

The Good Life:  
Making the Conscious Choice to Live by Our Values  
Yom Kippur 2024-5785

Standing before the court that judged the character of his life, and would ultimately sentence him to death, the Greek philosopher Socrates said, “The really important thing is not to live, but to live well.”

Today we plead with God, “B'sefer chayim, bracha, v'shalom...nizacher v'nikatev ...**I'chayim tovim** ul'shalom”. May we be inscribed in the book of life, blessing, peace, and sustenance. We and all Your people, for a *good life* and for peace.

What does it mean to live a *good life*? In this season, as we look back on our lives over the past year, we examine, we evaluate, we wonder. Are we living well? How can we ensure that we are living the good life that we seek?

Yom Kippur brings us in touch with our own deaths. We refrain from eating and drinking and fornicating, and we wear white like a shroud. Repeatedly our liturgy invokes death, the death of our loved ones in Yizkor, the death of martyrs in Eleh Ezkerah, the question of who will live and who will die in U'netaneh Tokef. This brush with our mortality is not meant to be morbid but motivating. Yom Kippur is the day of forgiveness, literally the day of “wiping clean.” It is a chance to start over, to be reborn. And so we ask ourselves: are we living a good life? Do our deeds reflect our values, our dreams? If not, we can start again.

Once, Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, had an opportunity to reflect on the direction of his life in a stark way. When his brother died the newspaper got the information wrong and wrote an obituary for Alfred instead. Seeing his own obituary in the paper, Alfred was jarred: it was titled “The Merchant of Death.” He decided that he did not want this to be his

legacy and used his wealth to create the Nobel Peace prize, rewarding the search for peace and understanding rather than the ability to blow things up.

This story also helps us understand an important truth about teshuva. It is not about creating a new self, but revealing the potential that is always within us. We each have within us the ability to do the right thing, to choose life. Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote that teshuva isn't about creating a new self, but rather revealing the essence of what was there all along. We must return to the root of our beings, our sacred neshama or soul, which is always pure no matter what we do. Kook believed that the coming of the Messiah would work the same way: it would not change the world so much as reveal something that was always here, latent. Rav Kook was the chief rabbi of Israel until 1935, just before the creation of the state. The place he dreamed of and always knew was there would be revealed just after his lifetime.

So how do we reveal our true selves, and live a good life? By making choices every day, in every moment, that derive from our values and lead to our dreams. In parshat Nitzavim, one of the last portions of Deuteronomy, which we read just before these days of awe, God says, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live.”

הַחַיִּים וְהַבְּרָכָה נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה, וּבַחֲרָתָּ בַחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ:

The focus of the phrase here is on the word **וּבַחֲרָתָּ choose**. Life and blessing don't just come to us automatically. We have to choose them. God and Moses are already signaling us how to choose. Choose to live by your values, they say. Choose the Torah, for it is a tree of life *eitz chaim hi*, for those who hold fast to it.

In our modern culture we have so many things grasping for our attention all the time. Our phones ping with endless notifications, with messages that say

“Urgent!” and “Please read!” with headlines and advertisements begging for our gaze. Our attention is a commodity, and everyone wants it.

**In this environment it is even more important than ever to be intentional about where we place our focus, to keep our eyes on the prize, so that we may not stray off after shiny things and paths that do not reflect our values. If we want to live good lives, we must choose to live by our values with every action, every step.**

Feeling busy and overwhelmed with a million things calling for our attention makes it difficult to maintain focus on what’s important. I certainly feel this more than ever, as this year our family welcomed a second child, Zohar. Before he was born, friends with kids would frequently speculate about which was harder, the jump from zero to one or one to two children. Opinions were split. When Zohar was born, many of the skills of infant care quickly came back, and so far Zohar has an easygoing personality, so caring for him is delightful, and not too difficult.

But in a life already packed with personal and professional obligations, adding infant care to my juggled responsibilities meant some balls were getting dropped. Seeking to sharpen my focus, I tried the usual advice about “getting things done.” I bought a small notebook to keep better to-do lists. Crossing off items was satisfying, but still, I felt overwhelmed with too many points of focus.

