

Temple Emanu-El RHS 5779 Sermon

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Chosen...To Try

Each year the weeks leading up to the High Holidays are heavy for me. As I sit in my study, striving to share with you messages of comfort and inspiration, a prayer echoes back and forth between my heart and the blank page in front of me. My prayer repeats, “Be open, be aware, be honest with yourself.

To my left are pictures of my family: my wife, my children, my everything. To my right are shelves of books from our tradition, full of wisdom and history, law and lesson. Behind me, always there but out of view, rests my ordination degree which bear the signatures of my teachers before me. Above their names, sits a simple clock, which softly ticks each passing second. The sound beckons me with potential. In the space between the seconds, and reflected back from the glaring white page, is the metaphor I’ve been looking for. It seems to wink at us and whisper: “Yes, it is right here. Open your eyes and be awake!”

Time waits for no one, and the blank page before you begs to be filled - but with this *Sefer Chayim*, it is you who holds the pen! In your Book of Life the words are yours to write, as are the stories, the deeds, and the choices.

“Inscribe us,” we pray to God, not just to live length of days, but to be full of days where we truly live! And God responds by placing the pen in your hand. As if to say, “It’s up to you. Inscribe yourself!”

The room now fills with a sense of spiritual urgency. It seems to shout to us the question: “How will you live your life to the very fullest, so that you can live the most meaningful, most beautiful, most connected life that you can?” Its voice seems to linger, now like a whisper: “What will you do with your time to make the very most of the days that you have left?”

These existential questions are far from hypothetical, but rather are intensely personal. Don’t bother looking around the room. They are addressed to you. They are addressed to me. For this reason, The High Holidays are often referred to as the *Yomim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, for it is with ‘awe’ that we approach an honest assessment of our lives.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel helps us understand the concept of ‘awe’ with the image of how we might approach The Grand Canyon. Perhaps you have been there. Picture yourself standing

right on the edge, and then looking down. It is vast. It is incredible. With our toes on the edge of the precipice, we gaze into the abyss, all the while rejoicing in the knowledge that our feet are firmly joined to unshakable ground. That is 'awe'- a mixture of elated connection, and fear. There was a special Rosh Hashanah about 25 centuries ago when our ancestors described feeling this awe. They had finally returned from our Babylonian exile. Ezra the Scribe called our ancestors together at the city gate, to read from the Torah for the first time in half a century. Some of our people "raised their voices in shouting and joy,"ⁱ because they recognized this simple act as a miracle. For once again, the Jewish people felt chosen by God.

While others burst out weepingⁱⁱ, for their lives were full of heartache, illness, injustice and despair. Their world was like ours, rent with war and hatred, waste and betrayal. For them it felt too much to bear. But when their leader, Nehemiah, stood to sooth them, before he spoke, he was silent, and "all the people stood silent (with him)."ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes it is only the silence between the words which is able to convey the profound message of being chosen... for a purpose.

Now, raise your hand if you have ever heard us, the Jews, referred to as The Chosen People. Raise a finger if when you hear Jews referred to as 'chosen', it makes you uncomfortable. Now, I would ask you to nod your head if, at least sometimes, when you hear Jews referred to as 'chosen', this speaks to you in a positive way... that you have positive feelings towards the term, 'chosen people'. Chosen-ness is worth pausing to talk about.

According to our sacred stories, our Patriarchs and Matriarchs were promised by God that we Jews are *Am Segula*: that we have a special relationship with God, a unique partnership to last forever. We are dubbed "(עַם לְבַדָּד יֹשֵׁב)" a "people who dwell apart, not reckoned among the nations."^{iv} meaning that somehow we are different, for better or for worse^v.

And our modern reaction to the idea of being "chosen" is...complex. In the times when we were persecuted, 'chosen-ness' became a cherished, cultural defense-mechanism: "they might abuse their power over us, but we know that we are Chosen." It inserted a Divine order to chaos and pain. When we had nothing, were running, or being hurt, perhaps the only thing that we had was that we were 'chosen'. Which leads to folks like Teviah, who says while fiddling on the roof: "God, I know that we are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't you choose someone else?"^{vi}

We American Jews have worked very hard over generations to 'fit in' to mainstream society- to be accepted into law firms, universities, and country clubs; to have the gentiles view our religious differences as just another aspect in a broad Protestant landscape. The last thing that we want to do is call attention to ourselves.

Modern Jewish theologians have reconciled our discomfort -with the idea of being ‘chosen’ - through the parable of a mother’s loving relationship to her many children. She has a special relationship with each of her kids, not just one.

