

My particular brand of interpretation tends to be a tad iconoclastic, so, given that I happen to be married to the rabbi, I feel (although some of you have heard it before) I must start before I start with the following. So here it is: the...Rebbetzin's Disclaimer.

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### **COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem...” You stand this day, all of you.... We enter this scene as Moses imparts his final words of wisdom—his “ethical will” to the Israelites. And for us, the Israelites, it's truly a recommitment ceremony. (Remember when we committed spiritual adultery at Sinai—that collective regression in the form of a Golden Calf?) Therefore, we now reestablish our bond with God, but most importantly this time, claims the Ohr HaChayim – with each other. This time we create a covenant of collective responsibility. It's as if we are guarantors for one another and to everyone in our midst – including “*geircha*” the stranger among us. In the Hebrew: “*Kol Yisrael areivim ze l'ze.*” In other words, this is a Jewish license to meddle—to stick one's nose into other

people's business. In any case, no small challenge—the art of appropriate and graceful meddling demands sophisticated skill and diplomacy (that most of us meddlers rather lack.) And with our American “I'm OK, You're OK” culture, such a concept directly bumps up against our hyper-individualistic sensibilities.

Nonetheless, consider that this orientation takes seriously our interconnectedness and responsibility to one another. The Tanna Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai has this to say about the utter necessity to speak up for the greater good. Picture folks traveling together on a boat. A passenger pulls out a drill and proceeds to pierce holes through the boat beneath his seat. As the others look on incredulously, he retorts “Why should **you** care? I'm only drilling beneath **my** seat!” *(relayed in a dvar by R. Y.Ciner)*

## TO TAKE A STAND

But even more than that, “*atem nitzavim*—you stand” suggests how we're to be responsible for the whole—because the Hebrew “nitzav” implies an attentive sort of standing, and in fact, can be read as: “taking a stand.” “All of you, responsible to one another, are to take a stand.” So in preparation for this talk, I was wondering what I was to be paying attention to regarding my responsibility to the collective. For what was I being called to take a stand? And as so often happens in our technology-laden lives, I found my answer...in my inbox. The emails that kept vying for my attention were related to this insanity currently gripping our country in the form of Islamophobia.

I have a relative who is set on convincing whoever will listen of the supposed evils of Islam. Upon being challenged that he's vilifying an entire religion, entire peoples, he counters with the following accusation: “the more ‘gentle Muslims’ (his words) don't exert enough effort to contain or minimize

the...violence perpetrated by their radical colleagues.” He asserts that as Jews, we do contain the damage of our own.

I looked around my world and perhaps it won't surprise you to learn that I wasn't convinced. And as I was having a moment of self-righteousness as I was criticizing my relative, I found myself thinking that it's awfully easy to criticize others and become self-righteous about our own behavior. (It's so tricky, isn't it?) Today, on Yom Kippur it behooves us to examine our own process to see what is so. In order to wrap my brain around how to respond, I found that I had to think smaller than the entirety of “Muslims” or “Jews.” I had to scale it down and relate it to my own life.

So I thought back to a time when I once heard a religious leader preach passionately about a passage from Torah—what some call the “Old Testament.” Here's the gist: In Genesis (chapter) 34 we read about the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter. This leader made the claim that Jacob was being taught a lesson – was in fact being punished, through his daughter's rape. And this supposed nugget of “enlightened” teaching was imparted to children and adults alike. Outrageous, right? Who, in their right mind in our culture in modern times could accept such a repulsive interpretation? How can a religious leader deign to pass such a claim on as wisdom—the father's punishment is the daughter's rape?

And who offered such an offensive teaching? Surely, you're thinking, this must have come out of the mouth of some rabid fundamentalist kook, some radical imam perhaps, no? In fact, it came (can you guess?) from a respectable rabbi during a Bar Mitzvah ceremony at a regular upper middle class synagogue in Maryland. No kidding. So, yes, (as Rabbi Olivier discussed in his commentary a few weeks ago) in our tradition, in rabbinic commentary, (as in holy texts of

Islam and other tradition's holy texts) we have some unquestionably loathsome passages. They challenge us and require of us a sophisticated understanding of context and a good old tug of war with the text as is customary in our tradition. Yet, this respected spiritual leader was recklessly referencing such a passage and passing it on literally as self-evident wisdom. And when such messages come from a spiritual leader, they're especially damaging because they're cloaked in ersatz overreaching authority that too often goes unchallenged. However, we must challenge them because "*kol Yisrael areivim ze l'ze*" we are responsible to and for one another.

