

On the morning of 11 September, an Australian swimming legend was on his way to the World Trade Centre for a business meeting. As the cab drove off to the appointment, Ian Thorpe wondered if he would want to get a photograph from the Windows to the World. He figured that he would and would have enough time to have the cab driver turn around to allow him to collect the camera he had left behind.

That morning was an important one for Howard Lutnick, the CEO of investment firm Cantor Fitzgerald. It was his son's first day of school. Even though the day ahead of him at his office in the World Trade Center had the usual array of important meetings and consultations, he wanted to be the one to take his son to school on his first day. He decided that he would go in a little late that morning.

Hilda Marcin had been retired for years from her work as a special education teacher's aide. She had thought long and hard about the decision to move to Danville, California to live with her daughter and her family -- leaving a place that she knew and where she felt comfortable. Eventually, being close to her daughter and grandchildren sealed her choice. She had made all the arrangements for her new life, including purchasing a ticket for her move to California on United Airlines flight # 93 for the morning of September 11, 2001.

A simple choice regarding a camera; a thoughtful choice about being around for a special moment; a well deliberated, life impacting choice -- all ended up being choices of life or of death. Am I being melodramatic? -- After all, these choices taken out of context of the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> may or may not be important ones, but seemingly were not life and death. The case could be made that they only became life and death choices after the choices made by some 19 terrorists on that fateful morning.

I would make the opposite case on this Yom Kippur morning. I would make the case that indeed every choice brings us closer to life or death. Each choice may not save our lives from an impending doom or dramatically end our physical existence. However, each choice, no matter how seemingly mundane, may contribute toward our progression down a path of life, freedom and a cultivation of the divinity within ourselves. However, each choice, no matter how apparently commonplace, may contribute toward our regression down a road of death, rigidity and an eradication of our selves and divine nature. We have no greater blessing and no greater burden than the fact that every choice we make brings us closer to life or to death.

This morning the book of Deuteronomy placed it plain as day before us, "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity ... For I command you this day, to love Adonai your God, to walk in the divine way, and to follow God's commandments, laws, and rules, that you may thrive and increase ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life--if you and your offspring would live."

Every choice that we make possesses this power to bring us closer to life, to divinity - or to take far away from that which we crave and bring us closer to death, to destruction and annihilation. Looking at our lives and at our world, there are many, many choices for us to examine and for which to prepare. This morning at this sacred time and on this sacred day I ask us to focus on the choices that our leaders make on our behalves and the choice that many of us are blessed with to choose these leaders. Our choice and theirs has the potential to bring us closer to life or closer to death ... we must examine both with the utmost earnestness and consideration.

The choices of our leaders affect us in a profound and long lasting manner. Their choices may bring us closer to life or death, quite literally -- while these same choices set the moral, ethical and spiritual pace for our communities, our country and our world. In the fall of 1962, John Fitzgerald Kennedy - as Presidents do on a daily, almost hourly basis, faced a choice that could bring millions literally closer to life or death. His choices and actions would bring a world further away from a path of spiritual destruction and ideological tyranny.

The Kennedy presidency had not been a sea of successes. The administration was still smarting from the embarrassment of the Bay of Pigs debacle when news of Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba reached the White House. This instituted a high stakes diplomatic chess match between the superpowers of the day. This match occurred in the context of acute distrust between the superpowers and in the midst of palpable fear that the world's destruction was merely the push of a button by an angry Communist away from reality. It was not only the physical destruction of life that was imminent, but a more subtle annihilation of a sense of trust, optimism and freedom that many were ready to sacrifice for a sense of security and certainty.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1962, President Kennedy spoke to the country, and to the world -- attempting his best to choose life in the wake of choices and atmosphere that seemed to choose the opposite. Attempting to stand up to

threat of the missiles on the Cuban with strength and authority, the President sought to move beyond their recent history of mistrust and antagonism.

“Our policy has been one of patience and restraint, as befits a peaceful and powerful nation, which leads a worldwide alliance. We have been determined not to be diverted from our central concerns by mere irritants and fanatics. But now further action is required--and it is under way; and these actions may only be the beginning. We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth--but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced ...

... My fellow citizens: let no one doubt that this is a difficult and dangerous effort on which we have set out. No one can see precisely what course it will take or what costs or casualties will be incurred. Many months of sacrifice and self-discipline lie ahead--months in which our patience and our will will be tested--months in which many threats and denunciations will keep us aware of our dangers. But the greatest danger of all would be to do nothing.

The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are--but it is the one most consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high--and Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission.

Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right--not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere, and, we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved.

With this choice of words, with this action ... President John Fitzgerald Kennedy sought to choose life. He did so in an atmosphere that did not necessarily promote such choices. This choice set our country and our world on a much different path than the one it had previously been traveling. All leaders face these kinds of choices, in this instance this leader found the courage and insight to choose life.

There are times, too ... when those in leadership positions make choices that exile them and others from life. No doubt, that in the moment or in the mind of that individual the choice seems clear. However, because that leader does not have the best information or support; their unwillingness or inability to see a larger picture or because of their lack of self-differentiation and anxiety, they choose death and the path that leads to annihilation of self and a shrinking connection to divinity.

We read about such a leader this afternoon when we encounter Jonah in the afternoon's Haftorah portion. Jonah, while not necessarily selected by the people, fills a leadership position in his role of prophet. The book tells us that Jonah is given the opportunity by God to lead others in Teshuvah, back to God. God asks Jonah to go to Ninevah and warn them that they must repent or suffer the consequences. Jonah is not so sure about the prospect of dealing with this people and it seems that he is not convinced that these non-Israelites are worth of all this effort. He chooses to flee from God via the sea - but God and storm and eventually a large fish find Jonah. Jonah realizes that the storm is meant for him, so he jumps into the sea where he is swallowed by a giant fish. In the belly of the fish and facing his own end, Jonah has a come-to-God moment. Once the fish finally vomits Jonah from its belly, Jonah is ready to make his choice.

