn. Less well-known is that Horn more recently wrote an article called, “Dreams for Living Jews.”⁸ She shares how, since she wrote her book, she has become the reluctant repository of people telling her their experiences of anti-Semitism, in a world that seems to value Jews dead more than alive. And to her dismay, they are asking her what they should do. She writes: “My first thought as a lifelong pessimist is to tell them: *Nothing. Sorry... Good luck.* But that’s not... what generations of Jews before us thought...”

Horn reflects that when it comes to Jewish history and culture, it is “precisely its astonishing resilience, its constant reinvention, its demonstration of what might be possible” that is so remarkable. Judaism, insists on the human capacity to change the world, in partnership with the divine. She writes:

The Hebrew prophets... are known... for their visions of previously unimagined and still-unrealized possibilities: widespread peace, ultimate justice, broad human liberation, shared enlightenment... So why not dream as big as we can, as our ancestors both ancient and recent didn’t fear to do? Why not solve the unsolvable problems, change the social order, undo the bad years, do the things that were supposed to be impossible?

Choosing life means committing ourselves to that vision of a better world, because we know the lives of others matter just as much as our own. Choosing life means rejecting pessimism and indifference and paralysis.

But after this time spent staying close to home and trying to protect our own, how are we supposed to muster our energy to look outward, to choose life not just for ourselves but for others, people around the corner in Cabot Square and people around the globe?

Well, our tradition wouldn’t be a guide if it just kept us comfortable.

So, let me tell you who I am inspired by, who I see choosing life this Yom Kippur. A Temple family who has quietly hosted a Ukrainian refugee, because they had the space and decided that it was just the right thing to do. My father, who is working to bring Uyghur refugees to Canada, because with the memory of the Holocaust, he can’t stand being silent.⁹ Our Caring Cooks, who have kept feeding the poor and homeless in our city with Resilience and Share the Warmth, and our Kugel Club,

⁷ Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (New York, 2021).

⁸ Dara Horn, “Dreams for Living Jews,” in *Sapir: Ideas for a Thriving Jewish Future* (Winter 2022), pp.8-17, [Dreams for Living Jews – Sapir Journal](#).

⁹ <https://thecjn.ca/podcasts/behind-the-scenes-of-the-jewish-movement-to-boycott-the-beijing-olympics/>.

which delivers meals to our members. Our Truth and Reconciliation group, which keeps advancing the work of education and justice, and our L'Dor vaDor initiative, which has shepherded the stories of our elders into print, giving them the honour, and attention, they deserve. A next generation refusing to accept the climate crisis, pushing for individual and societal change. All those who, in the wake of a divisive Quebec election, are committed to moving forward together and bridging our divides. We can't all do everything. But each of us can do something.

All this leads to more life. *Beguf o bezecher*, Ibn Ezra says: In body or in memory. "Sooner than we'd all like to believe," Rabbi Nancy Wiener writes, "we will join the ranks of our ancestors, and the legacy we leave will be determined by what we did yesterday, what we do today, and what we do tomorrow."¹⁰ How do you want to be remembered? What kind of ancestor do you want to be?

This brings us to our final touchstone: *atah vezarecha* – us and our descendants.

There's a quip attributed to Groucho Marx – "Why should I care about future generations? What have they ever done for me?"¹¹ – but the truth is that we are deeply invested in each other.

The next generation is *all* of our descendants, whether you are raising them, or teaching them, or sitting in the pews when we welcome babies on Rosh Hashanah or celebrate bnei mitzvah on Shabbat. Whether or not you are the one standing on the bima passing the Torah to your child or grandchild, you are part of that chain of tradition, and the choices we make are shaped by those who came before us, and will impact those who come after.

Just before Israel became a country, there was an important decision that David Ben-Gurion had to make. The issue itself doesn't matter to this story; the process does. Ben-Gurion went to Yitzhak Tabenkin, one of the founders of the kibbutz movement, for advice. "I have to consult two people before I give you an answer," Tabenkin said. The next day, the two men met and Tabenkin gave Ben-Gurion his answer. Curious, Ben-Gurion asked with whom Tabenkin consulted. "I consulted with my grandfather, who had died," Tabenkin replied, "and with my grandson, who is not yet born."¹²

What if we made every decision keeping in mind our grandparents and our grandchildren, two generations before us and two after, the people who will sit in

¹⁰ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/we-are-ancestors>.

¹¹ Cited in Roman Krznaric, *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* (New York, 2020), p.71.

¹² <https://www.sivanrahavmeir.com/the-daily-thought/consulting-with-the-past-and-with-the-future/>.

these seats, sustain this society, inhabit this planet? How can we choose life, not just for us, but for them?

We cannot always anticipate the consequences of our actions but we *can* commit ourselves to doing our very best: to choose, to choose life, to choose life for our descendants.

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Choose life, that you and your descendants may live.

We never know how the story will end. But for as long as we are in this world, may we write in the Book of Life.