

Yom Kippur 5776
In Active Pursuit
Rabbi Elaine Zecher

This summer the Reform movement joined the NAACP in its Journey for Justice march from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC to promote voting rights and justice. Each day, Reform rabbis from across the country joined the march.

I arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina on a sweltering summer day and caught up with the many people who had already walked that day's 20 or so miles. People of all skin tones, sizes, ages, and dress stood together at a rally before the state capital.

Cornell Brooks, the head of the NAACP and a Boston University seminary graduate, talked about carrying two important symbols in this many mile march:

One was the American flag, The other was the Torah scroll provided by the Reform movement. Each day, the Torah was passed through the arms of any one of the marchers who wanted to hold it.

Cornell Brooks said that he had come to realize that however one holds the Torah, it rests across or near the heart.

Over a half century ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched in Selma, Alabama with Martin Luther King. He said he was praying with his feet. This walk, with the communal embrace of the Torah, allowed everyone to bring the words of the sacred text alive with their arms, their hearts, and their feet.

Standing amidst that crowd, a crowd of upstanders, not bystanders, I felt intensely proud to be Jewish.

The next day, we walked forward in two lines, meeting many people. One of my walking partners commented how wonderful it was to have so many Jews participating. She also had never thought she would meet this many rabbis. She paused, smiled, and then added “who are so much fun!” Walking together in the hot sun and drenching rain, the presence of the Reform Jewish community made her feel she wasn’t alone in the cause. But then she said something that took my breath away. The essence of which was: “What does it feel like to be the chosen people?”

How I responded mattered greatly.

My internal reaction was defensive. Chosen and chosenness are loaded words. We recoil at the thought that these words could be interpreted as superior.

Should I say we aren’t really chosen? But, the Torah, the very symbol our fellow walkers had already embraced in their arms says so.

“...Of all the peoples on earth the Eternal God chose you to be his treasured people,” says Moses in Deuteronomy. (7:6)

The prophets concur. The liturgy emphasizes it.

I considered reasoning it away by citing the creation story that tells us how everyone is made in the image of God? I could teach her how our new machzor has added a phrase in *Oseh Shalom*, lifting up the Reform ideal of being a part of, not apart from others by asking for peace, *al kol yoshvei tevel*, for all who

dwell on earth and not just on the people Israel. Like a parent with more than one child, God has the capacity to love us all.

Or should I just admit we are chosen because of the particular nature of Judaism?

But then I thought, maybe I could convince her that it was part of the Jewish people's survival strategy to endure unending challenges in unwelcomed lands.

I was still pausing, trying to look pensive, not defensive, but. I didn't want to lose the moment, so I said, "I chose to be here walking with you!" And then we hugged.

In that moment, I felt called by her humanity connecting to mine. I felt chosen by what our tradition teaches: justice-*tzedek* and compassion-*chesed*. **Chosenness is a recognition that we each have a mission, a sacred purpose for our existence, guided, secured, and brought together by Judaism that connects us on the most human level to another.**

It is the ultimate act of holiness. The embodiment of sacred living: You shall be holy for I, the Eternal, am holy. To be chosen is to be holy. **Let's refocus our chosenness as a point of Jewish pride, responsibility, and inspiration to live our lives with purpose.**

This includes anyone and everyone who sees him or herself part of the Jewish orbit.

Chosenness, in this way, is woven through the story of our people. Judaism provides a particular path on which to make our way in the world founded on Torah, enriched by ritual, and

exemplified in the pursuit of a moral and ethical life. To be sure, there are other traditions that lead their followers toward repair and redemption. We have no monopoly. We aren't that special. But there is something special our tradition offers us.

Abraham, the very first Jew, showed a special kind of courage. He started out in Ur, he traveled with his father up to Haran, and then tragedy struck, his father died. Stranded there with his wife, Sarai, and nephew, Lot, he could have stayed. Some power in the universe, some expression of the divine urged him on. *Lech Lecha! You set out to this land that I will show you and there your name will become great and you will be a blessing.* It is in that moment that the idea of chosenness is born. He heard the call. He was pulled toward something larger than himself.

