

Message for *Parashat D'varim*

12 Aug 2016. On Choices and Paths

In a hot summer day, there is nothing better than some delicious ice-cream! So, here's an important question: Chocolate or vanilla or strawberry? Or "Roasted Garlic Almond Chip," or "Chocolate Covered Cicada," or "Chorizo Caramel Swirl."? Now, choose! Choice in America has been developed to perfection. And we love it ... Or do we? Having choices is great but sometimes, some people, have a tendency to live their lives as if they were choosing ice cream flavors. It is a cliché: Life is full of choices. Some choices are trivial, but some really matter.

Thirty years ago, I chose to become Jewish; that's a choice that matters. That is a choice that everyone who claims a Jewish identity makes every day. I mean it when I say that we are Jews-by-Choice. Three months ago, you chose me as your new rabbi; that choice matters to all of us too. I feel so blessed that we were able to choose and be chosen! As much as being chosen is an honor, choosing is a much more interesting albeit challenging act. In the past few weeks, choosing has been in my mind. So many choices to make that only time could tell whether I chose wisely or not. Sometimes, when we are in the middle of it all, in the heat of the moment, it is hard to know what the outcome of our choices might be. I would go one step forward and propose that choosing is the Jewish thing to do.

This is evident in the story of two Jewish castaways who were found in a deserted island after a year of suffering. The rescuing team looked around, and lo and behold they found that the two men had built three synagogues. When questioned, one of them explained: "That is his shul, this is mine." But what about that other shul? "Oh, that, we wouldn't set foot in it!"

To me, on this Shabbat, the moral of the story is not that they could not agree on matters of religious observance, but that they wanted to have a choice of shul!

Some people think that being part of a religious community makes our choices much simpler; some even suggest that if you are religious, then many moral choices are already made for you. That, however, had never been the case with Judaism. The Torah is very clear that the power to choose is in our hands. A famous passage from Deuteronomy, a book that we begin reading on this Shabbat, encapsulates what it means to choose in the Jewish tradition:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life— if you and your offspring would live – by loving Adonai your God, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that Adonai swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.” (Deut. 30:19-20).

First of all, although God is addressing the entire people, the “you” here is singular. It is true that we Jews tend to do everything as a group; however, according to the Torah, the act of choosing is a personal act. Secondly, our traditional commentators have struggled with this text, because it seems to give us a choice and then seems to take it away.

“*Uvacharta bachayyim,*” which could mean “you shall choose life.” The great 11th century French interpreter, Rashi, teaches,

“I[God] instruct you to choose the portion of life.” It is like a man who says to his son, “Choose for yourself a fine portion of my estate,” and then directs him to the best portion, saying to him, “This [is the portion which] you should choose for yourself!”

In other words, the people are given a choice but God thinks they need some help choosing.

I understand the phrase differently, *uvacharta bachayyim* means that we all have choices and that if we choose wisely, that will increase our happiness. I would translate it as “WHEN we choose life, THEN we will affirm life.”

We have all made choices and how we choose and what we have chosen, make us who we are. Now that the Olympic games are in full swing, and Michael Phelps has won more medals, lots of YouTube videos about his earlier years are emerging. There is one video of Phelps at age 15 talking about his choices. It was right after he had tried for the Olympic team in 2000, and did not make it. The interviewer asks him “How were you able to live a normal life as a teenager?” Phelps answer was

“I don’t really live a normal life as a teenager, I guess I give up a lot of things, but I’m getting tons of things that normal 15 year-olds aren’t getting, I think this is the life anyone can dream of and I’m definitely loving it!”

We know now that his choice was the right choice –no doubt. It was the wise choice because he knew then that he was giving up “normal life” as a teenager, but his choice propelled him into the brilliant future. Isn’t it wonderful when we make choices and they work out and we love it?

Phelps’ words reminded me of some of the choices I have made. When I was 13, I decided I wanted to be a gymnast, and that I was going to be an Olympian. It never happened but it did lead me to an important choice. By age 17, I had been training for almost four years. I practiced 3 times a week in the evening, and then Saturday afternoon, for about 3 hours each time. The training was at the German club, and it involved a 50-minute bus ride each way. After 4 years, I was getting better, and I knew that to be competitive I would have had to increase the training.

At the same time, in the middle of my senior year in High School, the opportunity presented itself to study Hebrew and Judaism at our local Conservative seminary, which was an hour bus ride on the opposite direction. I reasoned: I may get better at gymnastics, but I may never make the Argentinean Olympic team, on the other hand, with rabbinical studies, I think I may have a chance to lead a fulfilling life and serve the Jewish people. I made my coach unhappy but it was the right choice then, and I still think so. Every “real” choice implies a loss. I do miss what could have been ... I loved the world of gymnastics and still do, but I needed to make a choice, and I did. But, isn't it wonderful when we make an unusual choice, and things work out?

I know that not our choices lead to success –I know not all of mine have, yet I would not want to give up the freedom to choose. Sometimes, we make a choice for the right reasons, and things don't work out. Some other, a hasty choice leads to an unexpected happy coincidence. Do I have the key to tell you how to choose wisely at every turn? You can imagine if I, or anyone did, the key would have opened the gates of eternal blissful for us all!

So, when faced with meaningful choices, there are a few things we can all do. First, we should worry less about the outcome, “*sera lo que sera,*” we say in Spanish, “it will be what it will be.” Secondly, with the information we have at that moment in time, are we heeding the words of Torah, *uvacharta bahayyim*, “choosing life,” in other words, does what we choose have the potential to increase our happiness? If we determine it does, then go for it. Finally, what Michael Phelps and I have in common, if I may say so, is that we both did not do what was expected of us at a crucial time in our lives. He chose not to be a “normal” teenager, I choose to serve the Jewish people above all other things. This I know: We should not be afraid of making unconventional choices. We should not be afraid of following a path that others may find unusual or unheard of.

The great American poet, Robert Frost, said it beautifully in his poem “The Road Not Taken”. The closing lines read as follows:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Elohei haruchot lechol basar, God of the Spirit of all the living, teaches us how to be free to choose our own path. Guide us to make wise choices and help us see the many roads, traveled and less traveled, which lie ahead. Be with us, Adonai, as we live our choices that we may bring happiness to our lives and the lives of those around us.