

Choosing to Choose
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Rosh Hashanah 5774

When Shayna first moved to New York City in 2008, she needed someone to hang curtains over her bedroom window that looked over Amsterdam Avenue. Seizing the opportunity to further his matchmaking plans, Shayna's brother Ami suggested she call me and schedule a time for me come over and help her out. And I being extremely handy, always wanting to help a friend in need, and being interested in Shayna, was more than happy to help. I packed my toolbox and made my way to the apartment.

After a few minutes of small talk, I set up the ladder, drilled the pilot holes and hung the curtains. All was going well - until it came to the clean up. After gathering all my tools, I collected the extra screws, bolts, and curtain rod extension connector, put them in a ziplock baggy and then asked Shayna where she wanted me to leave the extra hardware. "Oh I don't need those" she said. "You can just throw them away." My head cocked to the left, and I said, "Throw them away? They are perfectly good screws." To which she replied, "Why would I keep them, I don't need them. And they take up space." To which I responded: "Throw them away?"

This conversation has repeated itself dozens of times since that fateful day:

Michael - why are you keeping those spare Ikea parts?

Michael - why do we need 3 different bicycle pumps?

Michael - why did you say yes when my grandpa offered you his leather hole punching tool - when will you ever need to punch a hole in leather?

For me, the idea of discarding usable screws or nails or tools is a foreign concept. Growing up, my dad and I prided ourselves on our ever growing collection of tools and hardware. For years, I admit, I didn't even know you could buy new nails. I figured everyone just used what they had collected! I used that moment, to explain to Shayna that one never throws away anything because: You never know when you might need it. Shayna then informed me that my philosophy led to clutter and chaos. "It's important not to have all the stuff lying around the house", she said. It's been 5 years since I helped Shayna install those curtain rods (pull out the curtain extension) and finally I can now say: "See I told you I would use this one day."

Behind the scenes of that the debate, regarding what to do with extra stuff, is a subconscious conversation about costs and benefits. For me the financial and environmental benefits of keeping everything pales in comparison to the cost of a slightly more cluttered and disorganized cabinet. For Shayna, the benefit of having a more organized and neat home outweighs the cost of having to go to Home Depot and purchase new screws.

We both are aware of the benefits.
We both are aware of the costs.
We just value each of them differently.

If you break it down, I'd like to believe that most choices are a result of a subconscious cost-benefit analysis. When it comes to making a choice, we analyze the available options, check out the costs and benefits of each - and then, ultimately, choose a course of action based on whichever choice provides the greatest good.

We do this all the time. We might check Consumer Reports before buying a car. We might look at reviews on Amazon.com before buying a new television or computer. Or my favorite: We might send an email out to EmunahTalks: ISO - In Search Of a Roofer, a Heating Specialist - or my favorite from this year: In search of an Auto Repair Specialist and a Dentist - and to be clear - they don't have to be the same person.

But like someone who has consumed that extra brownie at kiddush or ordered the jumbo popcorn at the movie when you know the large was more than enough, sometimes we look back and say, we made the wrong choice.

I don't think we chose to make bad decisions on purpose. I think we just don't see everything as a choice. Some decisions are made because of habit. And others because we fall into the trap of "we've always done it like that" or "everyone else does it this way" or "it doesn't really matter."

To compound the problem, we as a society often don't measure a products value by measuring its costs and benefits – we only look at the benefits. Benefits to the environment, personal relationships and our own health take a backseat to the perceived supremacy of goods and services which provide greater convenience and make us more available to others.

Rosh Hashanah comes every year to remind us that every choice - is in fact - a choice. That no choice should be made while on autopilot. That every choice matters. To make sure that the rubric by which we evaluate the choices that we will make in the upcoming year are true to who we are: to our values and to our ideals. And to remind ourselves that just because we made certain choices in the past, does do not define who we are today nor require that we continue making them in the year to come.

The idea - that we are in total control of our destiny, that we have the power to change and be who we want to be and act how we want to act, is central to Jewish thought.

