

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,

And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,

Who shall live and who shall die,

Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,

Who shall perish by water and who by fire,

Who by sword and who by wild beast,

Who by famine and who by thirst,

Who by earthquake and who by plague,

Who by strangulation and who by stoning,

Who's to say?

And who by fire, who by water

Who in the sunshine, who in the night time

Who by high ordeal, who by common trial

Who in your merry merry month of may

Who by very slow decay

And who shall I say is calling the shots?

Our tradition teaches us that our Father, our King,

our God is the arbiter of all,

But repentance, prayer and righteousness

avert the severe decree.

Much of Western civilization,
as displayed by Western thought throughout the ages,
is predicated on the belief that human beings are agents –
that we all have freewill.

In his dialectic treatise, How to be a Friend,
Cicero equated freewill and our respect for that of others
–

as foundational to our ability -
to be in relationship to one another
and essential to our capacity for goodness.

Centuries later the great Enlightenment philosopher

Immanuel Kant reaffirmed this link

between freedom and goodness.

If we are not free to choose, he argued,

then it would make no sense to say

we ought to choose the path of righteousness.

Classical and Enlightenment philosophers endeavored to

construct and contribute to societies which

not only accepted,

but honored God's greatest gift to humanity.

For many of us,

it would seem much easier if we didn't have freewill.

Determinism, the idea that everything is predetermined,
is a cop out.

If we don't have freewill,
we're not responsible.

If we abdicate the responsibility we have,
to grow and to change
then we might as well

find a better way to spend these days.

Without freewill, change becomes trite,
t'shuvah is nothing more than lip service

to an inevitable process in which

we are wholly at the mercy of forces beyond our control.

Without freewill we aren't accountable

and neither are the people we love.

A couple of years ago –

the magazine and multi-platform publisher,

The Atlantic, published an article with the incendiary title,

“There's No Such Thing as Freewill;

but we're better off believing in it anyway.”

The article, written by philosopher Stephen Cave,

traced the intellectual tradition from Charles Darwin

to the American physiologist Benjamin Libet -
which eventually gave rise and shape
to a theory of consciousness that belied our capacity
to make any decision in opposition to
our naturally occurring -
chemical and physiological processes.

The implications of this belief are catastrophic.

In 2002,

Two Psychologists, Vohs and Schooler,
tested whether belief in freewill would affect behavior.

The results are telling:

On a range of measures,
from cheating on a test to stealing money,
Vohs and Schooler found
that people who are
induced to believe less in free will
are more likely to behave immorally.

In another of Vohs' studies,
a group of day laborers
were assessed for their level of belief in free will.
Those who believed more strongly
that they were in control of their own actions

showed up on time for work more frequently
and were rated by supervisors as more capable.

Roy Baumeister of Florida State University,
my alma mater,
found that students
with a weaker belief in free will
were less likely to volunteer their time to help a classmate
than were those whose belief in free will was stronger.
Likewise, those primed
to hold a deterministic view by reading statements like
“Science has demonstrated that free will is an illusion”
were less likely
to give money to a person experiencing homelessness,

or lend someone a cellphone.

Further studies by Baumeister and colleagues

have linked a diminished belief in free will

to stress, unhappiness,

and a lesser commitment to relationships.

They found that when subjects were induced to believe

that “all human actions

follow from prior events

and ultimately can be understood

in terms of the movement of molecules,”

those subjects came away

with a lower sense of life’s meaningfulness.

Disbelieving in freewill leads to:

the breakdown of moral responsibility;

and a less meaningful experience of life.

But if we are to believe in freewill

it is not without cost;

we must resolve ourselves to the simple fact

that we will be disappointed.

The people we love will inevitably let us down.

It would be easy to attribute their failure

to meet our expectations

to their biological predilections.

It would be comforting to attribute -

our failure to be the captains of the ships of our lives,

the movement of molecules,

- or some unknown, hopefully just, Divine plan –

but our tradition places responsibility on every shoulder.

From Pirkei Avot we learn:

“All is determined, and yet freewill is given.”

If all is determined, what’s the point of this freewill?

This teaching is an acknowledgement

of our freewill

and also the fact that despite that freewill -

much of life is beyond our control.

But not everything.

Our rabbis teach in the same passage:

“The world is judged according to goodness
and all is according to the majority of deeds.”

We want the best for our children.

We try to give them the tools to best-wield their agency
authentic to the values we hope to instill in them.

And yet, no one exists in a vacuum.