On the surface, Jonah goes and does 'the right thing' - what he is asked to do. He goes to Ninevah and to his surprise and even dismay; the people of Ninevah repent and are saved. The story does not end here, however. We are given another glimpse into Jonah's nature and inability to understand. He makes camp at the outskirts of Ninevah and finds himself beaten to death by the sun and heat. God causes a gourd to grow, which provides Jonah with shelter. In the morning the gourd shrivels up and dies -- and Jonah laments the end of this gourd that saved his life. As Jonah laments its end, God chastises him for not being to have the same regard for the lives of the Ninevites that he seems to have for the shriveled gourd.

The choice of Jonah -- the prophet, the leader -- is never truly for life -- for freedom or opportunity for the people of Ninevah. His choice is literally for his own survival, but is not rooted in a higher understanding of what divinity is all about. He is blind to even basic truths, for despite acknowledging that God is everywhere, Jonah still attempts to hide from God in the sea. Jonah is so anxious and unsure of his own self that he must deny the validity and authenticity of others - in the form of the people Ninevah - to be secure. He is willing to do whatever he needs to do -- run, risk the lives of others -- in the form of the crew on the ship -- to reduce this anxiety. His is an arrogant, self-centered universe in which divinity is eclipsed by his own limitations. His

choices, will seemingly extend his own life at times, ultimately would bring him and those around him toward annihilation of self and a shrinking connection to divinity.

Today, with sincere contemplation and respect, we ask ourselves about how the choices of our leaders bring us closer to life or to death. Today, with great sincerity and reverence, we ask ourselves what choices we need to make on November 2<sup>nd</sup> to bring our world, our country and our own lives as far as removed as possible from death - from rigidity, annihilation and destruction and as close as possible to life - to freedom, trust and divinity.

We must closely examine the choices that President Bush and his administration have made and ask ourselves the questions, where have these choices brought us and where would more of the same bring us in the next 4 years? On September 11<sup>th</sup> -- the day that reminds us of the potency of all of our choices -- we sat in shock and disbelief in what we saw and heard. We waited for our leader, our president, to see on which path his choices would lead us. Would they be Jonah-like choices rooted in self-preservation and anxiety -- that on surface level may have seemed to be the right thing to do, but ultimately do not see a bolder, higher and more courageous vision? Would they be choices that felt more like those of JFK as he studied the threat of the Soviet missiles on the Cuban coast -- choices that while addressing needs of security and survival, strove for a less secure but greater, more global even divine ideal?

As the world came together, and countries around the world proclaimed, 'We are all Americans', we attempted to make sense of the first foreign attacks on our soil in more than half a century. We waited for our leader, our president, to see on which path he would lead us as he and his administration made choices about fighting Al-Qaeda and the Taliban; about how to appropriately and with respect to the ideals of our country treat citizens and aliens who were suspected of being involved in this terror; about how and why we would deal with perceived threats from Iraq; about the ways that we would manage and partner with the world and Iraqi people in the aftermath of destroying their albeit tyrannical, yet only country and homeland; about how to best support and manage our countrymen and women who gladly make the choice to fight if their President told them it was a choice toward life; about the respectful and honest manner to involve and inform the American people about the decisions and developments regarding these choices to fight.

We have also watched our President and his administration to see on which path they would lead us as they made choices in regard to how to

acknowledge the hard work, sacrifice and limitations faced by middle class and lower class families and workers; how to care for the poor and needy in our society; how to respond to sincere commitments of love and fidelity made by couple of the same gender; how to embrace the insights and life-changing and saving opportunities made possible to us by scientific research, like that of embryonic stem cells; how to genuinely and honestly assess its own performance, successes and mistakes and to improve from that assessment. As we consider the choice we must make on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, we have many choices to examine and upon which to reflect ... and to determine if we have been brought closer to life and divinity or closer to death and an annihilation of values we hold dear and precious.

It is a most serious obligation and privilege that we have every 4 years when we select a President and every year when we select our city, state and national leaders. The beauty and miracle of our country is that each one of us possesses the right and obligation to assess the choices of city council representative, our mayor, our senators and yes, even our President, and make our choice accordingly. It is without dramatization or exaggeration that I completely believe that choice we will make will bring us and our world closer to life or to death.

This choice is so precious and essential ... we forget at times how blessed we are to even make it, how to ignore it is a choice of death in itself. In November of 1917 there was a group of leaders who did not enjoy the choice of which we speak this morning. The only reason that they were excluded from choosing life or death for their country was because they were women. They decided to rally for this right on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. They were rewarded with arrests and eventual beatings in the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. Some years later, in 1920, their plea and its just cause was heard and acted upon. Similarly, in February 1965, there was another leader who did not enjoy the choice of which we speak this morning. The reason that he and people like him were excluded from choosing life or death for their country was because they were of African descent and their skin had a dark, colored hue to it. So, he and some 524 individuals chose to march from Selma, Alabama to the state capitol in Montgomery to remind others that they too deserved the right and responsibility of this choice. They, too, were rewarded with violence and degradation. Some months later, in 1965, their plea and its just cause was heard and acted upon.

The choice of life and death -- the right and obligation to do so is beyond no human being. We, you and I, have a gift, a blessing, an obligation to use it. Do not be shy as you assess and examine the choices of our leadership in these next few months. Do not shield them from the only question that is

important ... before them, always, has been life and death, blessing and curse  
... did they choose life or did they choose death? Will they choose for us life  
or will they choose for us death? As you make you choice on November 2<sup>nd</sup>  
... CHOOSE LIFE.