That's not just gumption, that's chutzpah. (The definition of chutzpah is not exemplified by the story of the guy who kills his parents and then pleads to the judge for mercy because now he is an orphan nor is it a justification to be rude.) In the most positive sense, chutzpah is a willingness to show, in the words of Heschel, "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."¹ It takes bravery, courage, and purpose. Chutzpah demands examining the world as it is and wanting to make it better with justice, responsibility, and compassion. It is about righteous indignation. Chutzpah blossoms when we realize Judaism provides us with the power to use our own voices for justice and kindness. It is not a passive act. We are not chosen because we are lucky, like winning the lottery. It is a stepping up. That is what chosenness is all about.

¹ This is the name of the book of essays by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the words he used in 1963 to demand President Kennedy declare a state of moral emergency regarding the situation facing African Americans.

Rabbi Edward Feinstein, author of The Chutzpah Imperative, has written: “The reward of a Jewish life is walking the world with a profound faith that you matter, your life matters, your dreams matter.² And other people matter, too.

Abraham demonstrates this kind of chutzpah, after he has already arrived in Canaan, when he stands up to God who plans to destroy the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah for their evil ways. Abraham must have understood the severity of God’s outrage. But his chutzpah took over. *Vayigash Avraham*. He doesn’t stay in his place, he actually steps up to challenge God, “Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?” Strong and resolute, Abraham asserts his own voice for justice and fairness. That takes guts. His disruptive, uncomfortable question is the quintessential Biblical example of speaking truth to power, but it is dangerous as well. He didn’t know how God would respond. Abraham is not deterred. He presents the famous mathematical negotiating algorithm to God. What if there are 50 innocents? 45? 40? Each time God acquiesces as Abraham makes his way down to 10. There is agreement. Even with 10, God will not destroy the cities.

Why did Abraham risk so much to challenge God?

This holiday calls upon us to ask questions of ourselves that go beyond an accounting of our souls, *cheshbon hanefesh*. We have received a tradition of noisemaking, disturbed by injustice and troubled by unkindness.

David Brooks in his book The Road to Character speaks about eulogy characteristics. How do we want to be described after we die? Yom Kippur says, “Don’t wait for someone else to

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write your eulogy.” Rather, write it in the book of life yourself. Don’t think that it is all written. You are still writing it now. It is not a “to do” list but a “how to be” list. **How** do you want to be? What is your mission? What are you chosen to do?

The South African author and Apartheid foe, Alan Paton, used one of his characters to reflect upon a very particular question when one dies. The character says: “When I shall ascend to heaven, which I certainly intend to do, I will be asked, ‘Where are your wounds?’ When I say, ‘I haven’t any,’ I will be asked, ‘Was there nothing worth fighting for?’”³ Today, we are posed the same question. “Where are our wounds? Was there nothing worth fighting for?” It is not about the literal injuries or the slights and grievances we carry in our lives. We all have those. Rather, ‘where are your wounds’ is about what matters enough to put ourselves at risk. For whom and for what are we prepared to be in peril? Spiritually? Psychologically? Professionally? Personally? Communally? These kinds of wounds do not hinder us. They direct us in our mission because we are truly invested in the outcome.

Within this extraordinary congregation we see many examples of mission driven living in practice. We see the time, effort, and devotion our leaders offer to secure the present and the future. Members of our synagogue lead major organizations that help to protect and repair our country, the land of Israel, and our world. You bring others to Haiti to witness the devastation. You sit with heads of state to secure Israel. You volunteer to ensure kids in unsafe neighborhoods are safe and engaged. You go to sleep worried about injustice and wake up energized to pursue it.

³ Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful Alan Patan, pages 66-67.