Then I turned to the book *Four Thousand Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman. He takes a different approach to time management. Rather than trying to cram more into our 24 hour days, Burkeman recommends narrowing our focus to what matters most, and making sure that gets done, even as urgent but less important things languish.

Burkeman's own story reflects this philosophy. He began as a "productivity geek" seeking to streamline his workload to become maximally efficient. After years of this he assessed his workflow and realized that he was very good at getting unimportant things done, while procrastinating on the things that really mattered. He would spend all day clearing his inbox of small, unimportant emails, while saving "for later, when he could focus," a long message from a dear friend, or the research for an important article he planned to write. Ultimately, the decks of his email filled up again the next day, and the moment to respond to his friend or research the article passed.

Burkeman realized: it wasn't so much about *how* he got things done, but rather *what* he was getting done. Productivity gurus like the author of *How to Live on Just 24 Hours a Day* suggest that if we could just squeeze a few more things into our days, we would feel satisfied and in control of our time. But they're wrong, Burkeman says. In fact, becoming more efficient always just ends up leading to higher standards of efficiency. Figure out how to answer more email faster, and you'll find that your inbox just fills up that much more quickly. Figure out how to fit more into a day and you'll find that the pressure mounts to get even more done.

None of us have time to *get it all done*. Our time is finite, about four thousand weeks in the average lifespan. Rather, our task is to figure out what our priorities and values are, and learn to focus on them. This was a comforting message for an overburdened parent, and helped me refocus my limited time and attention on what matters most.

Still, sometimes it's hard to decide what matters most. Making such decisions is hard, and many of us avoid it. The word "decide" actually comes from the same Latin root as "homicide"; it means cutting off, or effectively "killing off" the unchosen option. It is painful, and many of us avoid making decisions because we don't like killing our options. Instead, we try to "get everything done," so that we won't have to choose one thing over another.

But ultimately we cannot be in two places at once, or as my mother in law likes to say, “you can’t dance at all the weddings.” Whatever we are doing right now is what we are doing with our lives. We *are* making choices, whether we realize it or not, so we might as well make sure our choices are the ones we want to make.

If we want to make decisions according to our values and dreams, we have to know what they are. Let’s take a moment now and pause, and think: what are one or two things you value most in life? (pause) Now think: what is your dream for your life? (pause) For the world? (pause)

Many of us hold our values dear in our hearts, hold our “someday” projects like treasures locked in our chests. But in our hearts and minds our values and projects cannot flourish. They only count in reality. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel valued prayer enormously, but he also insisted that we must “pray with our feet.” Heschel was a philosopher, and had many thoughts in his head. Yet even he knew that none of this mattered if he did not live out the values he wrote in his books. So he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King for Civil Rights in Alabama, and decried the Vietnam war.

Sometimes we want to live out our dreams, but we are scared to take the first step, scared to be disappointed when dreams meet reality, so we procrastinate and clear the decks of our emails instead. A story is told in Persian culture about an architect who made designs to build the most beautiful, perfect mosque ever. Wealthy people and contractors all wanted to buy the plans and execute them, but the architect refused, fearful that his perfect vision would be flawed when it became reality. And so time passed and the plans were lost and the mosque was never built.

The time to live out our values, to work on our passion projects is today. In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of Our Fathers, a book all about how to live a good life, Rabbi Eliezer taught that we should repent one day before our death. His

students asked: how are we to know when that is? He answered: all the more so you should be in a state of *teshuva* or return, every day, just in case.

Some of us have experienced moments that feel like one day before our death, a brush with mortality that makes us recall the brevity of our lives and seek to make the most of them. An illness, the loss of a loved one, a change in job or home.

