

Parshat Nitzavim
Lionizing Life
Tamar Green Eisenstat - Class of 2023

In Parshat Nitzavim, as Moshe continues his final address to Bnei Yisrael, he instructs the people as follows:

I call on heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life... Devarim 30:19

הַעֲדֹתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ
הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה
וּבְחִרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים... (דברים ל:ט)

At first glance, “choose life” seems like an unusual declaration on Moshe’s part, as so much of life is simply not within our control. We can do what we can to stay healthy and alive, but can we truly choose a pathway that will result in life? Therefore why did Moshe tell Bnei Yisrael to “choose life”? Why not instruct Bnei Yisrael to “choose good”, as the Biblical commentator the Kli Yakar suggested? Surely that would make more sense and be more within our own sphere of influence.

Indeed, the recommendation of the Kli Yakar seems even more fitting given that our parsha is read just days before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, where the highpoint of the Musaf prayer service, *Unetaneh Tokef*, includes the heart wrenching words: “מי יחיה ומי ימות” “who will live and who will die”. In this prayer, we assert that while it is Hashem’s sole power to decide our mortality, our acts of repentance, prayer and charity, are said to influence Hashem’s decisions on the Day of Judgment. As such, an admonition to “choose good” (by doing acts of repentance, prayer, and charity), would actually be very much in fitting with the broader schema of repentance, rather than “choose life” which, according to *Unetaneh Tokef* lies in the Godly, not human realm.

Nonetheless, the Torah is very specific in requiring us to “choose life”. In commenting on our verse, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes: “[n]ot without serious efforts, not without thought and will and not just by chance is “life” won.” As such, for Rabbi Hirsch the word “life” is indeed key. Life is a fully immersive experience, and it takes effort and work to have a meaningful life.

But how do we actually go about “choosing life” on a daily basis? How do we healthily frame the experience of daily living in terms of a choice? I propose we see every day as a unique opportunity to start afresh. In Judaism there is an idea that every day is a new birth, a reboot, a new chance to choose life. We start each day by saying the prayer *Modeh Ani Lefanecha* “מודה אני לפניך”, thanking Hashem for returning our souls to us with the words “שהחזרת בי נשמת בי בחמלה רבה אמונתך”. Each day we welcome the return of our soul, of our life force, and every morning celebrates a rebirth. Just as the month of Elul and the upcoming High Holy Days provides us the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to “return” to a better, higher spiritual place, so too, on a smaller scale, each and every day accords us with that opportunity of a new beginning and for a chance to fulfil our potential.

An embracing of daily renewal and self-development is seen in the very first instruction given in the Code of Jewish Law, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim. Siman 1) that a person must: “יִתְגַּבֵּר כְּאֵרֶץ לְעִמּוּד בְּבוֹקֵר”, “strengthen themselves like a lion to get up in the morning.” This line seems puzzling at first blush; how does someone get up like a lion

when lions love their sleep and can actually sleep up to twenty hours a day including potentially all morning long? If we peel back the halachic layers behind our statement from the Shulchan Aruch, we see that the admonition to be “strong like a lion” has its roots in the teachings of the Tanna Judah ben Tema. In Pirkei Avot Chapter 5 Mishnah 20, Judah ben Tema teaches us to:

Be bold as a leopard, swift as an eagle,
fleet as a hart, and strong as a lion, to do
the will of thy Father in heaven.

יהודה בן תימא אומר, הוי עז כנמר, וקל כנשר, ורץ
 כצב, וגבור כארי, לעשות רצון אביך שבשמים

The Bartenura in his commentary to the Mishnah rejects the idea that to be “strong like a lion” means we need to leap out of bed like a hungry lion in search of prey, rather he explains that we must wake up and immediately get to work on conquering our impulses. Consequently, the more we can overcome the desire to sin and dissolve our resistance to growth and to change, the more successful we will be at life.

We see a related image in our idiomatic use of the name “lion”. Specifically, in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the verb “to lionize/lionise” means “to treat as an object of great interest or importance”. As such, when we get up each morning, we must lionize our lives by treating our lives as objects of importance and by being active participants in it - not letting life passively happen around us and blaming our environment when things don't go our way.

Just like the poor lion in the 1939 classic movie “The Wizard of Oz” who lacked his iconic lion-courage, we must get up each morning and set out on a hunt for the courage to take ourselves and our lives seriously and for the strength to overcome resistance and challenge. It is only through taking each and every day earnestly, through appreciating the opportunity of a fresh start when a prior day did not go so well, and through lionizing every moment, that we can truly “choose life”. In the coming year, may we all have the lioness strength to “choose life” and merit to be inscribed in the Heavenly Book of Life.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!



Originally from London, England, Tamar lives with her husband and four children in the Bronx, where she spends her spare time walking her dog in the Riverdale Forest and reading chick lit. Tamar is a graduate of Oxford University and Northeastern University School of Law, and in her prior endeavors worked as an Assistant Attorney General in the Charities Bureau at the New York State Attorney General's Office. Tamar has been involved in numerous Bronx-based nonprofits and community organizations, including SAR Academy/High School, the Riverdale Jewish Center, the Kehilah, the Hunts Point Alliance for Kids, and the Fieldston Property Owners' Association. Tamar has been fortunate to learn Torah in some incredible yeshivot including Midreshet Lindenbaum, Matan, Drisha, and Lamdeinu.