

Kol Nidre 5777/2016
18 Sentence Sermon on Life
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Tonight's talk is going to be short, very short. In fact, this introduction might prove to be longer than the actual talk. I think you deserve an explanation for the brevity of this talk. Let me start by saying that there are many aspects of the way most Jewish communities observe these Days of Awe that I find less than ideal. For me, this includes these traditional sermons. As you've experienced this year I've gone out on a limb and introduced some rather unconventional elements to our service. One of the great paradoxes of these services is that are they typically, long, wordy, boring and often irrelevant to our lives. Yet, to change them seems to upset people. Damned if we do, damned if we don't.

But to cut to the chase, earlier this fall as I was thinking about these holidays and what I might talk about, I found myself stumped. So I decided to challenge myself to find a way to deliver a meaningful sermon in 18 sentences.

I chose the number 18 for the obvious reason: 18 = life / chai in Hebrew. Not insignificantly 18 is also the numerical value of sin in Hebrew: Chet (8) + Tet (9) + Aleph (1) = 18. Two decidedly relevant themes to these Days of Awe. So here goes. This talk is my best attempt to offer a cogent, thought provoking sermon in 18 sentences.

- 1) In the Torah it is written: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse: Choose life! (Deut. 30:19)
- 2) Each of us is uniquely gifted with a life of indeterminate length.
- 3) Each of us is empowered with the ability to make choices about how we live our lives.
- 4) In the words of Tom Robbins, one of my favorite writers: The word that allows yes, the word that makes no possible; the word that puts the free in freedom and takes the obligation out of love; the word that throws a window open after the final door is closed; the word upon which all adventure, all exhilaration, all meaning, all honor depends.... In the beginning was the word and that word was Choice.
- 5) The Days of Awe are a gift from our ancestors, which we may choose to receive, or not.
- 6) They wisely or perhaps by accident created an annual experience replete with rituals through which we are invited to examine the choices we made and the ones we didn't make - good or for bad.
- 7) Too often we permit ourselves to remain stuck in little soul numbing cycles of hopelessness and despair.

8) We too easily forget that we have the power to make choices in our lives so that as the Torah exhorts us to do, we “choose life”.

9) Nothing but our failure of imagination and fear keeps us from making life affirming choices.

10) For reasons I don't understand it seems that despite being offered the gift of choice we too often prefer to not accept it.

11) Instead we live our lives as if our fate was predetermined and is unalterable.

12) But nothing could be further from the truth.

13) This is the essential lesson of the season.

14) The power to choose to make meaningful changes in our life is but a slight turn -teshuvah - away.

15) If the way you are looking at your world does not fill you with joy and meaning then look at it in new way.

16) Life is short.

17) Do not let it slip away.

18) Choose wisely, choose boldly, choose life. Amen