One of the ways I encounter mortality is through serving the dead and grieving. It seems strange to say, but one of my favorite parts of rabbinic work is writing eulogies. I love sitting with people as they look back on the lives of people they loved, and talk about what stood out. These moments affirm the truth of Maya Angelou's saying that, "people will forget what you said, they will even forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel." As I speak with the families of one who has died, what matters most in life becomes quickly apparent. The way we love our families. The way we support our communities. The way we strive to change the world for the better.

I have been touched by so many lives. This year I was incredibly touched by the life of Sandy Cohen, who passed away in March. Sandy died relatively young, long before he or anyone else expected him to go. And yet the life Sandy lived was already so full and admirable. Though I barely knew him, I could tell he lived each of his days to the fullest, as though he knew they might not last.

Sandy was a lighthearted, fun loving guy. His friends and family admit that he was more of a good-times guy than a rule follower. And yet Sandy lived with great fidelity to his own internal moral compass. He loved his family and friends, and showed them love and care, making time for them even when he was busy and opening his home to all. He was an upstanding businessperson, dedicated to his customers and going the extra mile to ensure

deliveries were made on time. He was kind to his partners and is remembered fondly by business associates around the world. He loved his community and, though begrudgingly, he took on leadership roles that shaped the success of the Harrisburg Jewish community. Through it all, he made sure to have a good time, spending time with his beloved Marcia on vacations and with his beloved Nittany Lions during football season. Sandy didn't need an accidental obituary to wake him up to life. He was living by his values every day. After interviewing his family, officiating his funeral and sitting shiva, I remember leaving the Cohens' house wondering whether I was making the most of my days, and whether I could make more time for fun like he did.

As the mother of two young children, I am responsible not only for my own life and values, but for the values I instill in my children. I often think about a Harvard study that my friend told me about years ago, before I had children. It cited a gap between the values that parents wanted to instill in their children, and the ones they were modeling. Researchers lay out three potential values: self care, care for others, and achievement. Many parents thought that caring for others was the most important value they could instill in their children. But when the researchers spoke to children, many of them thought their parents cared most about achievement. They reported getting more praise for a good report card than for doing an act of kindness or taking time to care for themselves. They also thought their peers cared more about achievement than about helping one another or caring for themselves.

In my short experience so far as a parent, I think a lot about the potential gap between the values I want to show my children and what I actually show them. Do I praise Yonah as much for helping his brother as I do when he shows me how well he can read? I remember one day when Yonah was at a Soccer Shots class, he got the ball and made a breakaway for the goal. When he scored, I cheered wildly. When the ball was reset in the middle of the field, I noticed that Yonah was shoving other kids trying to get at it. I had given him such a reward for his success and he craved that attention again. So

this time, I shouted from the sidelines that he should pass the ball, and cheered wildly when he did, even though his team lost possession and the other team scored. This was a toddler match, mind you, and the game was soon over. When he returned to my lap, I swelled with pride at his apparent skill in scoring goals, but I made sure to tell him how proud I was that he had passed the ball, and that it didn't matter if his team lost.

Zohar's name means radiance, and Yonah's name means dove, invoking the dove that brought an olive branch of hope back to Noah's ark. The name Zohar, too, connects to the story of the flood, as the ark had a *tzohar*, a window at the top to bring in light. My hope for my children is that their actions will bring light and hope to the dark world of pandemic, polarization and war into which they were born. They have already begun to do that, and inspire me to make sure I am modeling that for them, too. Though I am always busy, I want to make sure to take time away from pursuing my goals and achievements to care for myself and for others, so that they know that is important. I hope they will form their own values and that one day, when they become busy teens and adults whose phones ping at them with urgent messages and headlines, that they will remember to live by those values as a guiding light, a *tzohar* in their own personal ark.

Let's take a moment now to return to the values and personal passion projects that we recalled for ourselves earlier. What is waiting to be revealed in your life in 5785? What project might you take from plans to reality? Who is the person or who are the people that help you remember to stay on the path? What are the values that you want to be your guiding light, your *tzohar* this year? Let us keep them top of mind so that we may choose life, a good life, for us and all of Israel.