

## Choose Life!

Cathy Shadd Rosenfeld

Shabbat Shalom.

Sometimes simple sentences are complex. I love you. I miss you. “Choose life.” But as the local poet and educator Brenda Hellman once said, “Complexity and simplicity are not mutually exclusive.”

In this week’s *parashah*, *Nitzavim*, Moses gathers everyone together, warns them of the consequences of not keeping God’s covenant, prophesies that they will stray from but eventually return to God, and says that while they can choose curses or blessings, they should choose life. In chapter 30, verse 19, he says to the multitudes, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live.” The question I want to focus on in this *drasha* is what does it mean to “choose life”? If the choice is life or death, obviously most people would choose life. But assuming there is a deeper meaning, how can the simple sentence “Choose life” inspire us to live differently in the new year?

I am dedicating this *drasha* to the memory of two young men in my family, my brother and my nephew, who for different reasons were not able to choose life.

Forty six years ago I began my first teaching job at a big public high school outside of Boston. Five weeks before the first day of school, my beloved brother, my soul mate at that time, had been killed in a car accident. I was a wreck, alone in a school of 2,000 students, in a new

town, where I knew no one. I tried hard to be present and engaged, but between classes, I ran into the bathroom and cried. After some very long weeks, it hit me that not only was I not honoring the memory of my brother, but I was not honoring my students either. I realized that I wanted more than to get through each day; I wanted to live. Something profound a mentor had taught me penetrated my grief and pulled me back into life. She had told me that in order to teach effectively, I had to connect to my students, really connect, and in order to do that, I needed to find the spark, the core of something good, in each one. This was decades before I became Jewish. I didn't have the Jewish understanding of *B'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God), but I began to push myself to find a connection with each of my students. It ended up being a life changing year in so many ways. And when, many years later, I converted to Judaism with R' Kelman, of blessed memory, "choose life" were the first words in the Torah that I personally connected with.

When someone dies, we pray for their soul to be bound in the bond of life, but we too need to be bound in the bond of life. So what is this bond? I think it is our connection with our fellow human beings. There is really no life without connection—not in nature, not among people. All life is interdependent. Even the Hebrew word for life, *chaim*, is a plural noun.

Research over many decades has shown that humans have a profound need for connection, that it is something we are wired for. Our brains rely on social connection to regulate our nervous systems, which is why when we feel support, tasks feel easier. We crave belonging. Historically, exclusion from the group meant death, which explains why research shows that when we feel a lack of connection, our bodies suffer real consequences. Loneliness and

social isolation pose health risks, while social connections actually improve our physical and mental health.

Living can be passive—your body is doing it—but choosing life is an intentional act which involves your heart and mind. The Torah gives us hundreds of *mitzvot* to deepen our connections with our fellow human beings, including honoring our parents, respecting the elderly, loving the stranger, visiting the sick, and pursuing justice. When we perform a *mitzvah*, we connect with that person, we strengthen each other, and we add our small part to the force of life. But we can also choose life in moments when we are not actively doing a *mitzvah*. In *Nitzavim*, Moses tells the people that what God is asking of them is not beyond their reach. It is in fact “very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart,” in other words, in our everyday lives, even in casual encounters. We can smile at people, chat in an elevator, compliment someone’s dog, smile at a child who looks troubled, and say thank you at every opportunity. Anything we do to foster connection with others is a way of choosing life. I would like to offer two Jewish values, two *middot*, that can help us, as we enter the new year, connect more meaningfully with people we encounter every day: *sever panim yafot*, having a pleasant demeanor, and *sh’miat haOzen*, being a good listener.

In the Talmudic tractate *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)* 1:15, the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE sage Shammai says, “Greet every person with a ‘*sever panim yafot*’” which is usually translated as “having a pleasant demeanor.” *Sever*, meaning expression or frame of mind, often refers to turning one's attention toward someone. When we do that, we show that we see them. *Panim* means face, and the fact that it is a plural noun may hint at the importance of the connection between two faces. And *yafot* means beautiful. The *middah* suggests that we should greet

people with genuine warmth, eye contact, and a smile. We all know how good it feels when we are on the receiving end. Rabbi Israel Salanter, founder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mussar movement elevating Jewish ethics, taught that since the expression on our face can affect those around us, our face is considered in the "public domain," not within the "private domain," and we therefore have a duty to project warmth and uplift the emotional atmosphere of those around us. Showing a *sever panim yafot* reminds people that they are seen and appreciated.

