

SERMON: CHAI SOCIETY SHABBAT 5781

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WHY WE CHAI

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Many ubiquitous Jewish practices have obscure origins. Take, for instance, the eating of *hamantaschen* on Purim, a custom nowhere discussed in the Torah, Talmud, or even the Book of Esther.

Rather, it seems that *hamantaschen*'s association with Purim comes by way of a pun—and not a particularly good one at that—from the Medieval German cookies known as *mohn-taschen*, or poppy-pockets — *mohn*, poppyseed, and, *taschen*, pockets— which, I guess, kind of sounds like *Haman-taschen*, which, I guess, kind of sounds like it comes from the wicked *Haman*, or Haman.

Or take the custom of reciting your loved ones' names on *yahrzeit* —the so-called “Kaddish list.” Not only is this custom nowhere found in the classical literature, it even seems to have provoked the consternation of a great many Rabbis, some of whom, around the 10th Century, tried to outlaw communities from reading the names of their dead. These Rabbis likened the practice to consulting the spirits of the dead, which the Torah directly outlaws as idolatry—

in this week's Torah portion, as a matter of fact.¹ Only after much stern letter-writing, most of which went totally ignored, did the opposing Rabbis finally relent, conceding that naming our loved ones before *Kaddish* had become so popular and widespread that it was no longer a fringe custom but rather a mainstream Jewish practice. And so it remains, a thousand years later.

And here's one more for us to consider on this *Chai Society* Shabbat, which is the wearing of a *chai* medallion. The word *chai* means "living" or "alive" (technically, not "life," although that's how it's usually translated; "life" in Hebrew is the plural form, *Chayim*). On *Chai Society Shabbat*, WRT recognizes congregants who have affiliated with WRT for eighteen years or more and who are, despite it all, still very much alive—18 being the numerical value of the Hebrew word *chai*, comprised of the letters *Chet* (the 8th letter in the aleph-bet) and *Yod* (the 10th letter in the aleph-bet).

And this, as you well may know, is why Jews tend to give monetary gifts in denominations of eighteen. But have you ever considered the custom of wearing a *chai* as a piece of jewelry? Wearing a *chai* necklace is as Jewish as gefilte fish and rugelach (both of which also have obscure origins). The prominent display of a *chai* around the neck has also become something of a kind of pop-culture shorthand for "overtly Jewish," especially in Hollywood, where the

¹ Lev. 19:31:

larger the medallion, the more shiny the gold (always gold), the more unbuttoned the lapel, and the more hirsute the torso of the wearer, the better, or so it seems.

Canadian rapper Drake has shown off his Jewish pride by wearing a prominent *chai* during publicity shoots. It has even spread beyond the Jewish People to include some celebrity *chai*-wearers who adopted the practice, perhaps, out of an emotional affinity for Judaism, or for good luck, or as a *chutzpahdik* fashion statement. These include late-period Elvis Presley, who never met a piece of bling he didn't like, and baseball Hall-of-Famer Rod Carew, who had a Jewish wife and kids but who never converted to Judaism himself.

In any case, nowhere in Torah, Talmud, or Midrash do we find any mention of wearing a *chai*. The *Forward's* resident linguistics columnist posits that wearing a *chai* as an amulet around the neck probably originated in the second half of the 20th century², out of a belief that the word *chai* confers upon the wearer some life-saving or protective benefit — that is to say, it's a superstition.

Even the custom of venerating the word *chai* may be as recent as the 18th century, which, in Jewish-historical terms, is very recent, indeed.

² "Exploring *Chai* Culture," by Philologos. *Forward* (online edition), November 11, 2012. <https://forward.com/culture/165445/exploring-chai-culture/>

There's a reason, however, that our tradition lionizes certain words and phrases, among them, *chai*, “*shalom*,” and “*Shema Yisrael*,” as well as certain non-verbal symbols and images, like the *Magen David* (Star of David), the *menorah*, and even the *hamsa* which is a good-luck charm whose origins may go all the way back to ancient Mesopotamia. These utterances and images function as powerful reminders of what our religious tradition values: whether the light of sacred service in the ancient temple (the *menorah*), or the value of simply being alive (the word *chai*).

As it turns out, the fascination with *chai* may originate in a verse from this week's Torah portion, *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*. That verse, Leviticus chapter 18, verse 5, says:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְחַי
בָּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which a person shall live [Heb., “*va-chai bahem*”]. *I am Adonai*.

The straightforward, idiomatic meaning of these words seems clear enough: You should “live by” the laws of God, where the words “live by” simply mean “to follow” or “observe.”

