

We live in a world of seemingly endless choices. When I was little there were three TV channels and two colors – black and white. It used to be that if you wanted milk you had three choices: regular, 2% or skim. Now, it takes 10 minutes to figure out what to buy: organic or non-organic, Lactaid, GMO or radiated? Soymilk, almond milk, coconut milk or rice milk? And once I've narrowed it down to almond milk – which one: regular, low-sugar regular, vanilla or low sugar vanilla? Geez, I just want something for my cereal.

The diversity in the market is a mirror for an increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic society. A couple of years ago I had the joy of officiating at a wedding of a wonderful couple whose parents were born in China, Israel and Ecuador. The couple met at a Hispanic-Jewish cultural get-together sponsored by the group "Judios Latinos". They are just one example of the growing diversity in the Jewish community, as more people of other ethnic groups convert to Judaism and interfaith marriage rises. The growing number of Jews of color, with Latino heritage, Jews who are Sephardi and of mixed-background reflects a diversity that is pushing the boundaries of how we define ourselves as a community.

A growing range of choices is reflected in every aspect of our lives. Last February the upscale department store Barneys had a campaign featuring transgendered models. As part of the effort they released a video that told the story of two people who grew up in Oklahoma and their struggles to re-define their gender. Both speak movingly of being teased, even vilified, yet also about how they found the courage to become who they knew they were by choosing a gender they were not born into. One of them, a woman named Katie summarized her efforts, "you define yourself." This is, it seems, the mantra of our age: "you define yourself."

While we do have a *greater* array of choices in our time, we are defined, as human beings always have been, by what we choose. The Talmudic sages taught, "Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given." On this the medieval philosopher Rambam commented that what happens to us may

not be of our choosing, but how we respond is fully in our hands:

Free will is granted to all ... Each person is fit to be righteous ... or wicked ... wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous. There is no one who compels you, sentences you, or leads you towards either of these two paths. Rather, you, on your own initiative and decision, tend to the path you choose.¹

What he is teaching is we do define our selves, but having limitless choices does not mean that every path is equally good.

On Yom Kippur each one of us reflects on the choices we make. What have I done (or am doing) that reflects a respect for my body and wellbeing? What choices did I make that damaged a relationship with my colleagues, family or friends? Am I taking steps to restore those bonds, to build confidence and trust? What have I done (or failed to do) that weakens the synagogue or the greater Jewish community? How am I a positive force for change? How am I just a *kvetch*? Yes, we *do* define ourselves, but is it a definition we are proud of – not viewed through the scrutiny of others, but (as the Rambam implies) through our own judgment of our selves at our best?

In his book *The Paradox of Choice* psychologist Barry Schwartz argues that too many choices can actually be a bad thing, for with so many options we spend too much of our time deciding and not enough time doing. He believes that limiting choice actually leads to a deeper sense of satisfaction. Scholars continue to debate Schwartz's thesis, but most of us inherently understand that too many choices can be paralyzing. If we spend too much time focusing on all the possibilities available to us we won't have the emotional energy to direct ourselves to the choices that matter.

Is there a way to help us choose wisely? Are there any "constants" that define the boundaries of our lives as Jews, guiding us to not only live a rich Jewish life, but a good life? I would like to suggest four values (all that begin with "c") as a good place to start - covenant, community, complexity and compassion.

¹ Pirkei Avot 3:19 and Rambam *Hilkhos Teshuvah* 5:1

Covenant

Want to see the hottest Jewish video of the year? [Take a look](#) at one that came out a couple weeks ago that features the former President of Israel Shimon Peres looking for a new job. If you have not seen it, you really should – and join the half a million who already have.² (No – not now! It will still be there after Yom Kippur). The video opens with Peres, who this summer ended his term as President at the age of 91, looking for a new job. Along the way, as he takes positions pumping gas, delivering pizza and even doing stand-up comedy (introduced as “Shimi P!”) he offers pearls of wisdom, delivered dead pan, but always hilarious. When a customer refuses anything extra at the gas station Peres cautions, “If you keep refusing every offer you receive you’ll pay a hefty price.” After the customer finally agrees to buy some floaties, he adds, “Go in peace. It is the only solution.” As a security guard he questions a person in line whether he is carrying a rifle or ballistic missile. When the person says, “no”, as if the question is ridiculous, Peres says, “Good. The intellect is our finest weapon.” The video ends with an inspiring quote: “You are as great as the cause you serve, and as young as your dreams.”

To be as “great as the cause you serve” is about as good and pithy a statement of the first value that ought to define us, for that is what it means to be in covenant – a *brit* – with God. I have yet to meet a person who does not, at some point, stumble along the way, losing their dreams, failing others or themselves. To be defined by covenant, however, is to know that we can fall and get up again, that our lives are great because of the great Cause that our People has always served.

