

Choose “We”

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Something was wrong with Gus.

The 700-lb polar bear at the Central Park Zoo had begun to spend most of his waking hours “swimming an endless series of short laps,” the equivalent of pacing back and forth in his cage. He had all the fish he could want, and his cage was set up to simulate his natural habitat, but clearly, all was not well. The zookeepers brought in an expert, animal behaviorist Tim Desmond, who concluded that Gus was - stressed out.

Columbia University professor Sheena Iyengar explains that zoo animals experience perpetual anxiety, because they don’t actually know that they are safe. They can smell their predators in the next cage over, they are unable to migrate as the seasons change, and even though they receive food regularly, day in and day out, there is no real guarantee that it will continue to miraculously appear. They are living in perpetual fight-or-flight mode, with nowhere to fly and nothing to fight.

Desmond’s conclusion to Gus’s anxiety? He “needs more challenges. Gus wants to feel as if he still has the ability to choose where he spends his time and how - he needs to reassume control of his own destiny.”¹ This is true of people, as well.

The Whitehall Studies explored the health of employees of varying ages, pay grades and job environments over time. The researchers determined that, “the less control people had over their work, the higher their blood pressure during work hours...what affected people most in these studies wasn’t the actual level of control people had in their jobs, but the amount of control they perceived themselves as having.”² Agency is not just about having choices, it is about feeling empowered to make choices.

This past week as Hurricane Florence crept closer and closer, changing trajectory over and over,

¹ “The Art of Choosing,” by Sheena Iyengar, p. 13.

² “The Art of Choosing,” by Sheena Iyengar, p. 15.

slowing down and slowing down... and slowing down, I began to feel a bit like Gus the polar bear; pacing back and forth between Yom Kippur preparations and weather reports - "Category 4...3...2. Not going to hit Charlotte, barely going to hit Charlotte, 5-9 inches of rain in Charlotte," going from contingency planning meetings to responding to texts from concerned family and friends - "Yes, I have water. No I don't need you to come get me. Yes, I did find gas." Impending hurricanes have a great way of reminding us just how little control we actually have.

To a certain extent, we are all polar bears pacing back and forth in the metaphorical cages we have built for ourselves. But unlike Gus, we do not live in actual cages.

As Professor Iyengar notes, we "have the ability to create choice by altering our interpretations of the world - a small change in our actions, such as speaking or thinking in a way that highlights our agency, can have a big effect on our mental and physical state." However, once we recognize our agency, we must take another set of challenges into account. When we choose, are we choosing for ourselves? Or are we choosing with others in mind?

In Nitzavim, the torah portion Caleb, Brooke, Rebecca, Ben and Ms. Montoni just chanted beautifully, we read: "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. *Uvacharta bachayim* - Choose life - if you and your offspring would live . . ." ³

Rabbi Eliezer Davidovits asks the obvious question: What kind of choice is that? Wouldn't most everyone prefer life to death, blessing over curse? Here is Rabbi Davidovitz's insight: There are two ways to "choose life."

The first way is the "me" way. If we want, we can choose to think of ourselves first. We can worry about our needs and our desires and our wishes, and only later consider the needs, desires, and wishes of others. But there is another way to "choose life," another way to live our lives. This is the "we" way. Before we act, before we decide, before we speak, we can choose to think about how our actions, decisions, and words will affect others. We can think about how our behavior will affect future generations, including our own children and grandchildren. ⁴

In her book "The Art of Choosing," Professor Iyengar notes that most societies in the world fall into one of two categories: individualist or collectivist.

American society falls into the "individualist" category: we are taught, in this country, to be "motivated by [our] own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts [we] have established with

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁴ "Nitzavim: Life and Death" Davar Achar, by Rabbi Josh D. Zweiback <https://reformjudaism.org/nitzavim-mitzvah-choosing>

others.”⁵ If I want to move up in the world, if I want to find true success, I must make the choice that is best for me, over and above what might be best for the people around me. America promotes the “me” mentality.

On the other hand, most religious traditions, especially Judaism, promote a “we” mentality. In contrast to individualist societies, collectivist societies “see themselves primarily in terms of the groups to which they belong,” and “are willing to give priority to the goals of those collectives over their own personal goals.”⁶ Jewish text teaches us: “*kol yisrael aravim zeh lazeh* - all of Israel is responsible for each other.”⁷

We have very little control over the things that affect us.

The moment in which you meet your *besmert*, the speed at which cancer spreads through a body, the way in which the person next to you on Providence Road is driving his car, the danger level of an impending storm....

When we focus solely on our lack of control, we run the risk of building ourselves cages of despair and anxiety.

