

What Choice do We Have?
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Nitzavim Torah Intro 5779

Deuteronomy 30:19

הַעֲדִיתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה
וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָּ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אֶתְּהָ וּזְרַעְךָ:

“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.”

The choice presented by our most prestigious prophet, Moses, in this morning’s Torah Reading, feels obvious. Who would choose death and curse over life and blessing? And if there is no real choice here, why are we even asked the question? I wonder: in the real world, how do we know which choices bring life and which bring death? Which path will bring blessing and which path will bring curse? Not every choice we face is a life-or-death proposition. But make no mistake: some big questions facing us, and our leaders, at this very moment, are exactly that: a matter of life and death.

When it comes to the fate of our planet and our ecosystem, the Torah reading this morning seems downright prescient.

I accept that climate change is real, because there is far too much scientific evidence to deny it. The choice is ours to decide how to respond to that reality. Journalist Charles Mann claims there are two competing visions for how to respond to climate change. He describes a decades-long debate between these two divergent approaches in his new book entitled: *The Wizard and the Prophet: Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions to Shape Tomorrow's World*, in which he details how two scientists spawned movements that continue to affect our world. As a kind of shorthand, he calls one movement “The Wizard” and the other, “The Prophet.”

The Wizard believes in the power of human potential. This school of thought is optimistic about our ability to devise a solution to catastrophic climate change. With our ever more rapid and dramatic advances in science and technology, the Wizard envisions that we will think our way out of our problems. Just as the Agricultural Revolution and Industrial Revolution allowed humanity to grow and enhance our standard of living, there is a revolution around the corner waiting to change the calculus of how many people can survive and thrive on our planet. The Wizard believes in

technologies like GMOs--the genetically modified organisms that dramatically expanded our food supply only a few decades ago. The Wizard believes the average person here today doesn't need to change his or her behavior in order to secure a safe and prosperous future for ourselves and our planet, but rather that we should all double down on human ingenuity.

In contrast, the Prophet believes that we need to change. This school of thought warns that the road we've been traveling on is leading to a dead end, and that every person on the planet needs to make hard choices in order to ensure a brighter future. That composting needs to be available in every county in our country, that we need to eat, travel, dress, shop, entertain, play, and furnish our homes in a more sustainable manner. The Prophet believes that the revolution we're waiting for is an ecological revolution fueled by human willpower, that will ensure everyone can live sustainably, supported by the power of the sun, and by thoroughly changing the way we consume so that our perpetual waste doesn't continue to pollute our planet.

I must admit: the Wizarding argument, untempered by environmental stewardship, strikes me as reckless and selfish, in part because every well-intentioned and, indeed, helpful invention of the Wizard has also led to new and unexpected problems. GMO's

have led to greater nitrogen pollution, and have increased income inequality by concentrating control of agriculture and food production and distribution in the hands of a few large firms. The Wizard's path also appears to be so easy, it's seductive: it allows us to continue to believe our actions have no consequences because someone smarter and more capable will just come along to solve them.

It also--I must admit--doesn't feel Jewish. Today's reading begins by stating that we are **all** standing here, given this choice between life and death, blessing and curse. That **everyone** has a part to play in creating a world that we can proudly hand to our children. A world where they will have safe water to drink and clean air to breathe. Where the next generation won't ask us why we were so selfish that we compromised their world.

To follow in the footsteps of the Prophet requires **us** to change. We need to **choose** to invest in renewable energies, support more sustainable food options, and drive more eco-friendly vehicles or use mass transportation. We need to waste less and conserve more, which can be painful. WRT continues to be on the vanguard of that work: from composting thousands of pounds of food scraps and biodegradable utensils every year, to installing more solar panels on

our roof this past summer, to the LEED certified sanctuary we are praying in today.

Yet there is always more to do, more ways that we can **choose** a life where environmental stewardship is as much an integrated approach to our individual lives as it is a value of this synagogue community. If you'd like to know more about composting at home, or other decisions that can set you on the path of the Prophet, any one of us on the bimah, be thrilled to share with you how to get started by connecting you to congregants who are already making these life-changing choices. .

I pray that as we enter 5779 and beyond, we will all choose life and blessing together.