

Yom Kippur Morning 5780 - Torah Introduction

October 9, 2019, 8:45/11:30 AM

Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake

An Ever-Choosing People

Today's Torah reading envisions Moses delivering his farewell address to the Israelite people. He assembles the entire community and reminds them of the terms of their covenant with God. The operative verb in the passage is the imperative *U'vacharta*: *Choose!* "Choose life, that you and your descendants will live!"

The notions of choice and consequence run deep in Jewish tradition. A given outcome may be less or more likely but is not fore-ordained. From Biblical times to our time, we Jews have been a *choosing* people (or even a *choosy* people!) as much as we are a *chosen* people.

Often, of course, when Jewish people are asked to choose, we rarely if ever choose with one voice. You know the saying about "two Jews, three opinions?" Here's a timely case in point: it's

been more than three weeks since the September 17th Israeli election and the results still hang in the balance. Bibi Netanyahu's *Likud* Party and its main rival, Benny Ganz's *Kachol Lavan*/Blue & White Party have now placed in a virtual dead heat—twice within a single year!—and it's anyone's guess how things will play out.

In Israel, political parties need to enter into coalitions in order to claim a majority stake in the *Knesset* and secure the ability to govern. A hoped-for “unity government” linking Ganz's and Netanyahu's parties with a shared centrist agenda has not yet materialized, and neither leader has a clear pathway to a coalition without each other.... So we remain stuck, at least for now.

The stakes of this election are high, for all Israelis. As one key signifier, Arab voters turned out in record numbers, a clear declaration that one-fifth of Israel's citizens will no longer choose to stand on the sidelines nor be intimidated away from polling stations.

And this election is consequential not only for Israelis, but also for Jewish people everywhere. Israel functions not only as a homeland for citizens who live there, but also as a spiritual home for all Jews, everywhere. It could be said that this is Israel's *raison d'être*.

For non-Orthodox Jews who live in Israel *and* in Diaspora, the stakes in this election are high. Will Israel continue to lurch rightward, further entrenching the *Haredi* (Ultra-Orthodox) grip on power? If so, non-Orthodox Jews will continue to be marginalized. Non-Orthodox rabbis and cantors (like every one on our *bimah* today!) will continue to be denied the authority to solemnize weddings, preside over conversions, and perform burials. Millions of Israelis will continue to travel abroad just to celebrate a wedding outside the auspices of the Haredi rabbinate. Any push for marriage equality, which a majority of Israelis support, will languish. Gay couples will continue to face steep legal obstacles to bringing children into their families through adoption and surrogacy. Many of Israel's poorest citizens, who rely on public transportation for urgent services or to visit family, will continue to face severe travel restrictions on Shabbat. Anti-Arab

racism, directed not only at Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, but also at the 20% of Israel's citizens who are not Jewish, will continue to be fomented, gaining a further foothold in mainstream Israeli society. These alarming developments, already underway, do not line up with WRT's values or vision of Israel's future.

Unless we hold citizenship in Israel, we cannot vote in its national elections. But there **is** a vote we **can and must** cast.

In exactly one year, in October 2020, representatives of world Jewry—190 from Israel, 145 from the United States and 165 from the rest of the world—will convene in Jerusalem for the 38th World Zionist Congress, as they do every five years.

I have been asked to represent the Reform Movement as one of the US delegates for the three-day Congress, which will follow the traditions of the First Zionist Congress convened by Theodore Herzl in the Swiss city of Basel in August, 1897. That first Congress set in motion the wheels that ultimately led to the

establishment of the State of Israel, a mere 50 years after the founding event.

When world Jewry meets in 2020, the impact of the choices we make will be felt for years to come.

Specifically, the makeup of this so-called “Parliament of the Jewish People” will directly affect how millions of Jewish Agency- and other social-service dollars will be allocated every year for the next ten years. (By comparison, the Israeli government annually provides over one billion dollars to Orthodox institutions.) The more representation we generate for our Reform Movement, the more money we will receive and the more we can translate into reality our vision of a pluralistic, egalitarian, democratic Jewish society in Israel.

**The bottom line is that *you* now have a choice to make.
You have to vote!**

The open voting period will be held from January 21 - March 11, 2020 for all people over the age of 18 who self-identify as Jewish.

WRT will hold quick-and-easy voting events at the temple over the winter months during the open voting period, so that you can vote when you're already in the building. You can also easily vote online from home—it takes just a few minutes and a few dollars for a minimal processing fee. You can even do it from your cell phone.

Our entire congregation will participate in this important effort. Together, our choices will support an Israel that promotes peace, prosperity, and pluralism.