

Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022

CHOOSE IT OR LOSE IT

(Rosh Hashanah, Second day)

I want to welcome you all and hope you're enjoying the davening/service. On Rosh Hashanah we of course pray for a good year and please God many good years to come. They tell the story of an older man who on his 90th birthday visits his doctor for his annual physical. The man tells the doctor: "I think I'd like to make it to 100," "What do I have to do?" The doctor responds: "Well, do you smoke"?

"No".

"Do you drink"?

"No".

"Do you like to drive fast cars"?

"No".

"Do you ever eat foods high in saturated fat"?

"No".

"Then why do you want to make it to 100?"

We all want to live a long life but today on Rosh Hashanah we're also praying for a *good life*, one filled with meaning and purpose.

About 10 years ago on the last day of the MJE Israel trip, our group traveled to Hadassah Hospital to visit a victim of terror. We met an amazing young man named Keith. Originally from Bayonne, New Jersey, Keith made Aliyah at the age of 20 and went right into the army. Keith's base was attacked by a group of Palestinian terrorists who dressed up as Israeli soldiers, killing four Israelis and wounded a number of others, among them Keith. Someone from our crowd raised his hand and asked: "Keith: if before you made Aliyah and joined the army, you knew that you would have been shot, would you have still decided to come to Israel? Without flinching Keith answered "yes, I'd do it all over again if I had to". And then another person got up from the audience, someone not from our group who I did not recognize, stood up and said: "Y'know, I just realized that the day I converted to Judaism was the day you Keith, were injured in that attack. I know this because when the Rabbi performing the conversion asked me if I really wanted to convert, since the Jewish people, he said, are still a persecuted people, and the rabbi said: "just today there was an attack on an Israeli base and four Jewish soldiers were killed and a number were injured - are you sure you really want to become Jewish?"

I realize now the Rabbi was talking about you.

Keith then turned back and asked: "Well what did you answer the Rabbi?"

The gentleman responded: "I answered yes, and one day maybe I'll be worthy".

Keith turned back to the convert and said: "Welcome to our people".

Keith chose to make Aliyah and to join the army. This other gentleman chose to convert to Judaism. Like all converts, he is a Jew by choice. But what about all of us born Jews? Did we get to choose to be Jewish? Was there ever a time in our lives when we were asked if this is what we wanted? I don't know about you, but I was never asked. Yet we are somehow born with a special covenant with God and a unique lifestyle: Shabbat, kashrut, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur ... How did that happen?

The Torah, in just last week's Parsha (portion) tells us: "*For it is not with you alone I make this covenant ... but whoever is standing here today and not here today*" (D'vraim 29:14) To whom does "*and not here today*" refer? It refers of course to generations not yet born. The Talmud tells us that we, the descendants of those who stood at Sinai are *mushba ve-omedmehar Sinai* - foresworn from Sinai, namely, our ancestors somehow obligated us in being Jewish, in living this life of Torah. But how could that have happened? How can we be bound by an agreement, a covenant with God to which we never consented? That goes against all the laws of contracts that the Torah itself established and gave to the world!

There are many answers given to this question. The most famous answer is that we actually did consent to this and that we were there when God offered us this whole covenant at Sinai. True our bodies were not there, but our souls were. The Kabbalah teaches that the *neshamot* - the souls of every Jewish man, woman and child who would ever live, past, present and future, were present at Sinai when the Torah was given and all those souls joined into the well-known declaration of acceptance *na'aseh v'nishmah* - "we will do it and we will hear it!". We are in! So, our souls committed us to being Jewish!

Rabbi Isaac Arama (Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama, 1420 - 1494) was not a fan of this approach. He asked: if we are a composite of both body and soul how can the soul alone obligate the body to follow the Torah? The Torah after all requires the body's involvement in the carrying out the mitzvot - in only eating certain foods, speaking in a certain way, observing Shabbat ... How can the soul alone bind the body in this way?

The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser 1809 - 1879) suggested a different approach: he wrote that the acceptance of the Torah into the lives of the Jewish people is ultimately a *zechut*, a merit that gives our ancestors the ability to accept for subsequent generations. There is a legal concept in the Halacha (Jewish law) called: *Zachin l'aadamshelo b'fanav*, which means: "one may cause a merit for another when not in their presence" - the idea that if something is in the best interests of another person, someone else can accept that on your behalf. For example, if a friend was offered the opportunity to accept a free apartment in Manhattan on your behalf, your friend can legally accept the apartment for you and it legally becomes yours. Even if the apartment comes with some leaks and a monthly maintenance charge, since owning an apartment in Manhattan is valuable, another person can accept it on your behalf.