But when we instead focus on that which we can control: our response, our attitude, our next step... when we exercise our agency, we are empowered to live actively rather than passively, to choose life, rather than to have life choose us. But we must take that charge one step further, because **we are all “aravim zeh lazeh” – we are all responsible for each other. And so we must do more than choose life - We must choose “we,” and not just “me.”**

There is much to be said about the importance of donning one’s own oxygen mask first, and there is a fine line between caring for our needs and caring for the needs of others. Two years ago I spoke about what it means to forgive ourselves, to take care of ourselves. I believe deeply that we cannot care for others unless we are healthy ourselves.

But I worry sometimes that the power of the collective is being drowned out by the desires of the individual. I worry that sometimes, we are letting “me” outweigh “we.” We are failing to see the ways in which the individual choices we make, over and above the needs of the collective, can be dangerous not only for others, but in fact for ourselves as well.

Perhaps you’ve heard the midrash of the man in a boat who begins to drill a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protest: “Sir, what exactly do you think you’re doing?”

⁵ “The Art of Choosing,” p. 31.

⁶ “The Art of Choosing,” p. 32.

⁷ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 27b

“What concern is it to you?” He responds. “I am making a hole under my seat, not yours.”

They reply, “That may be so, but when the water enters and the boat sinks, we’re all going down together!”⁸

It is one thing to put on your own oxygen mask first. It is quite another to act on your own interests in a way that does damage to the collective. We must work to choose with “we” in mind, And act in ways that acknowledge our collective responsibility. Who do you see as being in your boat? Who’s destiny is bound up with yours?⁹

Let’s start small: Our families - both biological and chosen - are on board. The choices we make - about which job we take, and where we live, and how we choose to spend our days - those choices affect our partners, our children, our parents, and our friends.

But we interact with additional people every day - and so our neighbors are on board, too. When we choose to build fences or take down trees or add a second story on the house, those changes affect more than just our property.

Our Temple Beth El community is on board. When people serve on committees, or greet people as they walk into the sanctuary on Friday nights, or write a note to a fellow congregant whose loved one has just died, or make sacred gifts, our contributions affect the way our fellow congregants here at TBE feel supported and welcomed.

And the concentric circles keep growing: Our kid’s school communities, the people we work with, the other voters in our precincts - we are all on board together. Our actions ripple outward, and the choices we make, every single day, affect those around us, regardless of whether we want them to, or not.

We see this best in moments of tragedy and disaster: in the choice to close Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools in order to house some of the over one million folks who were evacuated from their homes along the Carolina coast.

We see this in the willingness of Covenant Presbyterian and Myers Park Presbyterian AND Forest Hills Church to be on call to host us for Yom Kippur this year. These churches had all the reasons to choose “me” over “we” - to be willing to host 1200 human beings, at the last minute is an astronomical undertaking, a massive logistical commitment. And it’s not like they don’t have their

⁸ Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Leviticus Rabbah 4:6

⁹ Inspired by activist Lilla Watson’s statement: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

own full calendars. But they all said 'yes - if it comes to it, please use our space. You are welcome and it would be our honor.' And I am confident we would do the same.

We know how well we come together in crisis - I have seen it over and over again. I wonder, however, what it would look like for us to take each other into account when the waters are calm, when there is no hurricane looming, when we are not in imminent danger.

When we choose "we," all people feel responsible for all children. From sharing carpool responsibilities, to showing up for friend's dance recitals, to checking all of the ingredients on the snack packet, even if your kid doesn't have any allergies, choosing "we" means all children are ours, not "theirs."

When we choose "we," people know that their presence and absence matters. Whether it's checking in on the regular who didn't show up for her usual coffee this morning, or texting the guy who usually comes to the J to swim every day at 2pm, or calling the couple that almost always sits in the second to last row, aisle side, every Friday evening, choosing "we" means every person feels seen.

When we choose "we," we are all accountable. Not only do we make healthy eating choices and actually show up for 6am yoga, we also ensure that every shiva minyan is full whether we knew the person or their family - or not. Choosing "we" invites everyone to be everyone else's accountability partner.

When we choose "we," humanity protects the planet. In a "we" world, Gus and his fellow polar bears wouldn't have to worry about melting ice caps and rising sea levels. Choosing "we" means caring for the whole world, not just our piece of it.

Before we are told to choose life or death, blessing or curse, we are told to assemble: "*Atem nitzavim hayom, kulchem* - you stand here this day, all of you - men, women, children. Members of the tribe and those who have sojourned with you. Tribal leaders and those who chop wood." We are not instructed to choose life until we are all there to hear God's words. Because choosing life is about choosing not just "me," but "we."

It is only together that we can truly choose life.

As we move into this new year, *Anachnu nitzavim hayom* - we stand today. May we do so together, and may we choose "we" - *uvacharta bachayyim*, may we choose life.