

The Gift of Choice

Rosh Hashanah 5779

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

Tova Mirris stood before a group of rabbis, a *beit din*, a court of law, awaiting a document, *Sefer K'ritut*, a book of separation, more commonly known as a *get*. That would end her marriage and her relationship to the Orthodox community. Playing the role as she was directed, she brought the document to her chest, symbolizing full possession. With the rabbis watching carefully, she ceremoniously turned and left the room symbolizing that the divorce had taken effect. One of the rabbis took the parchment from her, drew an X over it and tore it up, so no one could examine the document and find an error which would undo the divorce.

This ritual culminated a journey which began with the decision that she could not keep the rules expected of her as an Orthodox woman. In her autobiography *The Book of Separation* she writes, "I can no longer live a life I don't believe in. My marriage works only if I am willing to hide away the truest part of myself.

"My marriage works only as long as I agree not to grow."

One of her children, her son Josh, felt the urge to push the boundaries that framed his life, but he feared consequences:

"I need to talk to you mom. If one day I decide to eat pizza with meat on it, will you still like who I am?"

"Oh Josh." I feel my heart breaking open. Even at his young age, he knows the price to be paid for not following the rules. He somehow understood that love is what you risk losing if you wanted to choose for yourself.

For us too this is a day of choice, where we confront parts of ourselves, the conduct that only we fully know. Reform Judaism, in fact, gifts us the freedom to think, confront, reject, re-embrace, to choose how we want to live the years we are granted.

Shannon Keegan makes this very point as she sat in the rabbi's study, alternatively laughing and crying.

"Most people think I want to be Jewish because I'm about to get married. Rabbi, I am a lot more single than I want to be. I went to Catholic school for twelve years. I loved entering the cathedral, the mass, the sacraments, everything. But the priest kept quoting from the Gospel of John. 'No one comes to the father except by me,' says Jesus. I love Jesus as inspiration, but not as barrier. I wanted a real relationship with God, I wanted to be challenged and inspired but ultimately to define that relationship myself, to choose my own path."

She continued:

"That's what I get *here* and I also get true community. Everyone is so supportive, so caring. In class my teacher quoted Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan who said, 'More important than what you believe is where you belong.'

“I belong *here* rabbi. You know what I love about being Jewish? The feeling of being needed. You are a small people, but a people that have stayed alive in spite of so many efforts to kill you off. That resilience is remarkable, but it takes effort. Every generation must find its way to God and choose to care, to light candles, to observe holidays, to do mitzvot. I want to be a part of something that is bigger than myself. I want to matter and here I think I do. I *know* I do.”

Here, Shannon finds her place, her purpose, her worth. We can only hope to live up to her ideals, to present such a community of caring that supports her self-worth, which gives her every opportunity to partner with God, to achieve together what neither can achieve alone.

The Messianic Era, however, has not arrived. Not for Shannon and really not for women anywhere. In fact, fourteen times in the Hebrew bible our ancestors have responded to their journey with God with the word, *Hineni*, I am here. Abraham responded that way three times, Jacob, even Esau, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, not once is a woman given this opportunity in the Bible. Not Sarah who gives up so much to go with Abraham to the land which God will show them. Not Rebecca who ensures that the covenantal relationship would survive into the future, not Miriam who rescued the infant Moses ensuring that there would be an exodus and a revelation at Sinai, not Esther who risked it all to keep her people alive.

But today, women are saying, in effect, *Hineni*, we will no longer be marginalized, no longer placed behind the metaphorical *mechitza*.

My former rabbinic intern Jordy Gerson is rabbi of the Greenwich Reform Synagogue. Her nametag said so at the Biennial but her status was still questioned. Female colleagues who had their own congregations face the same questions at every convention, committed Reform Jews assuming that, “we’re not *really* the rabbi.”

“It’s common, in fact,” she said, “that when prospective congregants come to meet with me for the first time they are shocked when I open the office door.”

“You’re the rabbi?” They all ask, double-checking as if I might be hiding another rabbi under my desk. Almost exhaustedly, I answer, “I am she.”

This is not a problem exclusive to rabbis. The Reverend Kaji Dousa, Senior Pastor of The Park Avenue Christian Church and fellow Planned Parenthood clergy board member. Reverend Dousa is also the first African American woman to lead her congregation in 207 years, notes: “In nearly every ecumenical setting in which I have found myself the men around me removed my title. They referred to each other as father, rabbi, pastor, imam, guru, I am, more often than not, Kaji.”

The senior pastor has worked too hard to have her title taken from her. Women still have to work harder, be better, attain more, in order to be treated equitably, to be given opportunities and respect that they have earned and often do not receive.

Because we know that still today, women are subjected to abuse of one kind or another. Much too often women are propositioned at work by a man more senior in rank. She has worked all her life to attain that position, often having twice the training and twice the goods to reach that level. And she finds herself in an incredibly difficult spot. This is often not innocent flirting, a proposing of relationship that is her choice to accept or deny. No, this is power looking down at subordinate and she frets: Must I submit to keep my job and my livelihood? My family needs my income, can I risk everything to stand up for myself?

Yes, innocent misunderstandings do occur. People *can* be falsely accused. But with it all, can we at least strive for the time when women are respected for who they are and all they have earned, for the time when it really is *her* choice to enter into a relationship with that guy or not.

Relationships are evermore difficult and confusing. I once read these five pieces of advice for women in heterosexual relationships.