Of course among my liberal educated relatives there was an outcry, right? Well, perhaps not an outcry, but feedback at least? You already know, right? Not a word – my protests were abruptly and quietly dismissed. People preferred to pretend they didn't hear it. No one said a thing (including, by the way, my relative who wants all those "well-behaved" Muslims to reign in their "radical types").

So sure, we want those others to take big stands. But those places in our immediate world where we can really effect change potentially in our own environments—it seems to me we so often miss the opportunity to rise to the occasion—to take those things on—those little things that matter big. Therefore, how can we point fingers? How can we expect others to do in a huge way what we can't seem to manage in a tiny one?

## **IRONY**

In one of perhaps my best mommy moments of my mommy tenure thus far, I had this interchange with my kid. She had heard something on TV that led her to believe that she knew what some country should do about fixing some major internal conflict. I pointed out that amongst ourselves we can't even seem

to keep peace in the car for 10 minutes – so do we really feel that we can tell anyone else how to run their country or their lives? Rather laughable, no? Perhaps we ought to work on what we can do in our car, in our family, in our immediate sphere of influence before we go telling others how they ought to manage themselves. She saw the point.

### **WHAT STOPS US?**

So we are unwilling or unable to engage in a slightly uncomfortable discussion, yet we expect the world from others. Why is that? What stops us from taking a stand in our immediate world, as circumstances demand? I have an idea about that. I hail from Minnesota and thus grew up plagued by the value system known as “Minnesota Nice.” Maintaining an even demeanor in order to sustain some tacitly agreed upon social order is the norm. Boat-rocking is severely frowned upon. Garrison Keillor of “A Prairie Home Companion” fame satirizes this concept, dubbing it “Wobegonics,” which is said to include “no confrontational verbs or statements of strong personal preference.” So all confrontation is taboo. Avoiding discomfort is valued above all. Much of this stems from fear: fear of rejection, of alienation or—horror of horrors!—fear of not being liked. From my observation, it seems to me that “Minnesota Nice” reverberates far beyond its birthplace.

And so instead of addressing issues, instead of working through them, we tell ourselves that it doesn’t really matter. We minimize or deflect; ignore and placate. When this process takes us over, we engage with the world from our fear. And when led from our fear, we abdicate our responsibility for one another, and with our actions, state that social convention is valued over doing right. Yet to live into the best of who we are, it’s required of us to act and to speak up—

even when—especially when—it’s unpopular and out of our comfort zone; because of course, the measure of what we really value is borne out only by upholding our values when it’s difficult to do so—like for instance when we’re tested by having to extend those same rights and privileges to those with whom we may not agree or even may not trust. (*think 1st amendment – Freedom of Religion*). And we don’t *have* to *agree*, but it seems to me we *have* got to find an openhearted, grounded way to disagree, such that we will rock that Minnesota Nice boat anyway when necessary.

Lord knows, I am not the person to offer instruction as to how to go about taking that stand in a loving measured sort of way. That’s my personal growth edge. But I do have some inkling about how to halt this shrinking away from life—how to reclaim our own integrity. Here’s the key, I think, and my favorite oxymoron: It takes learning to get comfortable being uncomfortable. To this end, Moses offers further instruction – this time addressed to each of us as individuals.