This is actually how we convert a child to Judaism. When Jewish parents, for example, adopt a child who was not born Jewish and they want to raise the child Jewish, they convert the child. However, one of the requirements for conversion is *kabbalat mitzvot* or the "acceptance of the mitzvot" and a child under Bar/Bat Mitzvah age lacks the capacity to do that (in Hebrew it is called *da'as* or consent) and so the Jewish court has the authority to be the substitute for the *da'as* of the child. Why? Again, because of the principle of *zachin l'adam shelo bafanav* - that the court may act in the best interests of the child. Since being Jewish is considered a benefit, a hugely positive thing for someone to have in their life, the Jewish court can substitute for the *da'as* (the consent of the child) and accept Judaism on his or her behalf. Ultimately, giving a child the opportunity to live a Jewish life, with the beauty of Shabbat, and a tight knit community that will look out for him is a *zechut*, a merit for the child. A child raised with the values and ethics of Judaism - to give charity, to perform acts of kindness, to look out for the widow, orphan and stranger ... all of this will help the child feel happy and fulfilled. All of this is a *zechut*, a merit and therefore the court can do this for the child. Similarly, our ancestors were able to do this for us. Our ancestors understood how positive and awesome it is to be Jewish - how living a Jewish life is ultimately a merit, and so they too had the power to rope us into this whole thing on our behalf. Thus, it seems like we *don't* get to choose! Either, as the Kabbalists teach, our souls chose for us or our ancestors made that decision for us a long time ago - choosing a spiritual path that they believed would benefit us. But is that fair? Shouldn't we, like Keith or the convert, get to choose the path we want in life? How could Judaism simply be imposed upon us by our ancestors?

The answer is that today in our world we *do* get to choose. Although on a strictly theological level the choice to be Jewish has already been made for us (either by our own souls or by our ancestors), on a sociological level we ourselves must make a choice. The way things are today - if you don't choose to pursue your Judaism - it simply does not remain. You either chose it or you lose it. Today, even if we are born Jewish, unless we actively and proactively choose to do Jewish, we simply do not stay Jewish. All the studies demonstrate that the only American Jews who successfully transmit their Judaism to the next generation are those who actively live a Jewish life.

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once asked: how could it be that we continue to yearn for the *Moshiach* (Messiah) today? How could the Messiah come in our generation when the righteous of previous generations were not able to bring it? Is our generation really so much greater today that we could merit to bring redemption, something our great grandparents couldn't? Reb Shlomo answered that there's a big difference between our generation today and our great-grandparents generation back in Europe. Back in Europe, if you didn't want to live as Jew, there was really nowhere else to go. Jews were simply not accepted in society and so our ancestors remained amongst themselves.

Staying Jewish back then was therefore pretty much a given. That was the way most of our great-grandparents were raised: they were expected to live as a Jew and there was really no life outside of the community. But today, it's so different. Today it's so easy *not* be Jewish – *not* to have Shabbat, *not* to remain with Jewish values. Our world has changed so much in a very short period of time. Today, since we have become so accepted, it's much easier to simply follow the prevailing culture and simply do whatever everyone else is doing. Therefore, those who *are* staying Jewish today, said Reb Shlomo, are making a conscious decision to be Jewish. We have to make a choice our grandparents never had to. We have to choose to be Jewish and therefore our generation has a *zechut*, an additional merit to bring the *Moshiach* that our grandparents never had!

I am privileged to see this every day at MJE; young men and women choosing to live active Jewish lives, making conscious decisions to observe the Torah in a variety of different ways. Individuals, who for example, never ate kosher food in their childhood, but became inspired to start keeping Kosher. Others who chose to follow the Torah's principles on appropriate speech - who try to refrain from speaking ill of other people and others who every Shabbat commit themselves to visiting the sick by walking across the park to visit patients at Mt. Sinai hospital. I've had the great *zechut* (merit) of seeing others choosing to integrate Shabbat into their lives. Leaving work on Fridays early or using their precious little vacation time to observe the holidays. Even though this may not have been part of their childhood, people are seeing the value in once a week putting down the cell phone, disconnecting so they can reconnect with Hashem and the community. That's also a choice.

Keeping Kosher, giving charity, and observing Shabbat were all givens back in our great-grandparent's time back in Europe, but because they're not the norm today, we must choose to be Jewish. And given all the other choices we have, all the other things we could be doing on a Friday night (other than Shabbat), all the other places to eat (which are not Kosher), all the other not so Jewish things to spend our time and money on - being Jewish today is the ultimate choice.

