

Yom Kippur 5764
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Choices, Choices, Choices

Now, I really feel like a grown up and Californian! For the past five years we've owned a condo and it was a great place to live. And of course, the nice thing with condo living was there was no outside maintenance, and there was no need to worry about leaky roof repairs, that's what the association was for. But now, Matt, Dahvi and I are homeowners. Yes, watch out, we have to go shopping for a lawn mower! I'm a mountain-girl, I have no idea how to use a lawn mower. A Chainsaw yes, A lawn mower, forget it!

It took us eight months to find a house. Our realtor quickly learned the word, Besheret-Destiny and eventually, we found the house that was destined to be ours. But then we had to make some very serious choices and quickly! How much do we offer? What do we counter offer? How much do we sell our condo for? When was closing going to be in relation to this new baby? So many choices, so little time.

I know I am not alone when it comes to making choices. We all make major decisions in our lives. We decide what we want to be when we grow up, we decide where we will go to school, who we will marry, when we will start a family, and when it's time to let our children make decisions of their own. Choices! Choices! Choices!

Don't you ever wish that God would come to your aid right now and make some critical decisions for you? But that doesn't happen in real life, does it? So, absent of Divine Intervention we might make decisions based on our common sense - our experiences or the experiences of others. We study our options and possible consequences of our choices. We ask friends and family for their advice and sometimes we wish we never asked in the first place. But finally, the decision is made after we examine what we feel deep down inside, that gut reaction. People always say, trust your instincts.

When it comes down to it, all of these choices, about home, work, or personal goals are up to us. We attempt to take control of our lives regarding our future and work to create the ideal outcome. However, some decisions are out of our control. As the Talmud says, "People plan and God laughs."

Just as we make choices affecting our private lives we debate many issues in our public lives. We debate the public issues such as taxes, education allowances, and statewide improvements of public facilities and roads. Most civic and governmental issues are non-religious in nature. Our constitution calls for separation of church and state. And it is agreed that the state should not influence religion. But still the debate over the influence that religion has on the state rages on. For example, the case of the Ten Commandments in the Alabama Supreme Court Building.

Author and scholar, Alan Dershowitz, recently wrote about this very issue in Alabama. He posed a few interesting challenges.

First, although it has been asserted that America was built on the principles of the 10 commandments, it is amazing to think that Thomas Jefferson, one of the forefathers of our nation, rejected their divine origin. He called them "defective and doubtful." The 10 commandments may be central to our Judeo-Christian legal tradition, but they did not emerge from a vacuum. Similar principles are found in the Code of Hammurabi dating back to 18th century BCE Mesopotamia. Hence, the laws of Torah were developed in the context of the world of the Ancient Near East. So why not put the Code of Hammurabi in the courthouse? Would people protest the inclusion or exclusion of this document in a governmental setting as they might with the 10 commandments?

Some of our founders actually disagreed with aspects of the 10 commandments and codified their principles as opposed to the biblical precepts. For example, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine knew that if a parent disobeyed the law, children should not be punished for their parents faults.

Although the 10 commandments read "you shall have no other gods," we have always been a pluralistic country in which there are those who do have other gods or do not pray to any god at all. And while we should not take God's name in vain, when was the last time you were at a sporting event?

The truth is, we are a religiously diverse and pluralistic society despite the particular religious proclivities of our founders. America today is not the Christian America of the 18th century. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, to what extent should civil authorities involve themselves in what many consider to be religious issues?

The problem is that there is no clear demarcation of a boundary between what is in the realm of "religion" and what is purely secular in nature. Even this recent debate about Kashrut, namely, shechita, the ritual slaughtering of animals.

In the 1950s and 60s there was an attempt in New York to outlaw the ritual slaughtering of animals for Kosher meat under the auspices that it was inhumane. Most recently, in May, the Farm Animal Welfare Council tried to advise the British government to outlaw kosher slaughter again, based on the idea that shechita was not humane and animals should be stunned before slaughter. Jewish authorities unanimously asserted that animals stunned first cannot be considered kosher.

Recently, groups in Florida, notably PETA have attempted to persuade the government to outlaw shechita in order to force observant Jews to eat no meat at all and adopt a vegetarian life style.

Should the government ban ritual slaughtering of kosher animals? The answer may be obvious, government cannot decide what is halachically permissible to Judaism or another religion.

Those are communal issues, aren't they? What about issues that are between an individual and God?

