

Bereishit 5785

Shabbat morning October 26, 2024

Bnei Mitzvah of Daniel Fertig and Ethan Summers

Daniel and Ethan, thank you for teaching us this morning through two insightful divrei Torah. You both focused on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Daniel, you wanted to know why did G-d forbid Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree, and what did their choice have to do with us? Ethan, you wanted to know what that moment of choice means for our own choices. Did they have free will or did G-d know and arrange for them to disobey? Do all of the human beings since Adam and Eve have free will or are we in a predetermined set of unfolding events?

You both decided that it was necessary for Adam and Eve to disobey G-d in order to grow up, leave the garden, and become choosing adults. Daniel, you saw in this the human need to improve the world, and the implication that our primary function is to choose good, and specifically to make the world a better place. And Ethan, while you considered deeply the possibilities that we do and do not have free will, you concluded that “The ability to choose creates us, and who we are,” that decision-making defines us, that the decisions we made in the past shaped our present, and that we must continually learn from the choices we make and decide in each next moment who we want to be.

This was some deep thinking.

The truth is that we do and do not have free will. Our decisions matter more than we imagine, but we do not get to decide many things. That is why the realm of decision-making that does belong to us is so precious. Our ability to make choices within the limits of our power is an incredible gift and opportunity. The sphere of our agency– the landscape in which we can make choices – is the scope of our freedom.

However, it is the rare person who takes full advantage of the scope of their freedom.

Too often we see ourselves as bound and without choice when we really don't want to take responsibility for the choices we do have. We do what is expected of us, what is approved of by others, what's safe. We may even believe that we have no choice because we fail to accurately identify the full range of choices we have. As Oliver Burkeman recently wrote in *the Wall Street Journal*, our power to choose is unlimited if we're willing to face the consequences of our choices, if we're willing to own our freedom.

I want to say more about that in a minute, but first I want to back up a bit and look at the context in which Adam and Eve, the tree, and the garden are situated. This context is nothing less than the creation of the world. The story of the tree and the garden takes place just one chapter after the beginning of the entire world, after the beginning of the entire Torah.

On Thursday night we were out at Grand Army Plaza with all of Brooklyn, it seemed, celebrating Simchat Torah, dancing with our Torahs in seven big circles to celebrate the completion of an entire year, an entire cycle of reading Torah. On Simchat Torah, after we dance in seven circles with our Torahs, we read the very end of the Book of Deuteronomy (the last few verses of the Torah) and then we read the very beginning of the Book of Genesis (the first few verses of the Torah) and start the cycle all over again. The Torah cycle seems to say that we're part of a great cycle of life that circles around and around predictably, inexorably, in that we know exactly what the parashiot will be next year, in what order, with what stories. We will once again see Abraham and Sarah greet the strangers at their tent and once again see Jacob wrestle with an angel and once again see Joseph tearfully forgive his brothers. We will see Moses stand at the burning bush and lift his staff over the sea and climb into the clouds at the top of Mount Sinai. And sometimes life seems like this too – that we just repeat the same history– that we're powerless over cycles and forces bigger than us.

But the truth is that on Thursday night, and on every Simchat Torah, and in all of life, there's a gap, an opening for freedom. There's a moment between the death of Moses which takes place at the end of Torah and the birth of the world which takes place at the beginning of Torah. The gap might only be a few seconds long, but that gap is everything. That gap represents all of the moments when we stop and learn from what has gone before. When we grow. When we choose how we're going to approach the next cycle, the next action. It's true that in the Torah the stories we read will be the same, but we will be different. We will see different details. We will have new interpretations, new insights, new lessons about how to live. We will make different choices. That's the magic of Torah and of life. That's freedom.

But it doesn't happen automatically. Rabbi Lee Moore points out that the Torah ends with grief. Moses, our greatest leader has died. After 40 years of wandering through the wilderness with one goal— to lead the people into the promised land— Moses dies on Mount Nebo overlooking that land, denied the opportunity to enter. This is a moment of longing for all that is unfulfilled, all that should be but isn't. It's a moment of anger at the unfairness of life, the injustice of being denied what we've been promised. It could be a moment of fear that our lives will end without success, without ever arriving at our goal or destination. This year that grief for Moses matched the grief we all felt as we gathered on Simchat Torah, the yahrzeit of October 7th.

