

Choosing to Choose

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Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All the animals of the creation—were created in their full-grown stature, they were created with their consent, and according to their form (Rosh Hashanah 11a).

The rabbis taught that Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world, or by some accounts, the sixth day of creation, the day that humanity was created. Liturgically, the day is seen as more than just an anniversary. We pray “*Hayom Harat Olam*,” today the world is born, suggesting that the world, humanity, and each of us individually, are created “today,” every Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s teaching about the process of creation suggests something startling: each creature has a measure of choice in its own formation; its “consent” is required. Indeed, according to the great Hasidic master the Sefat Emet, at Creation, *l’da-atan nivr’u* means that all creatures chose for themselves—each one its own particular form.

This idea will be familiar to anyone who has engaged in creative work of any kind. At some point in the creative process, the object being created begins to direct its own form. The same is true of human beings. Of course, we do not have complete free reign to “self-create.” We are all born with particular physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics, and into particular social and familial structures. But the phrase “today the world is born,” suggesting as it does a passive process, is misleading. Within the realm of things within our control, we actively create ourselves on Rosh Hashanah, and indeed every day. And we do so through our choices.

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Why does our Torah reading this week need to command us to choose life, and what does that really mean? Reading the command in light of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s teaching, we may understand the Torah to be reminding us that *all choices are creative acts*. Each and every one of us creates ourselves constantly through the choices we make. In the end, we are the sum total of our choices; we are beings freely created according to the form we choose, not only at creation, but at every moment.

To choose life we have to actively, consciously, and continually choose who we will become. We have to choose to create ourselves and our lives, rather than passively allow ourselves to be shaped. At the most basic level, we have to choose to choose.

The command to choose life expresses a reality that life energy comes from the exercise and expression of the will, from making choices. We are most fully alive when we are actively, consciously engaged in the process of choosing who to be. The moment that we allow ourselves to be a certain way simply because we have always been that way, or because society or a particular person pressures us to be that way, or any other reason other than a conscious, thoughtful decision to be a certain way—we have died a little. We have chosen death, not life.

And this choice itself—to embrace our power to choose; to actively, consciously create ourselves—is neither intuitively obvious, nor easy. The opportunity on Rosh Hashanah to

create ourselves anew is a tremendous privilege and also a tremendous responsibility.

The Talmud teaches of the three books open on Rosh Hashanah:

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the *beinonim*, intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the *beinonim*—they are suspended and stand from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not merit, they are inscribed in the book of death (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

A powerful Hasidic interpretation (Toldot Yaakov Yosef, quoted in *Netivot Shalom*) understands this as follows:

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe themselves for the coming year.

As uncomfortable as some of us are with the idea of God sitting in judgment and decreeing life or death, this reading may be even more challenging, because it puts the responsibility squarely on us. We have to choose.

Perhaps this is one reason why we need to be *commanded* to choose life. All too often, we readily relinquish our power to choose because we don't want to bear responsibility for our choices, or we simply don't know what to choose. Other times, we *do* know what to choose, but the right choice feels too demanding; it involves too much work, loss, change, or risk.

And we have many strategies to avoid choosing. Sometimes we're passive, allowing life to simply happen to us. Other times we're reactive and reflexive, acting on

impulse without self-reflection, thought, and discipline. And often, we avoid having to make choices today by simply sticking with the choice we made yesterday, for no other reason than that we made it. This particular strategy can border on the idolatrous; we pledge our primary allegiance to our own prior choices and commitments.

Ultimately, we are free to choose, but we are not free from the burden of having to choose. To fail to choose is itself a choice, and it is not the choice of life and blessing.

Granted, it is not easy to know what to choose. But the fact that we don't know how to choose doesn't let us off the hook. We have to choose to become people who *will* know how to choose. Each choice that we make changes us a little and changes the way we perceive and decide the next choice. With each life decision we make, we become someone else, and it is that new person who will make the next choice. So our question is not only, who will I be if I make this choice, but, will making this choice turn me into someone who is better able to make the next choice? What will this choice teach me? Will it increase my courage, my strength? Will it deepen my capacity to love, sensitize me, educate me? Will it help me to tolerate greater depth, rise to the next challenge? Will it shore up my moral footing, or will it make me more susceptible to ever greater ethical compromise? How will this choice not only reflect, but shape, my character?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught that all the animals were created in their full-grown stature. This is perhaps a difference between the original creation and the ongoing process of creation, and between the animals and humans. We are not created full-grown, in our final form. We grow into who we are meant to be. And we have to grow also into our capacity to choose, we have to grow into *ba'alei bechira*, truly free, "masters" of choice.