### **CHOOSE LIFE!**

*“Uvacharta BaChayim”* “Choose Life!” Moses enjoins, in perhaps one of the most oft-repeated platitudes in Torah. This is a far-reaching little phrase. Growing up I recall Jewish organizations using it for capital campaigns, youth group themes and I’m quite sure I’ve seen it as a bumper sticker. Yet, it really is not surprising that this little phrase has become so popularized among Jews. Preserving life is considered paramount for us. When we celebrate we affirm *“l’chaim!”* “To life!” and when we give of our financial energies, we’re asked to gift in multiples of 18 – the numerical value of the word *“cha”* “life” in Hebrew. And when it comes to saving a human life, Jews are not only permitted, but in fact are

mandated to break almost any commandment necessary to do so. Usually these words are interpreted in a fairly surface, straightforward sort of way as in “embrace Life, “be a Life cheerleader,” “live life to the fullest!”—or something of the sort. It’s one of those phrases we hear and we assume we know what it means. And there’s nothing wrong with those interpretations.

### “CHOOSING” LIFE AS-IS

Yet for me, this season, “*Uvacharta baChayim*” has come to mean something quite different. It’s taken on a deeper resonance. This is what I hear now in the phrase “Choose Life:” “choose this moment of life exactly as it is, whatever is, right now.” I’ve been working with this leading into this New Year and when I’m able to be with it, it’s astonishingly powerful, even transformative.

I choose manageable things, small things, like a headache (literal or figurative.) I often practice choosing “getting up to get the kids off to school even though I’d love nothing better than to linger under cozy covers.” And maybe it sounds crazy, but in the choosing of my overtired life in the moment, my experience completely shifts. Resistance seemingly magically dissolves.

If I don’t “choose” my “as-is” life, I work myself up; I make family members miserable (ask the rabbi – he’ll corroborate this); I shut down and I can’t act. I expend energy wastefully, railing against things as they are, needing them to be different. I retreat—I move away from Life.

Whereas, when I’m in those spaces where I can Choose Life, in dealing with what is, I can lean into Life, and I’m able to step back and witness whatever’s going on with me – “Huh—look at that.” And in doing so, I rise above the trap of entanglement that I otherwise fall into. I’m freed up to simply act – to do what there is to do.

And I have incredible teachers around me. I know people (you know who you are out there) who choose their broken bones or foreclosure, or even cancer. And although I'm not yet practiced enough to make those seemingly impossible "choices," I see the absolute value in doing so. The folks who can take Life on as it is without needing it to be different, after having given up wishing things were different than they are—these people have incredible personal power, because they're able to choose what is, as it is, in the moment.

Lest you protest the semantics, please allow me to clarify what choosing is not. Choosing is not supporting, advocating, giving up or giving in, acquiescing, liking or approving. Choosing is simply leaning into the direct experience of what is. Period. No storyline. No needing whatever is to be different than it is. My experience of this is when I can do it, I don't back away from life. And all my energy that would usually be deposited into an abyss of misery, complaint, railing against—all of that energy potential is freed up to be used elsewhere.

### **DO THE EXPERIMENT**

Perhaps you are not convinced. Maybe right now you're listening to this and you can't believe it. "Amy doesn't have a clue. She doesn't know what she's talking about!" Or maybe you're thinking, "when will this interminable talk end!?" or "a pizza would be good about now...." You're here anyway, experiencing whatever it is you're experiencing. What happens if you choose your impatience, choose your frustration? Your hunger?. "*Uvacharta bachayim*"— Choose life— your life as it is right now in the moment. And just see what it does to your experience. And if you come to see the value in that, how about trying on: Your childhood. Choose. Your parents. Choose. Your life. Choose.

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Life offers us constant “choosing” opportunity. The more one can truly Choose in this way—you may as well be with what is—the more one is freed up to stand “nitzav” for whatever Life demands. One is freed up to take a stand, independent of the outcome, fully aware that there are no guarantees. Each time we fail to rise to the occasion; each time we fail to act because our discomfort or fear dominates, we miss the opportunity to express the fullness of our dignity, our humanity, our integrity. As the brilliant Andrew Boyd puts it from his collection of what he calls “Daily Afflictions” “Take a stand....because it’s the right thing to do. We never know what can or can’t be done; only what must be done.” (p. 62)

Remember Sodom and Gomorrah? The two cities God destroys because people were treating each other so badly? A Jewish folktale tells of a man who unflinchingly protested against the corruption of Sodom. A child once asked him, “Why do you bother anymore? No one listens to you.” He replied, “At first, I hoped to change them. Now I protest because, were I to stop, they would change me.”

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