Just last week, in parashat Nitzavim we read Moshe's charge to the Jewish people:

ראה נתתי לפניך היום, אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַטּוֹב, וְאֶת-הַמָּוֶת, וְאֶת-הַרָע.
See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.

הַעֲדוֹתַי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם, אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ--הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ, הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה; וּבַחֲרָתָּ, בְּחַיִּים
I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.

Commenting on the verse – the rabbis pick up on two words: **וּבַחֲרָתָּ** – Choose and **הַיּוֹם** – Today. Every day we have the ability to choose.

Picking up on this theme - the great 12th century doctor, philosopher and rabbi, Moses Maimonides, writes:

A person should not entertain the idea that a person is not in control of their destiny. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative, walks the path he chooses.

I'd like to bring to your attention four trends, four practices, which I believe have ceased to become choices and are simply how we do things. Which, I believe upon closer inspection, aren't such great ideas. And I confess, I use these goods and services too. Because the truth is, they do make life more convenient, they do cut down on wait time and they do result in more output. I don't at all believe that we must

completely eliminate them - but just be more thoughtful in how we use them.

The first two trends pit the convenience of single serve beverages against the environment.

Please raise your hand if you personally own or work somewhere that has a Keurig Machine or some other pod-based coffeemaker. These machines are super convenient. You pick your flavored pod, push the button and in one minute you have a delicious freshly brewed cup of coffee. Shayna and I registered for one of these when we were married. After a few weeks of using the machine I noticed two things.

1. Those little pods are expensive. Even when you buy them in bulk at Costco, the cost of the coffee in those little pods comes out to roughly 50 dollars a pound. Which is shocking because the same coffee in non-pod form costs only 10 dollars a pound.¹
2. They produce a lot of non-recyclable and non-biodegradable waste. This year alone, Keurig alone expects to sell 3 billion coffee pods this year. That's a lot of trash. And although different companies are trying new strategies to cut down on the waste by reclaiming used pods or repurposing them, is all that garbage really worth the convenience?²

Similarly, the appeal of having totally portable drinking water has resulted in changing how we as a country quench our thirst. Last year, according to the American Water Works Association, Americans spent a total of \$11.8 billion dollars on bottled water at an average cost of \$7.50 per gallon. That's almost 2,000x the cost of a gallon of tap water and twice the cost of a gallon of gasoline.³

So why is this such a big deal? We recycle the bottles right? Consider the following facts:

1. It takes three times the volume of water to manufacture one bottle of water than it does to fill it, and because of the chemical production of plastics that water is mostly unusable. Another way to think of it: when you pick up a water bottle at the supermarket, hold

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/dining/single-serve-coffee-brewers-make-convenience-costly.html?_r=0

² <http://site.thegreenlifeonline.org/2012/02/13/brewing-a-better-world/>

³ <http://www.businessinsider.com/bottled-water-costs-2000x-more-than-tap-2013-7>

it up and imagine it filled ¼ with oil. That's how much in fossil fuels it took just to manufacture it!⁴

2. According to some studies: Eighty percent of the water bottles we buy end up in landfills. That means roughly for every 10 bottles we drink, only two end up in the recycle bin resulting in tens of millions of bottles finding their way to landfills every single day.⁵

All this when we live in homes that provide access to the some of the cleanest and safest in the history of the world. We jeopardize the environment , our future, all of this in the name of convenience. I'd like to move away from choices that force us to choose between convenience and adverse effects on the environment to discuss choices which have harmful consequences on our bodies and relationships.

I won't even ask how many people have a cell phone. These devices have changed how we communicate and organize our lives. They can take pictures, they keep our calendar and some models, as I understand, even let us make phone calls. Smart phones are apart of life today and I know couldn't live without mine. But I am afraid that we assume that phones must be present all the time and are helpless to put them away.

- How many of us have felt annoyed when at a lunch or a meeting with someone only to have them periodically glancing down to check their phone.
- Who has felt frustrated by knowing you don't fully have the attention of the person who is standing right in front of you.
- Who has fought hard to gather the family around the dinner table only to have a member of the family walk off because their was a call they had to tend to.