To serve is not to abandon our freedom to choose. In fact, the Torah we read today indicates that free will is at the very heart of our relationship with God. “See, I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life.”³ Any parent (or pet owner, for that matter!) understands that no matter how much we insist that someone in our care follow what we want, it

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7b9O8k1tw&feature=youtu.be

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

just does not work out that way. The decisions children make – as frustrating as they sometimes may be to a their parents – is what defines them as the independent adults they are meant to be.

Yom Kippur is the day that reminds us all that we must take responsibility for the choices we make. When we live dedicated to a great cause, no matter how much we suffer or how distant the goal, our days can be rich and meaningful. If we hurt others, betray our dreams, lie or cheat our way through life; if we blame others instead of taking personal responsibility, every day will feel bitter in our mouths. To live outside a sense of covenant is not, Yom Kippur affirms, really living - it's just existing.

This Yom Kippur, then, if a 91 "has been" President can laugh at life (and himself in the process), so can we – so long as we keep in mind we are heading. We are, truly, a great as the cause we serve.

Community

You may be aware that here in Port we now have an impressive rowing team for High School students. What you may not know is that a few years ago the Reform movement's seminary Hebrew Union College decided to field a rowing team. Unfortunately, they kept losing race after race. Although the team practiced for hours every day, they always came in dead last. Trying to figure out how to improve, they sent their team captain to spy on the perennial championship rowing team at Harvard. After a week of watching the sculling crews propelling themselves along the Charles River, the Hebrew Union College captain returned home.

"Well," he said when meeting with his teammates, "I figured out their secret." "What is it? Tell us! Tell us!" they all demanded. "We should have only one guy yelling. The other eight should row."

No matter how deep the desire to succeed and get ahead, no matter how great the cause we serve, if we don't learn to row with others in life we won't get very far. In community, Judaism teaches, we learn that we can do

more – we can be more – than we can alone. The founding rabbi of our congregation, Rabbi Gene Borowitz, teaches that we Jews are ever “oscillating between the claims of the group and the consciousness of the self, between the ethical mandates of the universal and the necessary demands of the particular.”⁴ I must – as Hillel taught – be for myself. But if I am only for myself, what am I?

On Yom Kippur we confess our sins not as individuals, but collectively: *al chet shechetanu lifanecha*, “for the sins we have sinned against You.” No one of us could do all these wrongs. Even if we wanted to there’s not enough a time. So why do we claim as group what only some (maybe only very few) do? Some “miss the mark”, so all are guilty? The purpose is twofold: one, to shake us from being so self-centered. Life is not all about you – at least, not you alone. It’s about doing better in rowing together to steer this boat of life we are in the right direction. Two, on Yom Kippur we acknowledge not only what we did that hurt us or harmed others, but what we failed to do that we could have to make things better.

A friend recently told me a story of an Israeli friend of his who flew on El Al, Israel’s airline, and sat in First Class. “How was it?” my friend asked, “Was the service great?” “Let me put it this way,” the frequent flyer answered, “The food was OK. The seats were great. But I think that after serving Pharaoh in Egypt we Jews made a decision: ‘From now on ... we’re not serving anybody.’”

I’m not sure the El Al attendants base their approach towards customers on theology, but a central Jewish teaching is that we do not serve any *body*. We serve a grand vision that can only be achieved working in concert with others – a world not as it is, but as it might be; a society that honors each individual and places no one in servitude to another; a vision of what life might be like if each person who says, “I define myself” holds that in balance

⁴ “Renewing the Covenant: David Ellenson and Eugene Borowitz in Conversation” (<http://shma.com/2013/05/renewing-the-covenant-david-ellenson-eugene-borowitz-in-conversation/>)

with honoring how others define themselves. j

Living in this way isn't easy. It means others won't always do what we want – even our kids (OK, maybe especially our children). It means judging less and forgiving more. It means accepting that differences are built in the fabric of life, and everyone has their own tribe, interests and opinions. And if we can use Yom Kippur to learn to accept, forgive and compromise more, we just might find that we are a whole lot more in a *kehillah k'dosha*, a “sacred community” with others than we are all by ourselves.

Complexity

1700 years ago the Talmudic sages confronted a powerful religious alternative to Judaism called Manichaeism. The followers believed that there are two great powers in the world – good and evil – which are ever in conflict. In every age there are people who divide the world in two – the civilized and barbarian, the believer and the infidel, the children of light and the children of darkness. This is the approach of one who says, “If you are not with us, you're against us.”

