

Make Good Choices

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Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783/2022

Shana Tova!

I know you think the life of a rabbi is glamorous, and that our days are spent moving from one premier bat mitzvah party to the next...

But in fact, most of my life is spent making school lunches for twins (who only eat pasta), listening to nerdy books on Audible, chasing the dog who has stolen another napkin or towel or shoe...and walking back and forth, and back and forth, with the kids to school.

Sometimes, to spice up the routine, as they lumber away to class, weighed down by their giant backpacks, pigtails bouncing, I wave goodbye from the gate and dramatically yell: "I love you. Make Good Choices!"

They never wave back.

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It's been a few years since we've done this together, so, here's a reminder for us all: Rosh Hashanah is *all about choices*.

Like the secular New Year, the Jewish New Year inspires a wave of resolutions. This year, I'll have more patience. I'll go to bed earlier. I won't mind cleaning up the Legos.

We think this moment is about finding the will to stop making BAD choices...and there's a good reason we think that: On Yom Kippur, the Vidui will turn apologizing for *terrible* choices into a Hebrew acrostic. 22 Hebrew letters with an extra tap upon the heart to remind us: *You chose wrong*.

But the Jewish New Year is ALSO meant to be a moment of positive self-determination: As we look out over the next 52 weeks of the year, what active, thoughtful choices will we make, so that one year from now, when - God willing - we return to Royce Hall for Rosh Hashanah, we will have lived the life we prayed for, imagined, and committed to today.

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Now, if 52 weeks seems like an huge amount of time to consider, it might be because most of us have spent the past 2.5 years planning no more than a few days ahead.

One Bar Mitzvah student, Alex Shader, summed it up beautifully as he *finally* delivered his d'var Torah in May of 2021:

“As many of you know, (he writes) because of Covid this is my fourth attempt at a Bar Mitzvah. The last time the date was semi-official I was in a different grade, we had a different president, some people thought Covid would go away in two weeks, *and I was six inches shorter*. And while I have had to prepare two Torah portions, two speeches, and two trips to the tailor to alter this suit, it doesn’t bother me.”

Like Alex, we all learned how to adapt. We accepted our limitations. Some of us even found words of gratitude for being forced to change our routine.

Do you remember?

We were UNBELIEVABLY happy and fulfilled just to see our friends outdoors, from 6 feet away, laughing and crying as we told stories of Instacart exchanges, children run amuck, and zoom calls gone wild.

We loved that time because it was what our souls needed to thrive. Relationships. Connection. Community. That’s it.

We loved it because it broke the isolation and healed the loneliness we felt so intensely.

We loved it because, as humans, we are wired for connection. And when we didn’t have all the invitations and distractions that pulled us away from family and friends, what was left before us was exactly what we needed: Each other.

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The world is once again open and our choices are *limitless*. Nothing stands in our way of making up for all we’ve lost. Years of school. Years of retirement. The vacation we couldn’t take...we’re taking it now. It’s time to seize back the life we surrendered to Covid.

But before we rush into the New Year, let’s pause for a moment.

Right before Rosh Hashanah, we read in Parashat Nitzavim the perfect delivery of an invitation, that is also a command: God says to the Children of Israel, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your offspring will live.” (Deut. 30:19)

Don’t be led astray by God’s lack of specificity. This isn’t about choosing everything. This is about choosing what and who is most important to us, and then letting go of the rest.

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This might surprise you, but for Jews, “choosing life” was (and is) about choosing *and embracing* limitations. Not just one day a year, but every day.

Consider Kashrut: Not every food is available to you. Or Shabbat: Not every moment is intended for work and production. Even the covenant of Marriage: Not every person is yours to have.

You're not supposed to do it all. You're not supposed to have it all.

But, surprisingly, in the limitation, comes the holiness. In the restriction, comes deeper fulfillment and happiness.

How might we reorganize our lives if we knew "choosing life" was an invitation to embrace limitation?

How would we reorganize the next 52 weeks, if we woke up every morning ready to choose...*less*?

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Now, if 52 weeks of planning feels overwhelming, consider the alternative of 4,000 Weeks.

4,000 Weeks is the average number of weeks each of us has to live. Don't pull out your phone: That is roughly 77 years of life. It's also the title of a book by Oliver Burkeman, [4000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals](#).

4000 is both an incredibly large number, *when talking about jelly beans in a jar*, and shockingly small when it sums up our life. Spoiler Alert: We live cosmically insignificant and short lives. But, leave it to the Jews to take limitation and turn it into lemonade.

The High Holy Days arrive just in time to help us *reframe our insignificance* and to use it as motivation to choose a life that is meaningful and fulfilling.

Knowing you have a limited amount of time, what will you choose to do with it?

