

The Choice

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Imagine if you could choose your future—not know it, but choose it. What would happen to you? Would you live forever? Would you choose how you were going to die? What would be your legacy? If you could, would you turn fantasy into reality?

Even contemplating these questions feels both silly and dangerous; they are too tempting and too trite all at the same time. Of course, it is not really possible to know what will be. We only control our own destiny up to a certain point. Still, it is sometimes hard to resist the power of dreaming happy endings. Many of us would not necessarily want to see our future laid out in front of us, but it does not stop us from fantasizing about things beyond our control.

But then, God's words in this week's double parashah, Nitzavim-Vayeilekh, seem to violate these rules we have about how the universe works. We are not supposed to know what could be. But as the Israelites stand on the shore of the Jordan River about to cross into Israel, they are offered a look at their potential futures. In some ways, the picture painted of the future in the Land reflects the Israelites' present in the wilderness. Just as they had fallen into a cycle of rebellion and idolatry in the desert, God warns of the terrible things that will happen to the Israelites when they fall away from God and the life of mitzvot that they are supposed to be living in Israel. But there is also the promise of blessings and abundance when they follow mitzvot and strengthen their connections with God. Their potential futures have been outlined and the formula is simple. Do good and you will be rewarded with good, blessings, and closeness with God. Do evil and suffer deeply in the hands of your foes, in famine and in spiritual isolation.

But then, most strikingly, once God tells the people what could be, it is no longer in God's hands. God says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life" (Deut. 30:19). The significance of God's statement is profound. Up to this point in the Torah, the Israelites have received 611 mitzvot from God. 611 times, God has told the Israelites what to do. But now, with life—the biggest thing there is—at stake, God does not command. Instead, the Israelites are required to choose, one by one, who and what they want to be.

But are the Israelites strong enough? They have played child to God's parent through the last three and a half books of the Torah. They have grown and regressed; they have worshiped idols and moved closer to God. The moment of entering the Land, then, represents a major step toward accepting personal responsibility and accountability. They seem to be moving away from a life where their day-by-day affairs are controlled by God, away from divinely imposed reward and punishment. God, of course, will still be with the Israelites when they enter Israel, in some ways more than ever before. But they will lose Moshe before they cross the Jordan, and they will gradually forget the intensity of the community they had built together while living in the wilderness. Now, they have received the formulas that will determine their future, but they get to decide which one they will follow. And so they need to learn how to push their relationship with God to a new level even as they experience such dramatic changes in their lives. The Israelites will have to find the resolve to choose life even as they encounter uncertainty.

It is not difficult to relate to the Israelites' insecurity. We live in a world that is too familiar with change, with uncertainty. Somehow, in this moment, the Jewish people, America, the world—they all seem vulnerable and fragile. It feels as if our ability to choose life, both collectively and individually, is being challenged.

We are not the first to face these sorts of challenges, and we will not be the last. In some ways, in the face of such difficult things, it is comforting to know that others have faced this radical uncertainty. While our ancestors might have faced different anxieties, their process of transitioning from the certain to the unknown feels familiar. Just as the choice between life and death, blessing and curse, lay before them, so too it is for us.

The Israelites did not always make the right choice, but over and over, they are given a chance to choose blessing. The easy choice is not always the right one, but in our hearts, we know which choice to make to choose life, and be offered the hope of abundance and promise that can grow out of us. And so, in this moment, just as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness, we are at a crossroads. God, our communities, the world—they have placed before us life and death, blessing and curse. Which one will you choose?

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