In contrast, a defining characteristic of Judaism has been its embrace of ambiguity, holding multiple frames of reference at the same time. Consider the two most important religious texts of Judaism – the Bible and the Talmud. They are the best examples of the “both-and” approach, incorporating different points-of-view, at times diametrically opposed. The book of Deuteronomy affirms that God rewards the good while Job simply says the ways of Heaven are beyond human understanding. The books of Joshua and Judges speak of the violent destruction of the inhabitants of the Land of Israel; the prophets remind us that the People of Israel and the Canaanites actually continued to live with and amongst one another. There is no single voice. In the Talmud every page is replete with rabbinic disagreement and debate, with multiple answers to various questions. Our religious texts model for us, then, how to live with those with whom we disagree. As Jews we are

connected, bound together by heritage and vision, but that unity is not the same thing as uniformity.

Yom Kippur is, in many ways, about accepting this defining characteristic of Jewish life into our individual lives. All of us, in some way, have to endure the pain of complexity every single day. We are disappointed by our spouse or children, or get frustrated with our parents, yet continue to support and love them. After achieving financial success, most realize that no matter how many things we have, it still does not give us all we want. We are a messy mix of greed and gratitude, selflessness and selfishness. We dream and hope, and a moment later we feel depressed, as if all we do is for naught. We are – at the very same time – sick and well, healer and healed, still feeling young in our heads, but with bodies that remind us we're getting older. We balance yearning to stray with regret for having done so. On Yom Kippur we hold in balance the complex pain of recalling what we did wrong with the triumphant hope that we are not forever stained by it and can be forgiven.

In our bodies and our souls is writ the complexity of being human. It is, in fact, the very essence of how we Jews see Creation itself. It is not sameness that God praises in the story of Creation, but diversity. The land produced vegetation of various kinds – and God saw that it was good. There were different lights – one bright, yet alone; another for night that waxed and waned, yet which danced with the stars. And God saw that it was good. And the earth teemed with every living thing. And it was good. Complexity makes life wondrous and messy, hard to figure out and opens up a space for each of us. That is the message of Creation – and the truth we are supposed to affirm on Yom Kippur.

This is not an argument for moral relativism, for there is (as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah) great evil in this world ... and great good. But for most of us, most of the time, life is rarely so easy, clean or neat. Complexity is tough, but once you accept it you become more forgiving, a heck of a lot less self-righteous and much more compassionate.

Compassion

A few months ago the popular singer Alicia Keyes was in a group and someone asked, "Why are you here?" It was a question that haunted her. The answer she came up with was a song titled "[We Are Here](#)", which talks about not just bemoaning the world's problems, but getting involved. Her words are a powerful echo of the themes of this day:

Let's talk about our part
My heart touch your heart
Let's talk about, let's talk about living
Had enough of dying, not what we all about
Let's do more giving
Do more forgiving.

"Why," Keyes asked herself, "Am I here? What is my purpose?" In her answer to that question she leads us towards an understanding of Yom Kippur not simply as a day to move from what we have done wrong, but to remind us that our lives can be more dedicated to doing what is right.

In Hebrew the term for compassion is *rachamim* is connected to the word *rechem*, which means "womb." In this we are taught that compassion is an all-embracing and sustaining support for another. Just as a baby is in the mother, yet not her, so should your compassion lead you to see that those you help are a part of you, even if not you. Defined by covenant and its attendant sense of responsibility to the community (to others), attuned to the complexity inherent in Creation itself, how can we not be anything but compassionate? It is compassion, in fact, that has been the key to our survival as a people.

Some make the claim that we survived because we have been persecuted. That's ridiculous. Lots of peoples have been oppressed and persecuted, yet did not survive. "The way Jews survive in this world," says Rabbi David Wolpe, "Is because someone you don't know is your brother or sister." It is not hate that kept us alive, but compassion – an overwhelming sense that caring for someone else, as different as they are, as complex as

that caring may be, is my responsibility.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the popular and charismatic singer, went to Russia with his guitar to help in the plight of Soviet Jewry in the mid-1960s. Only one person, an old man, invited Carlebach into his house. Carlebach said, "I understand why people don't want to hear a singing rabbi from the West. What I don't understand is why you do, and why you took me in?" The old man said that when he was a child during World War I there was a rumor in his village about the Cossacks coming. All the children were brought to the village rabbi's house to hide. "It was bitter cold. The rabbi put his cloak over me. It's been almost 80 years since then, but that cloak still keeps me warm."

Let me ask you: how many of you have ever been touched or had your life changed by someone who cared for you at a moment of weakness, despair or vulnerability? Whether you knew them well or not, whether you thanked them or not – their compassion saved you. So, pay it forward.

In the final analysis, you do define yourself. The question of this day, however, is this: Am I happy with all that I am? Is the life I've defined all it could be? If not, then now's the time to turn things around. Don't get frozen by the choices that are open to you. *Kvetch* less and do more. Stop blaming others, and take personal responsibility to change. Accept life's messy complexity. Wrap the warm cloak of compassion around anyone who needs it, for God knows there are plenty who could use the love you have to give. And, for as long as the Holy One gives you on this earth, know that your crew (the Jews) needs you to row with them with all your might.