Now, for those who are still stuck on the number 4,000, quietly calculating how many weeks you might have left...pay attention. :)

This is an important piece of background information that's captivated me from the moment I read this book: Oliver Burkeman is a former productivity consultant, who made money FOR YEARS teaching us how to maximize limited time so we might achieve greater joy and satisfaction.

Zero out your inbox so you'll feel less burdened. Organize your day in 15 min increments and you'll work faster. Sound familiar? There is an *entire industry* committed to managing our time and manipulating our expectations that if we could just "get it all done", then we would reach some golden state of bliss and soul-satisfaction.

Burkeman sold this dream until the day he realized the premise was fundamentally flawed.

We're not getting it all done and likely we never will. And it's NOT because we didn't buy the right book or because we didn't try hard enough. No matter how creative and capable we are, there will always be things we didn't get to. There will be places we didn't visit. Experiences we couldn't provide for our family.

“Convenience culture,” Burkeman writes, “*seduces* us into imagining that we might find room for everything important by eliminating only life’s tedious tasks...But it’s a lie. You have to choose a few things (to invest your energy and time on) sacrifice (and jettison) everything else, and deal with the inevitable sense of loss that results.”

And, yes, making a choice means admitting we can’t do it all. It means grieving the loss of certain dreams and aspirations. It means MORE surrender and embrace of limitations which comes at a time when we are SO DONE with being told what we cannot do.

But here’s the truth: “Choose life” doesn’t mean choose everything. Choose life means choose your priorities and have the courage to let go of the rest.

And that elusive feeling of soul-satisfaction...? It comes through choosing **less** not more.

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This whole concept isn't easy, because though we may WANT to choose less, putting this into practice...is going to be hard.

But by CHOOSING to embrace limitations we have the opportunity *to use our best hours* to focus on what and who we love the most.

This year:

Will we choose to be with family - but keep the phone on so we don’t miss a text?

Will we talk about doing less - but feel compelled to say “yes” to every invitation?

Will we end work at 5 - but answer emails until 10?

Will we plan a vacation - but exhaust ourselves the week before because we know we can crash when we arrive...?

Will we tell our children and grandchildren to slow down...but then wonder aloud and worry why they *aren't* doing more?

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So, what can Judaism tell us about making good choices?

1500 years ago, the rabbis of the Talmud instructed the community to begin their day with a choice. To take what is ordinary and commonplace and give it priority.

Tadir u’she’ayno tadir, tadir kodem. (Zevachim 89a)

When there are two mitzvot before us, one rare and one more regular and commonplace, the more regular and commonplace comes first.

Perhaps our ancestors understood something about time that we often forget. At the end of our lives, we rarely recount the weeks we “maxed out” with over-the-top school projects, extravagant vacations, or long hours at work finalizing big deals...or big sermons.

Ask anyone who has lived through the death of a loved one, at the end of life we remember and cherish the ordinary moments. The relationships. The simple expressions of love and forgiveness - not the skywriting or elaborate bouquets.

Choosing the everyday or common place is ancient wisdom. Desperately trying to wave to us as we lumber through life with our overfilled backpacks and briefcases...

You don't have to wait 4000 weeks to realize *this truth*:

The moments you're skipping over right now,
the walks to school and back,
the hours lost that we think we'll make up for later,
though we know we never will...

These are the ones to be chosen first.

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A few weeks ago, we said goodbye to our beloved Temple member, Barry Korn, may his memory be a blessing. A husband, a father, a grandfather. One of our few baritones in Hasharim. A Shabbat regular.

In the words of those who spoke at his memorial, he was *extraordinary*. Why? Because he made choices - deliberate and intentional - that prioritized friends, family and community.

And yes, he designed gorgeous kitchens. And yes, he took beautiful photographs for Sotheby's. But most of the stories, *and this is not unusual for eulogies*, were about how he made people feel loved, seen, protected, and cherished. Not through heroic means - but by simply choosing a life that made them the centerpiece - and letting go of the rest.

At his memorial, Barry's wife Helene, displayed his ties on an artistic hat rack. Bright colors and patterns. Solids and prints. And she invited people, as the service concluded, to visit the tie rack, and to choose one of Barry's ties to bring home, that they might have a memory of him to keep close by. To remember the love he shared. And perhaps to share that love with others.

An ordinary piece of fabric, made into something extraordinary.

A bridge.

A tie.

Between Heaven and Earth.
Between this world and the next.
Between the life we have now, and the life we hope to be remembered for.

Avinu Malkeinu, on this New Year, help us to choose life, that we might live and be remembered for having chosen well.

Shana Tova.

Thank you to Rabbi Asher Knight, my wingman in writing High Holy Day sermons.

Thank you to Michele Lowe, the best sermon editor, coach, and cheerleader a rabbi could hope for.

Thank you to Larry Dressler who first recommended [4,000 Weeks](#).

Sending love to all the Jewish professionals (and their support teams) at this time of year. May 5783 be a sweet one for us all.