Some years ago when I was the facility manager here, we briefly rented rehearsal space to a new Oakland theater company called Ubuntu Theater. From them I learned that Ubuntu is a core component of the world view of the Zulu people in South Africa and emphasizes connectedness. The equivalent of our "hello" for the Zulu is "sawubona" which means "I see you." It implies I see your worth, your dignity, and your presence. And the response to this is "sikhone" meaning "I am here." It is a way of expressing the core belief that I am because we are and therefore my humanity is tied to yours. When we open our face, our eyes, and our smile to another person, we encounter their divine spark and we choose life.

When I had just moved from New York to San Francisco 35 years ago, people I knew invited me to Easter services at Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin District. Easter there was a full-on production with a raise-the-roof gospel choir, massive screens displaying close-up photos of local people the church ministered to, and the booming voice of the legendary Reverend Cecil Williams jubilantly preaching his message that we are all God's children. At one point, he told us to turn to the brother or sister behind us and show them love. And there I was, suddenly looking into the eyes of the homeless man behind me, his open face radiating

joy, his wide smile beaming, his arms opening to me. In a profound moment of *B'tzelem elohim*, I chose life, we embraced, and I cried.

Pirkei Avot 2:1:1, says, “Know that there is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears.” If we are to imitate God, we need to more consciously see and hear, which brings me to the second *middah*, *sh'miat haOzen*. Literally meaning “the listening of the ear,” it is understood to mean engaging one’s heart and mind to truly hear another person.

*Pirkei Avot* 6:6 contains a list of 48 *middot*, the practice of which is supposed to make one a practitioner of Torah and an ethical person. At the top of that list, right after “the study of Torah,” is *shmi'at haOzen*. *Shmi'at* comes from the same root as the word *sh'ma*, “listen” or “hear,” and *OZ-en* means ear. But listening and hearing are two different things, and *shmi'at haOzen* isn’t just hearing. It is active, attentive listening. We all know how we feel when someone is looking at us but not really listening to us. Rabbi Dr. Laura Novak Winer of the Hebrew Union College explains that *shmi'at haOzen* asks us to to be a focused, caring, non-judgmental presence seeking understanding. She writes, “It requires curiosity, humility and an ability to put oneself in the place of the other, with the aim of truly understanding them.” *Shmi'at haOzen* creates connection.

The Jewish Values Project of the The Stephen Wise Free Synagogue suggests that when we listen attentively to someone, we form a deeper relationship because we take in more of who they are. A few years ago, they offered this beautiful teaching: “Attentive listening is also a path to connecting with God. In the daily *Amidah* prayer, we address God as *Shomea T'filah*—the One who listens to prayer—and we ask God to listen to our voice. In our times of need, we

don't want God to experience our prayers as background noise, but to pay deep attention to even the innermost thoughts of our hearts that we may struggle to articulate. And we reciprocate that connection when we recite *Shema Yisrael*—Listen, O Israel—reminding ourselves to stay attentive to each other and to keep listening for God's voice in our lives.”

When we really listen to others, we are able to imagine what they are feeling beneath the words they are saying. We are able to experience them as *B'tzelem Elohim*. We connect, and as Moses urged, we choose life.

In today's *parashah*, when Moses advises the Jewish people to “choose life,” I think he is telling them that they will need strong connections to sustain them as they build new lives in the promised land without his daily guidance. Moses gives this advice as the people are embarking on a new journey. We read this *parashah* now as we begin a new year, a new journey of our own, one in which we too will need strong connections in order to thrive physically and spiritually and to do our part in creating a better world. In the coming year, may we see *B'tzelem Elohim* in those we encounter, show them a pleasant face, and really see and hear them. May we all choose life.

Shabbat Shalom.