

**Life: A Meta-Mitzvah**  
*Parashat Nitzavim*  
**September 15, 2001**  
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Our parashah begins with stirring words spoken by Moses: "*Atem nitzvatim hayom* ... -- You are standing this day" ... at a crossing point, about to enter the Promised Land.

Moses tells the people that the only thing they must do is to observe God's commandments. And, lest the people worry about how difficult that might be, they are given reassurance. "It is not too difficult for you!" (See Deut. 30:11).

"Not too difficult." What is it that is not too difficult? What is it that the people are required to do? The answer can be articulated in two words: "*U'vahartah b'hayyim* -- Choose life." (Deut. 30:19).

What does it mean to "choose life"? There are, of course, many interpretations of this phrase. There are many ways that we can and do understand this phrase, year after year. First and foremost, though, and particularly this year, we should read it literally. With these two deceptively simple words we are being told, literally, to choose life; that is, to have reverence for life and to do all we can to protect it and to nurture it.

Yesterday, there was a story in The Boston Globe about an historic operation. For the second time, a newly designed artificial heart has been implanted into the body of an ailing patient. That work is being done at none other than The Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. Isn't that fitting?

This is, indeed, what we Jews have always done. Life is a supreme value for Jews. We are told, in the Mishnah, that "One who saves even one life is like one who has saved an entire world." (M.Sanhedrin 4:5) Almost all mitzvot are deemed to be secondary to the mitzvah to preserve and to protect life. [See b.Yoma 84b]



For example, as Jews, we are supposed to observe Shabbat. There are many prohibitions on Shabbat: we don't use money; we don't travel; we don't cut paper, etc.

But if a life is at stake, we are required, if necessary, to do all of those. In other words, Jewish law doesn't give us discretion, in the event that life is on the line, to observe Shabbat or not. Rather, we are prohibited from doing so if it threatens life.

Another example: As Jews, we are required to refrain from eating certain foods -- foods, for example, that are derived from the meat of a pig, or from other non-kosher animals. Yet if a person needs medication that's only available from such a source, one is required to provide it to him.

There is a mishnah, a teaching in the Talmud, that tells us that if a pregnant woman insists that she needs to eat on Yom Kippur, she is fed. If a sick person is dangerously ill, he is fed on the advice of his physicians. In other words, if his physicians say he needs to eat, we feed him, even if he is reluctant.

Why? Because there's no greater virtue in Judaism than reverence for life. "Saving a life takes precedence." Not only saving someone else's life, but saving your own life. If someone threatens your life, you may violate all other mitzvot except for three: First, murder. You can't, even at risk to your own life, murder someone else. Your blood is no redder than anyone else's. Second, sexual immorality. You obviously can't sexually assault another, even at risk to your own life. Finally, you can't desecrate God's name and engage in idolatrous worship. Hence, saving a life takes precedence over (almost all) other mitzvot.

It's not accidental that Jews say, "l'chaim" when they lift up a cup to make a toast. It's not accidental that many Jews will wear a necklace with the Hebrew word "chai" ("life") on it. And it's not accidental that Jews making a contribution to charity will give multiples of 18, since the number 18 represents the sum of the numerical values that make up the letters in chai.

I mention all this because this past week we have been exposed, on a scale not quite fathomable prior to last Tuesday, to a colossal perversion of this Jewish idea. To think that, in the name of religion, in the name of a religion that is a daughter religion to Judaism, one could imagine that it is a mitzvah to terrorize and to take the lives of hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of innocent human lives is absolutely astounding, and deserves reflection.

Prior to this past week, we've known of suicide bombers, of course. In Israel this has been going on for almost a decade. But not here in America, and not on this scale.

It is understandable that people see this kind of shameful, morally perverse thinking to be characteristic of Islam. After all, how many Islamic leaders have ever condemned suicide bombing in Israel?

But the fact is that Islam does not necessarily stand for the murder of thousands of innocent civilians. There is a parallel passage in the Quran to the text from the Talmud I quoted earlier. It reads as follows: "If someone kills a person...it is as if he has killed all mankind, and if someone saves a person's life, it's as if he has saved all mankind." (Sura 5:32)

And so it is unfair to consider the ideology that led to the murderous assault on so many innocent people representative of Islam. And yet, I would suggest that Islamic leaders bear the burden of condemning, in the strongest language, this perversion, both here and in Israel.