Rabbi Moore suggests that if we want to enter a new beginning, a new cycle, able to fully embrace its possibilities, we first have to fully feel our grief and our longing. Otherwise we'll miss the possibilities of freedom. Otherwise be sleepwalking into the future, unable to assess or take responsibility for the choices we're making.

In this country, it's the unaddressed grief of 1.2 million deaths from covid. It's the anger and disappointment at the unfairness of this society, the massive gap in wealth, the difficulty for many people to make ends meet; it's the frustration at the loss of jobs and the increase in prices and the

hollowing out of cities and towns that used to be proud centers of manufacturing; it's the hopelessness of opioids and fentanyl; it's the fear of young men that they're being left behind; it's the fear that our lives and our children's lives will end without success or attainment of our goals. It's the longing for all that is unfulfilled, all that should be but isn't. If we can't see and feel and talk about those feelings, they distort our ability to see and grasp the choices that lie before us and their consequences. We might confuse acting out with acting wisely.

As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt wrote in the Times on Thursday, democracies around the world have used strategies beyond normal elections to preserve their democracies when threatened. Instead of conducting business as usual, they identify the threat and move to block it. West Germany exercised what's known as militant or defensive democracy after the Third Reich when they restricted and outlawed anti-Constitutional speech, groups, and parties. South Korea used this approach in the last decade to fend off threats to their democratic system of government. Another means to defend democracy is partisan gatekeeping, by which political parties take responsibility for blocking threats to the system itself. The Democratic party did so with Henry Ford in the 1920s, and Republican leadership did so by standing up to Richard Nixon after he abused power in the 1970's.

Another strategy is containment, by which responsible leaders of all political parties join together to defeat an antidemocratic threat. This happened in France this summer, when a multiparty coalition that included communists, greens, socialists, centrists, and center-right Republicans came together to defeat Marine Le Pen's far right National Rally. Though there have been a few American leaders who have reached across the aisle in such an effort, most have not made that choice so far in this country.

The authors say that this leaves one final strategy: social mobilization. It isn't too late for a chorus of influential voices across the society to speak out. John Kelly just did. What we haven't yet seen here is what happened

in Germany in 2023, when in response to a secret meeting between the far right Alternative for Germany party and neo-Nazi groups in which they planned the mass deportation of immigrants, the CEOs of Mercedes-Benz and Porsche and 300 other business leaders, and the top labor leaders and hundreds of small business leaders and the Catholic Church released a statement condemning right wing nationalism. The same thing happened in Brazil, in response to Jair Bolsinaro. These examples show that such a stand can be non-partisan. There can be a nationwide consensus of country over party. The CEO's of the Fortune 500 could decide to do this together. The Catholic Church could do this. Obviously there was risk for every German and Brazilian CEO, every bishop, every small business owner, and every French political leader who took a stand this summer. Their choices were not without consequences. But silence is also a choice that has consequences.

I want to be very clear: what I'm saying right now is not about partisan politics; in fact the whole point is that this should be far beyond partisan politics.

Daniel and Ethan, Adam and Eve were driven by forces larger than themselves that they didn't understand, *and* they used free will to make a choice with consequences. We are all influenced by emotions and conditions larger than us, *and* we all have free will. We may or may not take full advantage of the scope of our freedom, and we may or may not use it wisely.

There are a lot of American leaders telling themselves right now that they have no choice. There are the leaders who are doing the wrong thing and know they're doing the wrong thing, and there are the leaders who are doing nothing and saying nothing when they could take a stand.

When history looks back at us, it won't only be the people who did the wrong thing who'll be blamed. It will also be the silent ones. It will be everyone who said they had no choice, but really didn't want to face the consequences of the choices they do have.

The gap between the death of Moses and the birth of a new world rushes by in a moment, but that gap is where freedom lives.

Please, G-d, give us the courage to fully use this gap we're in right now where freedom lives. Give us the courage to feel our feelings and not be ruled by them – so that we all can see clearly the choices and consequences that lie before us. Please awaken every person with influence, giving them the will to speak and act boldly now on their conscience and their values – the values You taught us. We have eaten of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Please, let us exercise that knowledge now.

Shabbat Shalom.