Now, the Jewish tradition is very clear that ‘chosen’ does not mean ‘superior.’ Starting with Torah itself, here is what being ‘chosen’ is not: We are not considered ‘chosen’ because we alone have the ability to ‘know’ God. Nor does God appear only to Jews, or answer only Jewish prayers. Example after example ranging from Hagar to Avimelech, Bilaam to Yitro, were non-Jews who ‘knew’ God at the highest level,^{vii} on par with Sarah, Abraham and Moses.

Our Torah is clear that knowing God is something that all people can share in, Jews and non-Jews alike. Judaism believes that deed, not creed, is what the Divine recognizes, in all of its wondrous flavors.^{viii}

And being ‘chosen’ does not imply that we Jews are more righteous than others, as our prophets, and the evening news, are quick to remind us. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, never “did any of the major strands of Jewish thought see Jewish chosen-ness as a privilege. It was, and is, a responsibility.”^{ix}

^xThroughout the centuries, we believed that we were ‘chosen’ by God to be *l’or goyim* (לאור גוים), ‘A light unto the Nations,’^{xi} to bring knowledge, and justice, and civilization into the world. This was the engine that drove us to high rates of literacy, which introduced to the world life-saving medicines, concepts of human dignity, and democratic constitutions.

We Jews have been taught since the womb that we hold ourselves to a higher ethical standard of how we should conduct ourselves in the world; and, in turn, we hold the world to a higher standard of how it should be.

Rosh HaShanah is a time that we remind ourselves of this. Make no mistake, we might fall short of that standard, but the standard is there. Whether it chose us, or we chose it, the standard is here.

Ultimately, we each choose what we want to believe. And who, in their heart of hearts, does not want to feel like they are God’s partner here on earth? The wisdom of our tradition states it clearly, that sometimes only through silence can the profound questions about being chosen be conveyed and received.^{xii}

Seeking this for myself, I took refuge in the quiet of a local monastery. Silence and isolation can be jarring, but with each breath, with each sunrise and sunset, the edges began to soften.

What I'll share with you is a midrash that I wrote, sparked by the questions that we Jews have been asking on Rosh Hashanah since the beginning of time. Were we 'chosen' by God? And, if so, what were we 'chosen' for? What is the purpose of Judaism? And as Jews, what is our purpose in life?

This midrash is titled: 'Those Who Climb The Mountain Get To Experience The Vistas'.

xiii"“You see,” he said to me, “I was at Sinai, and you, you were with me.”

“We were...” says I, my voice inflection leaving open every doubt and certainty.

“I was there,” he continued, “when we saw the thunder and heard the lightning, and God’s voice boomed out irrevocable promises...all in the silence of the unaccented Aleph, that profound pause in time, when the earth stood still. I was there, and you, you were with me.”

“We were,” thought I, “we were.”

That miracle which split the sea, bringing us from slavery to here...the boundary between the desert and The Promised Land... that miracle happened. So much so, that its impact burned into our collective spiritual DNA, and echoes of it continue to ripple out with each successive Jewish generation.

“I had to document it,” he said, “for this was the fulcrum of our story, and that of human history. So I did what anyone would do,” he shrugged a knowing smile, “I reached for my i-phone to record it all! The rumblings from Mt. Sinai, the silence, the 10 commandments, the entire Torah! This must be filmed, recorded, proven beyond any doubt. But then I realized that there are no i-phones in this place, no machines, no electricity. This miracle walk through the sea, then desert sands, all happened... ‘before’.

So I reached for my paper, my pencil, my paints, my easel. I would capture every exchange, each sacred image, through illustration and color. But I knew, too, in that instant, that pivotal place in time, that I had no paper nor pencil, no paints nor easel. What happened to us at Sinai, it was before all that. And even if these things existed somewhere, I found myself, all the same, lacking.

And so I swore to myself, in that moment, that I would remember. I would act as a witness, an (אֵד/Ed), for even in the beginning I knew that in those miracles, exchanges, and lifetimes lay the secret to wisdom, and communion, and living life to its spiritual fullest.

Afterwards, even though I had the experience, I could not convey these to my future daughters and sons without trying to describe them using words. These words were my best, and only, tool to convey not just what happened, but with such precision that circles of meaning could be extracted from their every detail.

