

Choosing Life in 2026

Sermon for Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5786

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וּבַחֲרַת בְּחַיִּים, “Choose life,” our Torah portion urges us. If only it were so easy. Many of us work hard, doing what we can to extend our lives—exercising regularly, eating healthfully, drinking in moderation if at all, driving safely, refraining from smoking and other unhealthy habits, seeing the doctor regularly and taking our recommended vaccines and medications, and even that list is incomplete. Still, there is much we do not control. We are all too aware of life’s random blows, cells dividing or failing to do so in ways that riddle bodies with illness. One organ or another could turn on us, and it could be our brains. Accidents and the dangerous behavior of others can end our life in an instant, vigilance notwithstanding.

That cheery message will be driven home on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mornings: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who shall live in who shall die, who by drowning and who by stoning,” and so forth. Yes, the litany ends, וְתִשׁוּבָה וְצִדְקָה וְתַפִּילָה מֵעֲבִירִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה, “but repentance, prayer, and righteous giving can impact the harshness of the decree,” and we do affirm that our choices make a difference. But we are all too aware of the limits.

The full section in which Moses conveys the commandment to choose life reads: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—by loving the Eternal your God, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to [God]. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the land that the Eternal swore to your [ancestors], to give to them.”ⁱ These words echo several other sections of the Torah that promise blessings, including long life and both human and agricultural fertility, as rewards for observing מצוות, commandments; and threaten curses, horrific punishments, for failing to do so.

In חובות הלבבות, *Duties of the Heart*, the eleventh century rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda says of these blessings and curses, “Everything in our religious literature, whether it be instruction, precept, or moral exhortation, demonstrates this view,”ⁱⁱ namely that the blessing of life is chosen by observing the מצוות. An early modern rabbi, Chaim ibn Attar, explains with more specificity, “Moses means that we should concentrate on immediate problems such as making sure that God will grant the necessary rainfall as a result of our observing the commandments.” Now, far be it from the rabbi to discourage anybody from living Jewishly, but most of don’t share this theology. Who among us believes that God grants or withholds rainfall

or prematurely ends the lives of evildoers but extends long life to the righteous? That does not match our experience. Surely some among us believe that God exercises power to make individual life-and-death decisions, but others believe God to have limited God's own power to allow for free will and to enable the unimpeded natural processes of atoms, molecules, and cells.

The Women's Torah Commentary also acknowledges, "In Deuteronomy, 'life' refers to the reward for obeying specific laws or for obeying ... [T]orah...in general." However, it goes on to say, "In this passage, this language signifies the 'path of life,' the way that people choose to live their lives."ⁱⁱⁱ The twentieth century scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz explains Moses's intent similarly: "Life, goodness, and a blessing are all one option, in contrast to death, evil, and a curse. I present you with both paths, but I want you to choose the positive option."^{iv}

The Torah, being ancient, is written to resonate with its contemporary readers twenty-five hundred years ago. In a world where so much seemed to be outside people's control, they held onto hope that what appeared to be random was in the firm hands of a benevolent God. At a time before scientific discoveries about a variety of matters—from the Earth's shape and rotation to weather patterns, from causes of illness to the basic function of our vital organs—people clung to faith that their behavior motivated a just and merciful God to reward and punish them on the basis of their actions.

We know so much more—the patterns of the universe and the ways our bodies work. If our eyes don't glaze over first, there are people who could explain to us why Arkansas has been so hot and dry all summer. We are clear-eyed about the harm that people can do to one another and to our planet. Still, we do not know why good and righteous people suffer, why the same cancer treatment that saves one person's life has no impact on another, why some babies are born in perfect health while others endure lifelong disabilities. We **know** we cannot "choose" a year of good rainfall or to die comfortably in our beds, all our faculties intact, the day after our hundredth birthdays.

Still, Torah's point stands: What we do matters.

We can choose to be to speak kindly or harshly when we need to get a point across.

We can choose to express our anger cruelly or with a calm explanation to the person who has piqued our ire.

We can choose to be generous, or we can choose to be miserly. We can even be so charitable that we impoverish ourselves—that is, we can choose too little or too much of a good thing, or we can strive to get it right.

We can be alert to climate change, its causes and harms, and do our best to reduce our own role in warming the planet, or we can conclude that's not our problem.

We can choose to ignore evil that does not impact us directly, or we can pay attention to harms being carried out in our names, as Americans or as Jews—working, even against all odds, to build just societies.

We can choose to work for the wellbeing of our Jewish people—here in Arkansas, across America, in Israel, and around the world—or we can choose to disavow any special obligation to those who share our heritage and destiny.

We can choose to notice the suffering of people we don't know, who live half a world away, or who don't share our identity, or we can embrace our responsibility to the whole human family.

And now, as Elul draws near its close, and we approach the High Holy Days:

We can choose תשובה, repentance, committing ourselves to finding ways to reverse our failures of the last year, or we can remain set in our ways.

We can choose תפילה, praying that God will reach into our hearts and help us to do the hard work of seeking forgiveness and a better future, or we can stay home, imagining it's all on us alone.

We can choose צדקה, eager to give in ways that bring goodness into the world that, perhaps even very indirectly, redresses harm we have done; or we can keep it all in our own pockets.

We can and we must make life-affirming choices, writing our own names in the metaphorical Book of Life for the new year ahead. No, our choices may not assure that we will live to next Rosh Hashanah, that we won't be ill or injured, unemployed or impoverished. But they can assure that we live in harmony with אבינו מלכנו, our God who simultaneously holds us to standards like a sovereign and forgives us like a loving parent. Then, may God חנינו וענינו, be gracious and answer us—and ultimately, we pray that God will עשה עמנו צדקה וחסד והשיענו, deal with us righteously and kindly and will be the Source of salvation we may find in this world and the next.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 30:19-20.

ⁱⁱ Bachya ibn Paquda, Duties of the Heart, Third Treatise on Service of God 8:5.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Torah; A Women's Commentary*, Deuteronomy 30:19.

^{iv} Steinsaltz on Deuteronomy 30:19.