1. It's important to find a man who does his share round the house.
2. It's important to find a man who can make you laugh.
3. It's important to find a man you can count on and never lies to you.
4. It's important to find a man who truly loves you.
5. It's important that these four men do not know each other.

Finding a real mensch is important, though we know perfection will always elude us. Sometimes these relationships present excruciating choices.

Let us take a painful example: your mate has been involved in an extramarital affair and confesses to you. He comes to you and begs for forgiveness. You have loved him for over thirty years and after much thought and discussion decide to try to keep your marriage together. An excruciating decision. We all know that things won't go back to how they were. Healing will happen, if it does, slowly, slowly.

Forgiveness is mighty hard, and if one day we forgive, we really cannot forget. Yet we *also* know that resentment and antagonism rent far too much space in our heads and in our hearts.

Psychiatrist Dr. Edith Eger writes, "Healing is possible when we choose to release the wounds, to let go of the grief." She tells the story of a clinical situation in which Renee's son Jeremy comes into the den while she and her husband are watching the ten o'clock news. His dark face looks troubled. Renee was about to reach for her son, wrap him up in a cuddly hug that he would still consent to on occasion, when the phone rang. It is her sister in Chicago who was going through a bad divorce and often called late at night. "I've got to take this," Renee said. She gave her son's cheek a quick pat and turned her attention to her distressed sister. Jeremy muttered "good night" and headed toward the stairs.

The next morning Jeremy was not up by the time she was putting breakfast on the table. She went to knock on his bedroom door. No answer. The room was dark. The bed still made. A sixth sense drove her towards the closet door. Jeremy's body hung from the wooden rod, a belt around his neck.

On his desk she found a note, "Sorry to disappoint you. J."

"When Renee and her husband Greg came to see me," Dr. Eger writes, "he'd been dead for only a few weeks. The loss was so fresh they weren't grieving yet, they were in shock. During those early visits Renee sat and sobbed, 'I want go back, just go back.'"

Over the course of the next year Renee and Greg came to see me less and less. But for the first time Greg spoke with urgency. He and Renee had attended a high school graduation party for their friends' son. It was incredibly painful to be there, but at one point Greg realized he was having a good time.

Greg turned to Renee in her elegant blue dress and was struck by how clearly he could see Jeremy in the slope of her cheeks, the shape of her mouth. He felt swept away by love for Renee and love for their son.

He asked Renee to dance; she refused and left him alone at the table. Greg cried as he recounted this in therapy. “I’m losing you too,” he said to his wife.

“How dare you,” Renee retorted. “Jeremy doesn’t get to dance, why should you?”

I said, “Who’s dead Renee? Jeremy or you?”

[Dr. Eger] looked at Renee, “Renee—I want you to try something: put a picture of Jeremy in the living room. And set aside fifteen minutes every day to sit with him. You can touch his face, talk to him, give him a kiss then go about your day.”

“I’m so scared of abandoning him *again*.”

“He didn’t kill himself because of you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“For reasons none of us will ever know Jeremy choose to end his life. You don’t get to choose *for* him.”

“I don’t know how to live with that.”

“Acceptance isn’t going to happen overnight. But you get to choose a way forward. You get to realize that living a life is the best way to honor him.”

Last year Dr. Eger received a Christmas card from Renee and Greg. They were standing by the Christmas tree with their daughter, a beautiful girl in a red dress. Greg embraces his daughter with one arm, his wife in the other. Over Renee’s shoulder a picture of Jeremy sits on the mantle. It’s his last school picture, he wears a blue shirt, a smile larger than life. He isn’t a void in the family. He is present, always with them.

As excruciating as it was, in the face of death, this family chose life.

So did the remarkable Amy Krause Rosenthal who wrote to the world: “I have been married to the most extraordinary man for twenty-six years. I was planning on at least another twenty-six together.

Want to hear a sick joke? A husband and wife walk into an emergency room in the late evening on September 5th, 2015. A few hours later, the doctor clarifies that the unusual pain the wife is feeling on her right side isn’t the no-biggie appendicitis that they suspected but rather ovarian cancer. The day they learn what had been festering is also the day they had officially kicked off their empty nesting. The youngest of three children had just left for college.

So many plans instantly went poof.

My husband Jason is an easy man to fall in love with. First the basics: he is 5’10”, 160 lbs. with salt and pepper hair and hazel eyes. He can cook and there is no sweeter joy than seeing him walk in, plop the grocery bag down on the counter and woo me with olives and yummy cheese he has procured before he gets to work on the evening meal. Jason loves listening to live music. That’s our favorite thing to do together.

Here’s the kind of man Jason is: He showed up at our first pregnancy ultrasound with flowers.

So why am I writing this? I am hoping that the right person reads this, finds Jason and another love story begins. I will even leave this intentional empty space below as a way of giving you two the fresh start you deserve.

With all my love,

Amy

So, clearly, people are capable of great, selfless actions. We are capable of overcoming hostility. We can resolve to free ourselves from the traps too often of our own making.

On this extremely holy day we can resolve not to live with demons or guilt. You can realize that you don't have to wake up and dread the day.

Though we cannot control what happens, we can control how we respond to what happens.

Rosh Hashanah wisdom:

You don't have to feel trapped in pattern ways, in relationships, in justifications.

You can *choose* to make life more joyous. You can live life more generously, thus making life more palatable for others. You can say to those who used to count on you, *Hineni*, I am here, once again you can count on me.

Even though we can never predict the length of our days, we can pick the depth of our days.

We can count our blessings.

We can enlarge our blessings.

Be a blessing!

Even now, particularly now.

You can choose life.