But it's not just choosing Judaism for *ourselves*: if we want the Jewish people to be a force in the world for good, we also have to choose to make a difference for the greater community. Rabbi Shlomo Goren was for many years the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Army. In his autobiography, he shares the following story: During Israel's War of Independence in 1948, as the city of Jerusalem was under siege by the Jordanians, Rabbi Goren was serving as both a combat soldier and a rabbi for the army. Early one Friday morning a jeep pulled up beside the rabbi and the driver said he was sent by General David Shaltiel to bring the rabbi to see him. When Rabbi Goren arrived, the General told him the IDF has received intelligence confirming that the next day the Jordanian army will be sending in tanks to attack Jerusalem. There is only one route for the tanks to come in, the General said, and the only way to stop them would be to dig ditches and trenches but this could only be done in the dark of the night so the Jordanians wouldn't see. That would mean the only time to dig would be Friday evening and the only able-bodied men not serving in the army, available to do this, were the ultra-orthodox students in the Yeshivot, in the religious seminaries.

The General asked Rabbi Goren if he could recruit as many yeshiva students as possible to dig trenches on Shabbat to stop the tanks. You have to understand, that even under these dire circumstances, it would not be easy to get yeshiva students to do something which would otherwise be a complete desecration of the Shabbat, and to do so publicly. Rabbi Goren went to the various Yeshivot pleading with the students to volunteer to dig the trenches on the Sabbath. In one yeshiva, where approximately a hundred students were studying, Rabbi Goren informed the students of the situation and asked them if they would help. The students were so moved by the rabbi's plea - there was not even one student who didn't raise his hand to volunteer. Rabbi Goren told the religious students to go home and pray the Shabbat service and meet at the assigned areas to begin the digging throughout the night. He told them he would make sure they would have wine to make Kiddush and that they should restrict their violation of the Shabbat to the digging alone. Rabbi Goren went from yeshiva to yeshiva making his case, and in the end, the good rabbi recruited over a thousand yeshiva students willing to dig ditches on the Sabbath to stop the tanks. The students dug trenches throughout the entire night along every road where the tanks could enter Jerusalem. They even managed to dig parallel trenches so if a tank wouldn't fall into the first trench, the second one would get them.

At exactly 11am Saturday morning, just as the intelligence information had promised, a column of thirteen tanks approached Jerusalem. Rabbi Goren, who was able to see all this from a rooftop, wrote that the tanks were advancing at a very high speed. Suddenly he sees the first two tanks roll over and come to a halt upside down. They had fallen

into the trenches. After that a third tank crashed into the first two and turned over as well. When the remaining ten tanks saw what happened to the tanks before them, they turned around and headed back to where they came from.

The trenches the students dug saved Jerusalem and its 100,000 Jewish residents. Those students had a choice to make, and they chose to act on behalf of the greater community.

We may think the choice to be a Jew has been made for us but it's not true. We also get to choose - whether to be active or to remain passive, whether to sit on the sidelines or pick up a shovel and start to dig. We get to choose whether to be a spectator or get our hands a little dirty by doing something positive for the Jewish people. Will we speak up and defend Israel when she is unfairly maligned in the press or someone at work or in our circle of friends says something untrue about Israel? We get to choose whether to write an article, blog, speak up or remain silent so we don't create any waves.

In the coming year when we are asked to contribute to a cause we know is important - will we donate? Will we give to a friend who needs a loan or to someone that's fallen on bad luck or perhaps to our own community, to MJE which requires funds just to keep things going and to continue our mission to reach out to our less affiliated Jewish brothers and sisters? *That* my friends, is choosing to be Jewish; by caring about those who don't have a community and are at risk of being lost to our people.

And there are so many more areas in our lives to make that choice: from *who* we date to *how* we date, whether we will one day give our kids a Jewish education, how honestly, we act in our business dealings and the *chesed*, the kindness we do for others - these are all opportunities to make real and authentic Jewish choices for our lives and our community in the coming year. That's what the Torah means when it says: *ubacharta b'chayim* - "and you shall choose life". I never understood that phrase; I mean who wouldn't want to choose life? What it means is the good in life can only happen if we proactively choose it and pursue it. The Shofar we're about to hear is a wake-up call, meant to shake us out of our slumber and inspire us to be proactive. The sounds of the shofar remind us that by *not* making a choice in whatever part of our lives, we *are* making a choice to simply go along with whatever is going on around us. Our ancestors may have chosen Judaism for us, but today we also get to choose. On this Rosh Hashanah let us choose the Torah for our lives and may we merit in the coming year to see the positive consequences of that choice, a year filled with blessing and joy, meaning and purpose.