For the past four and a half years I have served on the Orange County Executive Committee of Clergy for Choice for Planned Parenthood. This committee's mission is to bring religious perspectives to issues from family planning, contraception and abortion. Many of the major religions are represented on this nationwide committee and speak openly about the diverse views held by the various faith traditions. We may not always agree with one another's opinions, however, we all agree that choices made in relation to the family and a woman's body do not belong with the government, rather they are a personal matter between a woman, her family, her doctor and her God. These are decisions that require serious thought through the exploration of Jewish text, tradition, and one's own conscience.

In Jewish law it states that the life of the mother takes precedence of the child in cases that are life threatening. Not so in other faith traditions such as Catholicism. Can we then legislate against terminating a fetus under all circumstances as many who oppose the present law argue? This would be a violation of Jewish law protecting the life of the mother. All laws regarding reproductive rights and abortion are predicated on the issue of what constitutes a human life and when does the soul enter the body?

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, one of the most influential commentators and teachers of Torah and Talmud from the 11th century teaches that a fetus is not a person perse. This is in agreement with the Talmud that states ubar yerech imo, the fetus is like the thigh of its mother - it is a part of the mother - not an independent being. However, once the baby crowns, or the birth begins, then is it considered to be a life equal to the mother's. This is not to say that Judaism condones abortion under all circumstances. Judaism believes in saving the life of the mother and fetus when possible. According to Jewish thought, Abortion is not a condoned method of birth control and should not be used as such.

The issue of when a fetus becomes a person is the subject of theological debate and discussion. Different religions have very different views in this matter.

However, the government attempts to give it's own judgment to religious opinion. For example, in March 2002, the Department of Health and Human Services announced new rules to permit states to make a fetus eligible for government-subsidized health care under the State Children's Health Insurance Program by defining a child as "an individual under the age of 19, including the period from conception to birth."

Rabbi Balfour Brickner states that, "in an act of political alchemy, this program would turn a fetus into a child and a woman into a vessel. Under these new regulations, these women who are now transformed into vessels, who are poor, but not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid, are entitled only to those services that directly affect the fetus. They are not eligible for any other prenatal care, or for postpartum care of any kind." The mothers are completely left out of the medical loop allowing the fetus to be entitled to medical care while they are treated as an object of little importance..

Reverend Emma Jordan-Simpson writes about her concerns about taking away a woman's right to choose, and the dire consequence that would only lead to other decisions being taken away from the individual. If this choice is taken away today, then others may be eliminated tomorrow.

We are a nation based on certain basic freedoms, especially the First Amendment freedom to express ourselves and voice our opinion. We have the freedom to make choices regarding what we choose to believe and how to worship. What we believe guides our actions. Because government legislates behavior - actions - and not beliefs and because we are a nation of many religious beliefs, a fine line can be easily crossed. So where does the discussion about issues of ethics, morals, and values belong?

For us, it belongs here, in our synagogue. It begins in our homes and with our families. As Reform Jewish teachers, community leaders, and parents, it is our responsibility to teach about Jewish values, morals and ethics in order that each individual can make an informed choice.

How appropriate that we talk about making choices during this evening of Kol Nidre. Tonight and tomorrow, we evaluate the choices we made this year. In our Yom Kippur morning Torah portion, we read from parshat Nitzavim. In it God says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life - by loving God, heeding God's commandments, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure." - Choose life!

God understands free will and our ability to make our own choices. What we are challenged to do is weigh our choices and act in accordance with our Jewish ethics, values and morals.

Even as we debate issues that are challenging and cause us to find ourselves at odds with one another, we realize just how fortunate we are. Our country is strong because we can have these debates. Can you imagine having this discussion in Saudi Arabia in which this debate could never exist in the open? The simple fact is that there are ethical issues that are not black and white. There are grey areas that challenge us. This is where we, as citizens of may bring our religions beliefs into our civil actions. But, this does not mean that the actions of the civil authorities can or should trespass upon the religions convictions of its citizens. What is beautiful about America is that we are a nation of citizens not just citizens of a nation. We are required to think about issues, debate them, and even protest them.

As Jews, we bring our ethics and morals into the discussion just as I would expect a Catholic, Muslim or Hindu to bring their views of ethics and morals into public life and public issues just as we do in the Planned Parenthood Board or other Interfaith Clergy Committees.

On this evening of Kol Nidre... on this cusp of self-evaluation and examination, may we reflect on the choices we make throughout the year, consider their impact on our private and public lives. As we weigh our choices, may Judaism be one of the many voices of conscience to allow us to act Jewishly. May we continue to express ourselves openly, welcome debate, and never allow the door of religious freedom to close behind us.

Amen