

Yom Kippur 5784
Drash by Sherri Billimoria

The sum total of my philosophical education comes from the half-hour tv sitcom, *The Good Place*, which asks this question: what does it mean to lead an ethical life? What accounting of right and wrong is happening? Beyond the plot, or most of the jokes, one question has stuck with me— what do we owe to each other? This question is a reference to the philosopher T M Scanlon, who I will be frank— I have not read. But I find that all quandaries and disagreements on both macro and micro scales are, in some way, related to this question: how should we think about masking in public places? How late is too late to play the piano in an apartment building? What should our governments fund? Can I ghost someone after a mediocre date? What do we owe, and to whom?

And so I bring this frame to most things I read, and it is not a surprise to have seen it in today's parsha, Nitzavim.

Nitzavim includes a number of sexy oft-quoted lines – Moses is about to die, and it's his last big speech, reiterating the covenant. But this time, the scope of the people named in this covenant is shockingly inclusive – *you are standing here today, your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer— to enter into the covenant of your God.*

Moses goes on to say that this covenant is being made *with those standing here with us today ... and with those who are not here with us.*" This statement is surprising: even those *who are not here* are

implicated in this covenant. “The stranger within your camp” is sometimes also translated as “your convert” – and as someone who is a Jew by choice, these two details are surprising, even if I don’t love the frame of “stranger within our camp”. Like many of us, and all the more so since I did not grow up with Torah – I struggle to see myself in these texts, to think that I am present or implicated in Torah in any real way. And here, it’s explicit. Those who are *not* here with us today, those of us who did not grow up Jewish– we are also included in this covenant.

It does not feel a stretch, then, to connect a covenant being made with those who are not here today with the reality of climate change and crisis. The other side of that inclusion is responsibility.

It actually doesn’t matter whether we agreed to it or not, our lives are deeply impacted by the choices made decades and centuries before us – and our choices as a society today do materially and fundamentally change the lives of the generations to come. As Rabbi Miriam said last night – there is no point at which we can give up.

The parsha famously goes on, to talk about *the blessing and curse set before you today*, and imploring all standing before God to “*choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.*” What does it mean to choose life in the face of climate crisis? What do we owe our offspring, and what did our ancestors owe us? Who chose the blessing, and who chose the curse?

There’s a real comfort to the black-and-white framing here – we’ve got a blessing, and a curse, and it seems like you should really choose the blessing. And – how quaint, this idea that there’s a clear right

and wrong and you should just choose right. Moses says, *surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.* “surely, it’s not too baaaaaffling?!” How absolutely condescending, especially when we know it IS baffling. Yom Kippur asks us to atone for our sins, and we take account. “Surely” there *are* the choices from the past year that give us a sinking feeling in the stomach, that we are not proud of and would not do again, and that we want to make right. And other choices that are much stickier, where the answer to “what do we owe to each other” is not clear-cut. How do I know when I chose the blessing, and when I chose the curse?

In my favorite scene in the tv show Fleabag, Phoebe Waller Bridge is – doing confession? Giving confession? I do not know my Christian terminology – but anyway, she’s in the confession booth in a church – and while the context is far from Yom Kippur, the sentiment here resonates so deeply with me. She says *"I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to tell them.*

"I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong, and I know that's why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they'll get out of it, and even though I don't believe your bullshit, and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I'm still scared. Why am I still scared?"

Tell me, she seems to be saying, tell me what's the blessing and the curse. Tell me what I owe other people. I too crave a strange calculus, that will divvy out exactly which actions I am allowed to do while knowing that I am choosing the blessing and maintaining the moral high ground. Can I justify that I not-so-secretly do love red meat, carbon impacts and animal welfare be damned, because I work in climate change and theoretically that has had real impact in the world? Can I ignore the number of flights I take in a year because I think really hard about buying carbon offsets each time? Do I get some credit in the universe because I mostly don't buy from Amazon anymore? Part of the high holidays is taking account – and I find this accounting of what is and is not my duty – to be the toughest of all. When “am I being too hard on myself”, and when should I push myself to do more? I *am* baffled.

And I'm also not interested in a life that places pleasure at odds with integrity – if we really, truly believed that our individual actions alone would stop climate change, it becomes clear that it's a trap. Would we never drink anything other than water, because of the carbon footprint? Would we never get in a car again? We know this is a nonsense approach, and not just because it's impractical – “carbon footprint” became a popular concept because *British Petroleum* popularized it! We cannot individual-action ourselves into a new universe, no matter how much corporations would like to convince us that we can. As Rabbi Miriam said last night – we *have to* move past personal responsibility and personal shame. It's clear that our existence as human beings has impact, in all the beautiful ways and also in real extractive ways. This is inescapable. I don't believe that we shouldn't

exist; therefore I believe that we have to grapple with questions where the answers don't feel satisfying, and we have to take action anyway.

I work on climate change and energy policy, and I spend much of my time working directly with utilities, deep in the weeds of trying to shift the system away from fossil fuels, and the infrastructure that supports them. I know it might feel easier, or at least more satisfying, to simply write off utilities and regulators— and I do believe there is good reason to demand change, and to be angry. And, the reality of the changes that climate change demands are clear-cut on the macro level— and mind-boggling complicated and unknown on the detailed level. It's not choosing the curse to sit in complexity, to feel sure of your convictions and also uncertain of the best path to get there.

So what are we supposed to do? If we take for granted that the answer is *not* to simply throw up our hands and turn away from what's scary – how, then, do we get out of a stuck place, how do we hold ourselves and others accountable— and also with gentleness?

The parsha does not make it clear, but it does open a little bit of a window.

After reminding us how easy it should be to choose between the blessing and the curse comes the line I was most familiar with before writing this. *It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us*

and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

Many, many people have written reams about this passage, in more detailed and nuanced ways than I will today; this line, which we sang last night as we took the Torahs out of the ark, is the reason we read this passage on Yom Kippur. But with my limited Torah study experience, here’s what I think: I think it’s funny that these lines follow the description of the blessing and curse being set out, which does feel like it is being given from the heavens. Many teachings and stories, most famously a story involving an oven, affirm that one way to read this line is that it is up to *us*, not just the words in Torah, to determine what is halacha and what is not; what we should do and what we should not do. Capital punishment is rampant in the Torah; we also know that the Rabbis essentially wrote capital punishment out of existence. *We* can decide. We’re being given a vote of confidence – the thing is very near to you; you have the tools you need.

I genuinely think this is a lovely, poetic sentiment – and it’s also... obvious, in the context of my life. I don’t think that the Torah alone isn’t better at discerning right and wrong than my own judgment and what I feel in my own body, and I imagine most of us in this room don’t, either. The image of it being in my mouth and in my heart doesn’t actually help me to discern what is the blessing and what is the curse. And maybe that’s not the bit to hold onto most closely – maybe what we can learn from this parsha, and from the centuries of teaching about it, is that *we get to change our minds*, individually and as a society. We get to interpret and reinterpret Torah; we get to say, yes, those choices, those

words, those fuels might have served us in the past, and they don't anymore. We can choose something else.

As I reflect on this year, the questions I ask myself are in many ways the same as last year, and the year before. But I also want to give myself space to examine the questions gently, to turn it again, now, within today's context. If the thing is very close to me, then it is also grounded in this present moment – and different from what came before.

I don't have a neat and tidy conclusion, but– that messiness, these questions *are* my conclusion. May you have the space to be baffled, to contemplate what your own blessings and curses are, what you owe and are owed – and may you have the space to change your mind. Gmar chatimah tovah, may you be sealed in the book of life.