I told my children, and they told theirs. Some of what they conveyed was best relayed through stories that eventually were written down. Over centuries, with dozens of edits and editors, this narrative as a way to access Truth was codified, ascended when transcribed, and awarded a throne. Soon, men and women of conviction used sacred script, black fire on white, with letters crowned, to further convey our quest to know God, to be part of God's work, and to live a worthy life.

What we experienced at Sinai, you and I, is captured in the script and parchment of the Torah scroll. Knowledge, cleared to be learned, in the white space between each letter, in every bound word. What happened at Sinai, when the key to the existential was delivered^{xiv}, is that we walked away with the command that we were 'chosen' ...“to try”. Chosen-To-Try...again and again, despite set-backs and success, to bring the world from where it is, to where it could be.

‘To try’ is more than something noble, it is to be ‘holy’.

To try to live up to our proclaimed ideals, and in doing so, to bring justice and awareness into the world. This is the essence of Torah. This is the essence of the Jew - actively trying to ‘do good’, to ‘heal a broken world *Tikkun Olom B'malchut shaddai*, with God as our partner.^{xv}

Not that this was easy to do. Around these stories and their symbols as metaphor towards the Divine, we created an entire religion...multiple religions, if we were to be honest about it. For us, the Jews, we'll talk about it mostly with joy, often with a tone of cynicism rather than reverence. We will have a major holiday to commemorate it, we'll tell the story in the right order, and we'll recall the heart of the matter through our five senses. The table will be heavy with symbolic delectables, just the way your mother's family always did it. We'll sing songs, and mark how yet another year has gone by, the ones asking *Mah Nishtanah* a year older.

I'm not saying that Mt. Sinai happened in the way that you think it happened, nor am I saying that it absolutely did not...

All that I am saying, is that I was there at Sinai, and you, you were there with me. And starting at that very moment, the moment that started ‘forever’, we chose...^{xvi} to ‘try’.^{xvii}

Baruch Attah Adonai, Shoma-ah Kol Truah Amo Yisrael B'rachamim

Blessed are You, in our lives, Adonai,
You hear, with love, the shofar-
True voice of your people Israel.

ⁱ Ezra 3:12

ⁱⁱ Ezra 3:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Nehemiah 8:5

^{iv} Num 23:9 (Bilaam)

^v In Torah we are often identified by non-Jews as “Ivri,” people who dwell outside of ‘regular’ society.

Throughout the ages, we are known as a people who do not bow to human gods, and if pressed may speak truth to power, and thus were seen as a threat to the status quo.

^{vi} Fiddler on the Roof (film), 1971, based on the story by Shalom Aleichem.

^{vii} **‘highest level’ that a person can have with God; meaning the tier of relationship dubbed as ‘prophet’, those who God ‘spoke’ to, and through whom God ‘speaks’.** These four listed are all considered in rabbinic Judaism as ‘non-Jewish’ prophets for this reason.

^{viii} Judaism also states that “the righteous from all the nations have a share in *Olom Haba*, the world to come.”^{viii} We believe that if you are righteous, you have a share in the Afterlife, regardless if you call yourself Jew or Gentile, Muslim or Christian, Agnostic or Atheist.

^{ix} Chukat-Balak: A Nation That Dwells Alone (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks), July 4th, 2009

^x For some of us here today/tonight, as it has been for Jews throughout the millennia, this idea of being ‘chosen’ is a source of pride and profound inspiration.

^{xi} Light to the Nations **לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם** (l’Or goyim) is a term originated from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 49:6, 42:6, 60:3, etc) which Judaism interprets as the Jewish Divine mandate to serve as a mentor for spiritual, actionable, and moral guidance for the entire world

^{xii} **The most powerful example of this is the silence at Sinai, and the ‘silent aleph’ midrashim that lionize this.**

^{xiii} ‘Only those who climb the mountain get to experience the vistas’.

He recalled these words, even as he put distance from the danger lying still on the path behind him.

There is a midrash you should recall... at its essence its message is the same truth it has always been, although its form has morphed to remain digestible and deemed relevant throughout time.

^{xiv} the doorway to life beyond slavery was gifted to us,

^{xv} “So you see, I wish that I could show you the U-tube clip that went crazy viral through every avenue of Social Media, but nothing like that was possible- so we did our best to convey it in other ways that were available to us. Yes, it might have been helpful if my i-phone was on hand, but there are advantages to these other ways, as potentially imprecise and misunderstood as they may be- for it forces us to tap into pieces of our Being that might otherwise remained dormant.”

^{xvi} (decided)

^{xvii} Thoughts From The Monastery (Anderson, unpublished, July, 2018/Av 5778)