

# **Choose Your Own Adventure**

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### **Rosh Hashana Eve 5770**

Choose your own adventure – I used to love those books as a kid it was actually the only kind of book that I would read – remember how they worked – you would start reading on page 1 – reach a certain point and then you would have to make a choice – if you want to follow the scary sound into the cave by yourself turn to page 19 but if you want to wait for your friends instead, then turn to page 21. I loved these books because it was all about choices – you alone had the power to decide what would happen next – and the choices you made always had an impact on how things turned out in the end.

Our life is made up choices - we decide to do this – or not to do that – we decide to say this or not say that...our life is made of moments – moments that are profound – and moments that are mundane – moments that remain with us in our hearts and souls and moments that fade away – forgotten forever. It sounds simple – it sounds obvious – but how often do we stop – I mean really stop – pause and think about the choices we make and have made – and how they effect who we are in the world and how they have effect the world in which we live – how often do we stop – and think about the moments – holy and mundane that define who we are as people in this world?

There is a great chasidick story about Reb Zusya<sup>1</sup> who around Rosh Hashana one year was traveling by train to meet his brother Elimelech in another town. Reb Zusya boarded the train with the other passengers – dressed in his usual way – his clothes tattered and torn – the soles of his shoes worn through – and his beard untrimmed and unkempt. Just as he was about to board the train a man, dressed in fine clothes and a newly minted hat arrived huffing and puffing out of breath to the train door and shoved poor Reb Zusya aside saying – “step aside pauper - I must make the last train out of town – I am in quite a rush!”

Once on board Reb Zusya made his way through the crowded train cars – looking for a seat to rest for the train ride ahead. As it turns out there was only one seat left – right next to the man whom moments before, in a rush and in a huff, had pushed him aside. As Reb Zusya took his seat the man continued where he left off – he taunted and insulted the rebbe the entire ride.

The train pulled into the station and the man noticed that a rather large crowd was gathered on the platform. As the man came off the train he asked one of the strangers in the crowd “for whom are you gathered?” “The great Reb Zusya, of course the stranger responded.” Despite being in such a hurry the man joined the crowd in anticipation.

Reb Zusya exited the train and was embraced by the crowd with cheers and hugs. Immediately the man who had insulted the rebbe along the way realized what he had done - he fell to the ground and wept – and begged Reb Zusya to forgive him. Please reb Zusya – how was I to know who you were – I ask you to forgive me for what I have done - please I beg of you forgive me. Reb Zusya - looked down – helped the weeping man to his feet – and simply responded – I thank you for your apology but I Reb Zusya can not forgive you. He paused and said with compassion my friend, you see while sitting on the train you insulted a poor beggar and not a great rabbi. In order to be granted true pardon you must seek forgiveness from all of the poor beggars in the world – and then only then may you be forgiven!”

In many ways this is the quintessential High Holiday story – it’s about sin and forgiveness, it’s about recognizing the wrongs we have done and seeking to make amends. Reb Zusya teaches us that we may only seek and receive forgiveness from the people whom we have wronged – the man didn’t insult Reb Zusya – he insulted a beggar – so it makes sense that Reb Zusya couldn’t forgive him for what he had done.

I recently heard Eli Wiesel tell this very same tale - only with a very different lesson to be learned. The key, he claims, lies in listening closely to Zusya response – “beggars everywhere” – everywhere is the key word for Professor Weisel. He teaches that at its core this story is about actions and moments in our lives and that our actions and the choices we make matter. We learn from this story that how we choose to act in this world has an effect not only the people around us and in our lives but our actions have an effect on the larger world in which we live – upon people we may never meet or know and upon generations yet unborn. How we choose to act matters.

Imagine if the man had stopped for a moment and thought about the choice he was about to make – remember he was in a hurry – he chose to push Reb Zusya out of the way – remember he saw only a schlepper and beggar – he could have chosen to see a person created in the image of God. Imagine if he chose to see with his soul and not with his eyes.

