



**SERMON YOM KIPPUR AFTERNOON:
CHOSE LIFE (AND/ OR DEATH)**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Wednesday 19 September 2018
Beit Klal Yisrael

- 1 “If there is to be birth,” wrote Herbert Samuel,¹ “there must be death. Unless there were departures, a time would quickly come when there could be no more arrivals. We can imagine a world in which there was neither birth nor death, but not a world in which there was one without the other.”

- 2 I’ve recently raced through a pair of enthrallingly wonderful books, the first two parts of a trilogy – and I’m now wishing the next few months away until part three comes out. They are *Scythe*² and *Thunderhead*³ by Neal Shusterman, and they tell of a world about 200 years in the future, when every form of fatal illness, injury and accident has a cure, and humans live indefinitely, governed by a benevolent supercomputer named The Thunderhead.

- 3 This world suffers from two problems. The first problem is the one Herbert Samuel highlighted: global immortality leaves no space for new life. In Neal Shusterman’s books, therefore, professional ‘scythes’ have the job of selecting and killing a set number of people each year to keep the population manageable. The scythedom, with the power of life and death over everyone on earth, is a corrupt institution which treats itself as above the law, while the Thunderhead, omnipotent in so many ways, helplessly and powerlessly looks on in grief at the carnage being wrought by this sect of the race it is programmed to protect.



- 4 The second problem is the total listlessness of the rest of humanity. With danger removed from the world, there is nothing to fear. With inequality removed – for the Thunderhead’s algorithms have successfully eliminated poverty and famine – there is nothing to strive for. There’s not even any crime. And with lifespans lasting hundreds of years, relationships, family, love... all somewhat lose their meaning. People are “plagued by boredom and slavish routine”; life is no longer about “forging time, just about passing time”.⁴
- 5 In many ways, these two problems with a post-bereavement world – the practical need for mortality, and the emotional need for suffering – are the two options that were placed before the Israelites in our afternoon Torah reading:⁵ good and evil, life and death. It was our decision. We are urged, **בחרת בחיים**, “Choose life,” but the choice remained and remains ours. God, omnipotent in so many ways, has restricted Herself to look on in grief, helplessly and powerlessly, at the carnage being wrought by the humanity whose creation brought such joy and pride.⁶
- 6 So why leave it up to us? One doesn’t leave a child next to a plug socket and say, “I set before you the choice of whether or not to stick your finger into it.” That would be neglectful. Was God neglectful of humanity in even allowing us the option of choosing evil?
- 7 The Jewish tradition has a surprising soft spot for evil, or at least recognises its necessity. If we are to avoid becoming a world of aimless, passionless drones like those in Neal Shusterman’s books, we need others to make the wrong choices. Only when faced with the effects of oppression, crime, inequality, wrongdoing, can true humanity have an opportunity to shine forth. And on an individual level, if I conquer the urge to steal when subject



to temptation, am I not worthier than the person who never steals because they're never tempted?

- 8 But Jewish thought goes further than this, and argues that the continued survival of human life on earth is actually dependent on each person's ability to access their **יצר הרע**, their evil inclination.⁷ “The **יצר טוב**, the good inclination, is very good,” Rabbi Samuel bar-Nachman tells us, “but the **יצר הרע** is also very good. Were it not for the **יצר הרע** nobody would build a house.”⁸
- 9 We need to be virtuous and ethical and steer clear of wrongdoing, but nevertheless our evil inclination does supply us with that vital spark of avarice that is necessary for creativity, for ambition, for procreation, for survival against all the odds that life throws at us. Without it, we would just drift through bucolic lives of nothingness. Without death, we would never truly know feelings of sorrow and sympathy; we cannot value what and who we have in life, unless, somewhere in our minds, we are conscious that one day we will no longer have them.
- 10 We need a little evil inclination to progress as a species; we need a little death to progress as a species. So the choice offered by God, ‘live or death; good or evil’, is getting more complicated by the second. Neal Shusterman's Thunderhead supercomputer, a thinly-veiled allegory for a deity, allowed humankind absolute free will. And what happened? It had its microprocessor heart repeatedly broken by humanity's inability to conquer our baser instincts. Sometimes it was so saddened by the corruption and depravity and self-inflicted suffering on earth, it would make it rain, a hardware equivalent of shedding tears. Eventually, though, the processor steels itself and concludes, “I have coddled humanity for too long. An infant cannot walk



if it is forever in loving arms. And a species cannot grow if it never faces the consequences of its own actions. To deny humanity the lesson of consequences would be a mistake. And I do not make mistakes.”⁹

- 11 In other words: no pain, no gain. The lesson of consequences cannot be learned if people don't do wrong and find out what happens next. Like God in our Torah reading, the Thunderhead had allowed people a choice. Unlike God, the Thunderhead had protected them from that choice's consequences.
- 12 In the real world, we deal with the consequences, good and bad, of our choices year-round. Some consequences come about almost immediately, some are delayed. But the noises we create with our acts always produce an echo, and sooner or later, according to no particular pattern, that echo will come back to us. But Yom Kippur, with its regular schedule, is when we face up more literally to the choices we have made; when we are required to look God in the eye and see the tears – of joy and pride, or of sorrow and anguish – that we have caused.
- 13 I omitted the second half of the Herbert Samuel quote with which I began this sermon. “If there is to be birth,” he said,¹⁰ “there must be death. Unless there were departures, a time would quickly come when there could be no more arrivals. We can imagine a world in which there was neither birth nor death, but not a world in which there was one without the other. If some ‘Messenger’ were to come to us with the offer that death should be overthrown, but with the one inseparable condition that birth should also cease; if the existing generation were given the chance to live forever, but on the clear understanding that never again would there be a child, never again new persons with new hopes, new ideas, new achievements; ourselves for



always and never any others – could there be a doubt what our answer would be?”

- 14 Good and evil, life and death. Choose life; choose good. But perhaps it's not entirely binary after all.

Check against delivery.

GW 19.09.18

¹ Herbert Samuel. *Belief and Action: an everyday philosophy* (London: Pan Books, 1953): 67ff.

² Neal Shusterman. *Scythe* (London: Walker Books, 2016).

³ Neal Shusterman. *Thunderhead* (London: Walker Books, 2018).

⁴ Shusterman, *Scythe*. 109, 152.

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:15

⁶ Genesis 1:31

⁷ Joseph Albo's *Book of Principles* 2:13

⁸ Genesis Rabbah 9:7

⁹ Shusterman, *Thunderhead*. 500.

¹⁰ Samuel, *ibid*.