Aside from being a source of frustration during social settings - cell phones have also proven to be dangerous.

- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that in 2010, over three thousand people died while driving distracted and over 416,000 people were injured.⁶

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/norm-schriever/post_5218_b_3613577.html

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/norm-schriever/post_5218_b_3613577.html

⁶ <http://www.distraction.gov/content/get-the-facts/facts-and-statistics.html>

- Eleven percent of drivers aged 18 to 20 who were involved in an automobile accident and survived admitted they were sending or receiving texts when they crashed.⁷
- Perhaps most jarring: Five seconds is the average time your eyes are off the road while texting or checking an email. When traveling at 55mph, that's enough time to cover the length of a football field. A lot can happen in those 100 yards.⁸

Despite knowing these facts - many of us still check our phones. Considering the costs, is it worth finding out:

- What's for dinner
- What's the score of the baseball game?
- Who just emailed you?

Lastly, I'd like to speak for a few moments about the importance of something which is free and vital to our mental and physical well being: sleep. We know the benefits. People who sleep roughly 6.5 - 7.5 hours a night live longer, are typically more creative, can focus more clearly, do better academically and professionally, have less stress and fewer accidents. They are physically healthier and regular sleep has been shown to help control weight and hypertension. And yet - how many of us can honestly say they get enough sleep. More importantly, how many of us can say that we've valued watching one more television show or checking one more email at the cost of a few extra minutes of sleep. Do the benefits outweigh the costs?

Like I said before, every day, when we wake up, we must make choices. Perhaps, the most important choice we make each day however is the decision to reaffirm our commitment to Judaism. Our ancestors living hundreds of years ago didn't have to make that choice: The Jewish communities neighbors decided where they lived, what they did professionally, and who they interacted with socially. Ours is among the first generation who can chose. Your presence here today, demonstrates that you believe that Judaism provides benefit and adds value to your lives. There is a benefit in being here this morning.

And a life filled with Judaism does have costs.

- Choosing affiliation in a shul does have a financial component

⁷ <http://www.distraction.gov/content/get-the-facts/facts-and-statistics.html>

⁸ <http://www.distraction.gov/content/get-the-facts/faq.html>

- Choosing to come on Shabbat or the holidays might mean missing work, missing soccer practice, missing violin rehearsal, missing a day of school.
- Keeping kosher does mean limited options when it comes to selecting the menu or eating out.

And what is the benefit?

For me, a life infused with Judaism provides for meaning, joy and hope.

When I study Judaism's sacred texts I feel like I am in dialogue with the likes of Maimonides and Rashi. I am searching for answers to life's deepest questions. That search provides meaning.

When I celebrate the holidays, I feel a sense of joy and freedom different from a secular celebration. The tranquility of sitting in the sukkah, the rest from a Shabbat Nap, or the joy of dancing with the Torah on Simḥat Torah is incomparable to anything else. And the message, that things can change and always get better – provides hope, even in the darkest day.

I know my past, I know my present, and I know where I am going.

Judaism challenges us to actively consider every single choice. Specifically, Rosh Hashanah inspires us to ask ourselves: What are my short term goals - what are my long term goals? Rosh Hashanah comes to remind us that regardless of our choices in the previous year, today, we can take a stand and chose to make 5774 different.

- Will this be the year that I have committed to spending a few extra minutes making coffee in order to reduce my impact on the environment?
- Will this be the year that I carry around a plastic water bottle or opt to drink water from the water fountain in an effort to reduce my carbon footprint?
- Will this be the year that I put my phone down to see the people in front of me or download an ap that automatically senses when I am driving and disables texting?
- Will this be the year that I commit to doing simple things to take care of myself and those around me?

- How will I chose to embrace and deepen my Jewish identity in the year to come?

My blessing for us is that in the New Year – may we feel empowered to make choices every day, to not only see the benefits but also evaluate a given choice's costs.

And in doing so, learn to act on those choices which reflect our values, our ideals - and represent who we really are.

Shanah Tovah!