But the Rabbis rarely stuck to straightforward, idiomatic readings of anything, and it is the specific use of the word *chai*, as in *va-chai ba-hem*, that a person should *live by* the rules of the Torah, that the Babylonian Talmud expounds as signifying that the laws of the Torah are specifically for the purpose of *living*, and not dying.³

The 18th Century Moroccan Rabbi fittingly known as the “Or Ha-Chayim,” meaning “The Light of Life,” after his popular commentary on the Torah, explains that the point of including the words “*va-chai bahem*,” “and live by them,” is that “if a Jew is forced to violate one of God’s commandments, better to violate such a commandment than to accept martyrdom.”⁴

With very few exceptions, it is always preferable for a Jew to save a life (his, hers, or someone else’s) than to accept death. Judaism does not encourage us to become martyrs for our faith—a meaningful contrast to Christianity and Islam, both of which have prominent pro-martyrdom themes and sects running throughout their tradition and history. Consider Jesus, the ultimate martyr for his faith, in one way of looking at things, and the central role that martyrdom plays in Christian art, iconography, literature, and belief and you will detect a stark contrast with Judaism, where, in general, martyrdom is frowned upon. The Talmud goes on to say

³ *Sanhedrin* 74.

⁴ https://www.sefaria.org/Or_HaChaim_on_Leviticus.18.5?lang=bi

that a person may violate any and all of the *mitzvot* in order to save life, with the exception of murder, sexual crimes, and idolatry. In general, Judaism prefers its faithful to live by their faith, not to die by it—*va-chai bahem*.

Further, Judaism insists that our obligation to *life* almost always exceeds our obligation to *law*. Take, for instance, our admonition not to fast on Yom Kippur if doing so may jeopardize one's health. And yet, every year, people unwisely choose to fast, even at great personal risk. I assure you that *Halakha*, Jewish law, would prefer you full but alive to hungry but dead.

Judaism is a tradition of life and its life-affirming commandments are for the living. Judaism teaches that every day we are alive is a day to do *mitzvot*, a day to do a little good, a day to leave the world a little bit better. Every day, that is, is an exercise in affirming and sustaining life.

This year of pandemic living, this turbulent year of injustice and unrest, has, for me, underscored the relevancy of our verse, “*va-chai bahem*,” which conveys Judaism's insistence on the preciousness of life and the priority of the Jewish obligation to safeguard it.

This is why, from a Jewish perspective, the threefold guilty verdict in the trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd strikes me as so significant.

Above all, this verdict affirmed what Judaism has been saying all along: that each life carries intrinsic, infinite worth; that each life is immeasurably precious in the eyes of God. This same tradition proclaims in the Talmud that one who snuffs out the life of another has murdered a world entire, and that one who saves one life has saved the world entire.⁵

When we affirm, as the Torah does in its very first chapter, that humankind is made in the Divine image,⁶ it means that we are committed to the precept that Black lives matter as much as everyone else's lives.

When we affirm that humankind is made in the divine image, it follows that to destroy the life of one is to desecrate the God of all. It also follows that God's image on earth can never be fully realized, our human potential never fulfilled, our uniquely American sins, wounds, and traumas originating in Black slavery never remedied, never healed, until we come to experience the justice that was rendered on Tuesday as the ordinary course of

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 37a.

⁶ Genesis 1:27.

events in a world that puts *chai* at the center, in a world that venerates life, which urges every human being born to live, to thrive—not merely to exist but to *live*; to elevate the *act* of living to an *art*; to infuse life with joy and purpose and transformative power.

Judaism does not espouse a *laissez-faire* attitude about matters of life and death.

Judaism does not think that one Black man suffocated beneath the knee, and far too many other Black men and women, boys and girls, dead at the hands of law enforcement, is just a problem for Black people or communities of color. Justice denied one is justice deprived all. One life murdered is a world destroyed.

Judaism does not consider two million dead to Covid, more than half a million of them our fellow citizens, is an acceptable tradeoff for stubbornly insisting on “business as usual.” These are extraordinary times that demand an extraordinary commitment to *chai*.

Judaism would also admonish us that it did not have to be this way; that it still *does not* have to be this way, with the dead and the dying piling up even as the vaccine stockpile gets used. With still too many fellow citizens dying day by day in mass shootings even as

our elected officials sit on their hands. With still too many people who have reason to fear law enforcement more than to revere it, conditioned by experience to believe that the firearm intended to protect lives will instead rob them of theirs. With still too many of these same people, many of them from communities of color, among the most likely to get sick, and suffer, and die, as the pandemic continues to rage.

Judaism would, invite us, in every instance, to take the words *va-chai bahem* as if our lives depended on them, because they do.

That beautiful *chai* around your neck may show off your Jewish pride, but it won't save your life or anyone else's. If we really want to save lives, sustain lives, protect lives, there are things we *can* do right here and now:

- continue to follow public health guidelines;
- fight for sensible legislation to curb mass gun violence;
- stand up to make sure that the Chauvin verdict will not be the only one of its kind;
- remember that this verdict provides accountability for a single crime, not justice for a battered population; much less a solution for a broken system;

- give *tzedakah*, give food, give blood, give facts, give life-sustaining assistance to support the needy whose lives have become even more perilous during the pandemic;
- and please put the health and safety of others—particularly the nearly four out of five of your fellow citizens who are still unvaccinated—at the forefront of every consideration.

We may understandably give thanks to God for the so-called “gift” of life. But every day we are alive, the responsibility to preserve, prolong, and promote what life is in our hands.

As is written: “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”⁷

Life is not only a gift from God. Life is a *choice* that God charges us to keep choosing, steadfastly and unceasingly, for ourselves, for every other human being made in the divine image...

...this day, and every day. *Amen.*

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19.