Even with the careful instruction of Aaron,
and the best of intentions,

Nadav and Abihu,

two of his sons who we read about on Yom Kippur,

are at the mercy of forces

they can neither understand nor control.

Aaron could not stop them from accessing their agency

any more than he could stop God from punishing them.

The actions of his sons are disappointing,

the retribution for their human error

seems cosmically unfair.

Yes. Nadav and Abihu chose -

to bring their 'strange fire' to the altar.

No. They did not understand

the consequences of their actions.

In fact, to their minds they were doing everything -
just as their father had taught them,
with the noble intention of serving God.

We have been given the ultimate gift of choice,
with very little understanding -
of what the implications of our choices will be.

We are searching in the darkness
with only what we hope is a reliable tradition
and trial-and-error to light our way.

At the end of forked paths
in the labyrinths of our lives lies an unknown.

Even if we take the 'right path'
we are promised little beyond
personal satisfaction in that choice alone.

The book of Job realizes this for us.

Job was righteous.

Exceedingly righteous.

Ostensibly he did everything in his power
to live a good life.

But God chooses to test Job.

God takes his health, home, and family away from him.

That's Job's reward for choosing to live righteously.

When Job confronts God,
after being subjected to the worst fates imaginable,
he is answered with a resounding reminder
of his own smallness in the grand scheme of things.

Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Pzhysha once said to his students:

"Everyone must have two pockets,
so that they can reach into the one or the other,
according to their needs.

In their right pocket are to be the words:

'For my sake was the world created,'

and in their left:

'I am but dust and ashes.'

This is the primary conflict of our lives,

how will we choose to see ourselves?

How will we choose to live our lives?

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik understands Judaism

as asserting the following:

“...man stands at a crossroads

and wonders which way to proceed.

Confronting him is terrible choice:

between the image of God

and a beast of prey;

the glory of nobility
or the monster of the universe;
the choicest of creatures
or a corrupt creature;
the image of a man of God
or the Nietzschean übermensch
[who in the vacuum created
by the supposed death of God,
creates a new moral framework].
Man must always, always decide.”

In his understanding of this statement,

Pinchas Peli,

a student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, writes:

“Free choice, which is part of [one’s] being,
means that [one] can create [oneself] at will and,
as it were be born anew.”

These High Holidays are a reminder for each of us
of the humbling extent of the world beyond our control,
but also,
of the responsibility and opportunity provided by choice.
Our freewill is more than a mere consolation,
a candle flickering in the winds of fate.

We must choose to conduct ourselves righteously,
and not for the sake of reward or punishment.

The rabbis struggle throughout our tradition
with the reality of a world which, too often,
does not reward us if we are good
or punish us if we are bad.

We all know, or know of,
wicked people who prosper endlessly.

We all know, or know of,
righteous people
whose names were not inscribed in the book of life.

We have the opportunity, now,
to acknowledge that that book's author
has provided us with the ability to choose.

We have the opportunity now,
and each and every day we are blessed with life,
to choose to live justly, morally,
and with real conviction.

But even if we make that choice,
even with all of the best intentions and aspirations,
we must reconcile ourselves to the fact
that we will miss the mark.

So too with the people we love.

We must be understanding of them when they do.

We must be understanding of ourselves too.

To choose to forgive is divine.

Alexander Pope wrote:

Ah ne'er so dire a Thirst of Glory boast,

Nor in the Critick let the Man be lost!

Good-Nature and Good-Sense must ever join;

To err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine.

We must see ourselves in everyone

and the Divine within ourselves.

Yes, we are going to make mistakes,

we will sin against God,

we can atone and be forgiven.

We will be wronged by our fellows,

intentionally or not,

and we have the capacity to forgive.

But the choice to do so is our own.

It's to your benefit to ask for forgiveness,

Mishnah Yoma teaches us that for sins against God,

Yom Kippur atones.

However, for sins against your fellow,

Yom Kippur does not atone.

Your life is a long road without a turn in it.

We should endeavor -

to break down walls instead of building them.

You can forgive.

You have the choice.

You deserve forgiveness.

But the other has a choice too.

Choose to live up to yourself. You are divine.

Except, you are not all-powerful.

None of us is.

If truly, you can only control yourself

in relation and reaction to the world around you,

it behooves you to use

the built-in time for reflection of these Days of Awe.

Of course, you can always choose not to.

But, like believing in and actualizing your own agency,

it's probably to your benefit.