Our sages tell a story<sup>2</sup> of two men in a boat facing each other. One man takes an axe and starts chopping a hole beneath his seat. With astonishment and anger the other man asks “WHAT ARE YOU DOING!”– the man with the axe responds – “its under my seat – what’s it matter to you? With sadness and fear he responds “If you succeed in digging a hole in this boat we will both surely sink and perish in the cold waters below.” The rabbis in this *midrash* teach us that we are all in this boat together – this place, this space, this town this world - the person we choose to be in the year to come matters to each and everyone one of us. Just as we work hard to be better students, just as we commit ourselves to our careers, just as we practice hard at sports – so to should we work hard at being the people we know we can be. But not because it will get us ahead, or make us more money, or win us the game – but because it matters to you and it matters to me, it matters to your neighbor, you co-worker and indeed the worlds - what kind of person we will choose to be.

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<sup>2</sup> *Leviticus Rabbah*

We live in a busy, stressful complicated world – it's easy for us to choose to be the person digging a hole underneath their seat or the man on the train – it's easy to keep our heads down and think of only ourselves and our families and our immediate needs. The world in which we live seems to teach us it's ok to choose and to act in this way – the world in which we live seems to be shaping who we are! Yet, our tradition believes and God teaches us that it should be the other way around – we should be the ones shaping the world in which we live! And we can only shape the world in which we live through action – as individuals and as a community.

OK so our actions matter – we have the power of choice – now what? At work we have a job to do– a description of what we are supposed to accomplish – at school we have a syllabus or a course outline that tells us what will be covered in class - on the sports field we have plays that develop – but what do we have as human beings created in the image of God. Well as Jews we have Torah, we have midrash, we have thousand of years of tradition and texts written to guide us on our journey and we have Mussar. Our sacred job is to be Holy because God is Holy and to live our lives daily in praise of God – our job as human beings is to see and feel with our souls.

We read in the Talmud the following:

If a person is scrupulous in their conduct, gentle in their conversation, pleasant towards their fellow creatures, affable in manner when receiving them, not retorting when affronted, but showing courtesy to all, even to those who treat you with disdain conducting their commercial affairs with integrity...such a person has sanctified God's name....

Imagine what our world would be if everyone chose to act in this manner but once – if everyone chose to work hard at fulfilling our sacred purpose. How different our world would be – how different our world would feel.

We have our sacred job description – we have our goals and objectives - we know why our job is important – now we need a plan – and that's what Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are for. Over the next 10 days between now and Yom Kippur take a half hour or an hour by yourself – make a list of the things that you would like to work on this year – what attributes would you like to improve upon this year – is it patience, its humility, kindness, love – take the time and write it down. Then come up with a plan – how are you going to accomplish your goal of being holy – of partnering with God in creation. Then if you feeling brave – share it with a loved one someone you trust and ask them to hold you accountable –ask them to help you along your journey. But here is the thing – it won't be easy – we are after all human – we are not perfect and we will make mistakes – but remember the person you choose to be in the year come effects me – effects the person sitting next to you and it affect the world in which we all live.

We often forget but how we choose to act is up to us and no one else. In the garden of Eden God revealed to Adam all of human history from beginning to end – Adam noticed that King David was to die just after being born. Adam protested how could this be –

King David can not die at birth – he is to be the great King of Israel the Messiah is to be his descendant. To this God responded there is nothing I can do it has been written this way – Adam paused and said to God I will give him 70 years of my life – and so King David didn't die at birth but instead lived a full 70 years of life. Adam had a choice how to react – he could have been silent – he could have just accepted – but he didn't he ACTED – he didn't allow the world as it was to shape him – rather he shaped the world as it should be through his action.<sup>3</sup>

Now then we find ourselves assembled in prayer - our voices united together as one - lifting our spirits to the highest heights of the heavens – as one community we begin our journey into the unknown year ahead. Tonight each of us begins our journey into personal action – as we look to shape the world in which we live and fulfill our purpose – and recognize that our actions do indeed matter.

Choose your own adventure - my favorite part about the books – was that when you were done reading you could read it again – you could start from the beginning and start all over again choosing differently this time. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are like starting over on our own choose your own adventure book – who will you choose to be in the year ahead - will you think about how the choices you make effect those around you and the world in which we live. Will you choose to see with your soul in the year to come?

Shanah Tova and Shabbat Shalom