There are the quiet kindnesses, too, I watch from the bima like it is a beautiful dance. You embrace a mourner as she enters the synagogue for the first time since the funeral for Qabbalat Shabbat. You turn to newcomers with the most pleasant countenance. You make a phone call or a visit to help each other through calamity, sadness, and distress. These choices of purposeful living reflect the kind of chosenness of which I speak.

Moses stood before the burning bush that did not burn up. There he discovered his mission. The challenge for all of us is to be on fire but not to be consumed and not to allow our passion to consume others.⁴

There is a story of a person who consistently and with exasperation examined the world around her filled with sickness, war, disease, and callousness. Each day, she would raise her hands toward the heavens and cry out: “God, How could you create a world like this?” This went on for some time. Finally, after days and weeks, a voice responded from heaven.

How could I create a world like this?

How could you live in a world like this unchallenged?

To be part of the Jewish community, to be among the chosen means a moral imperative for living. To hold the essence of the Divine demands we regard every human being with that same ideal.

It also takes awareness that each person’s path is distinct. We are different from one another. And yet, we share this moment, and a vision of a better world. We are all the chosen

⁴ From a lecture by Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz

people. Except maybe for the Jews of Minnesota. They call themselves the “frozen chosen.” For all of us, chosenness is Judaism’s gift to us.

“How could you live in a world like this?” God asks us.

How we choose to live and act in a world like this is our response.

Our Torah portion for this day, says “Choose Life” Choose blessing so that there may be many descendants after you. We live in a world of choice.

All of us are potential menders, repairers of brokenness and healers of breaches of despair. We can soften the hardened heart.

Just as chosenness demands we embody the moral and ethical imperative, it also requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to summon courage, and to put ourselves on the line.

Let us dare to lay ourselves exposed, to boast of open hearts that make room for bravery.

The list is long for repair. The headlines may catch our attention first.

Refugees smuggled in boats. Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body on the shore. Refugees behind barbed wire refused and turned away, a scene we are all too familiar with in our own history.

In our own Boston community, clergy and youth workers walked the neighborhoods this summer and invited others to join to respond to the cries of mothers and fathers who agonize

from the ravages of violence, particularly gun violence; on their children.

Israel, too, calls to us. It remains at risk in an unfriendly neighborhood and has important work to accomplish internally.

The list keeps going and it includes examples of need that don't always get into the public's eye.

Maybe your chosenness is to devote your energies to help your ailing or grieving parent, special needs child, or loved one.

Or perhaps you pay closer attention to the feelings and responses of those around you.

Or help people get older more wisely.

Your chosenness may be to build a magnificently large or small company, organization, or corporation that has a profound impact on your employees, your customers, or society.

Or you may find ways every day through your own speech and use of language to focus on the positive and thereby lift the soul of another just a little higher.

The value of all of these--*elu devarim she'ain lehem shiur*, these actions cannot even be measured: precious behaviors that involve honoring, accompanying, caring, and welcoming.

The path is varied. Chosenness isn't always large. It comes in all sizes and forms and represents us all wherever we stand. We are all chosen for a mission. Yom Kippur summons us to declare what it is.

Chosenness envelops the pursuit of justice, the expression of compassion, the manifestation of chutzpah and the embodiment of responsibility. There is great joy in that, too, as the conduit that disturbs us into action.

When we are asked, "Where are your wounds?" What will we say? What are we willing to be wounded for?

I believe in us. To be chosen is to carry the divine spirit forward enacted with compassion, justice, and chutzpah.

Judaism has chosen you. Choose it back for together we can repair this world waiting so desperately to be redeemed.

These resources helped to direct my thinking about this sermon:

Between Me and the World by Ta-Nihisi Coates

Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson

Leadership on the Line by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky

Mishkan HaNefesh, our new Machzor

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity essays by Abraham

Joshua Heschel, edited by Susannah Heschel

The Chutzpah Imperative by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

The Road to Character by David Brooks