Having said that, I don't think it's unfair for us to condemn it. On the contrary, we must condemn it.

We're not dealing here with a simple difference of opinion, with a matter that can be resolved with discussion, with compromise, with a handshake. Either you value life or you don't. And the folks who encouraged those nineteen hijackers to do what they did clearly do not. And that is evil. The acts are evil, and the ideology is evil.

The Torah implies that it is easy to choose life. "Choose life," the text says. I remember the first time I studied this passage and I thought to myself: How obvious! Who wouldn't choose life instead of death? And yet it apparently isn't so obvious to everyone. People who choose death over life do exist, and they are very, very dangerous.

In this country, we're not used to condemning behavior or ideology as evil. We're a very tolerant nation. We believe we should live and let live. Even we Jews find it doesn't come naturally to condemn evil. In the High Holiday liturgy, we pray to God "*ken ta'avir memshelet zaton min ha-aretz* -- eliminate tyranny from the world," but we're not usually focused on what we mean by that. Now, for the first time in perhaps forty years -- a generation -- we are preparing to do battle with evil. It's important for people to understand that that is what this is all about.

This is an extraordinarily momentous time in American history. As a nation we're being called upon to do battle with evil. Last week, the week before that, we weren't talking that way. But then again, last week the tallest buildings in New York were the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

All of us are still reeling from the attack last Tuesday -- trying to process it, trying to make sense out of it. We're still trying to locate the unaccounted for, care for the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and grieve our losses. But the time will soon come when we will be called upon to support an effort to defeat those responsible for setting in motion this gruesome attack. I hope that such an effort will not be made in anger, for one rarely exercises good judgment in anger. I hope that it will not be motivated by the desire for revenge, for as it says in the Bible, "Revenge is the Lord's." Rather, I hope it will be motivated by precisely that belief that distinguishes all of us from those who would carry out such a dastardly attack; reverence for life. Choosing Life.

We must never forget that it is reverence for life that distinguishes us from those who would destroy us, and therefore, we must never give up our devotion to that principle. If we do, we stoop to the level of those fighting against us. We must remain true to the principle that innocent life is still deserving of protection, whether a person lives in Arkansas or Afghanistan.

It is for that reason that all the talk of war that we've heard in the past few days should give us pause. War is a very dangerous enterprise. All sorts of unintended consequences occur. The rule of law often breaks down. As James Carroll has pointed out, one can respond with force to terrorist attacks; one can even go after and eliminate the perpetrators of the despicable violence we've witnessed this past week; without calling it "a war," and without celebrating and embracing the freedom from the rule of law that that word implies.

In that story about the artificial heart operation that appeared in yesterday's paper, there was a startling detail. The only folks who are candidates for receiving one of those hearts are folks with a life expectancy of less than thirty days. It makes sense: it's experimental surgery, and you couldn't justify risking it on someone who could perhaps be helped by other means, or who might live a while even without any surgical intervention.

But think of what that means: that a group of physicians and nurses and other medical professionals will spend hours upon hours operating on a person with a life expectancy of less than thirty days in order to extend his or her life. Think what

that says about the reverence for life! Life, in our tradition, is of infinite value -- whether it's the first month of a baby's life or the last month of an adult's life.

You might not have seen that story about that artificial heart in yesterday's paper. After all, it wasn't on page one. It was on page two. As important as it was, it was displaced by the awful news we've been immersed in these past few days.

This has been an awful week, with awful news. Some of us have lost loved ones. Others of us have known people who've lost loved ones. All of us have been shocked and upset. We all need comfort. We all need support at this time.

As the sad work of recovery continues; let us hope and pray that we will not lose our reverence for life. As we look forward to our most solemn, penitential holidays, days on which we pray to God, *zochreinu l'chaim* -- that He should remember us to life, let us, too, remember our commitment to life. Let us mourn our loved ones, let us comfort the bereaved, and let us remain ever committed to furthering life. Let us pray that one day, a story like that one about the artificial heart will once again be on page one, and that we will, as a nation, one day once again be directing our best energies toward the protection, preservation and nurturing of life.

Amen.