

Rabbi's Message

CHALLENGES AND CHOICES

There is no question that life presents us with challenges. In fact there are times when the challenges of life seem to come in a never-ending stream complete with turbulent stretches of white water rapids. We are often challenged by our children, challenged by our parents, our spouses, and the full range of relationships in our lives. We might find ourselves challenged by poor health, by work, finances, and/or any of the various aspects of our lives.



Beyond our personal challenges we live in a challenging world. The issues of community, country, and the world at large generate tides of trouble that invariably rock us and at times swamp us. There are wars, recessions, environmental catastrophes, and a host of storms that threaten our stability, our future, and even our dreams.

Sometimes, with a bit of luck, we can see a challenge on the horizon and act preemptively to avert it; more often we are powerless to prevent the onslaught of life's difficult realities. Yet, while we may be powerless to prevent and may have precious little ability to stop, alter, or undo any of those things that cause our distress, we are almost limitless in our power to cope.

With challenge comes choice; though rarely, if ever, do we get to choose the challenge, we always have the choice as to the attitudes and perspectives we bring to bear in meeting the challenge. We are in possession of a significant array of supports and frames with and within which we can better shape our responses to challenge.

In 2003 Rabbi Harold Kushner (the author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People) wrote an entire book in exploration of the power inherent in the 23rd Psalm entitled The Lord Is My Shepherd. In the introduction to the book he explains that in the days following September 11, 2001 he was often asked, "Where was God? How could God let this happen?" Rabbi Kushner found himself responding that, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was that, when we had to confront the unfairness of life, we would not have to do so alone for He would be with us."

Within that response we find two powerful things. One concerns the frame within which we see our challenge; do we expect life to be a challenge free easy street with each day spent in paradise, or, do we understand that challenge, crisis, difficulty, failure, and even death are normal parts of the journey through life?

If we conclude that life is, in fact, often unfair,

capricious, and problematic, it becomes possible to turn away from the unanswerable question of why is this happening to me toward the answerable questions of how I might respond, what are my action options, and to whom do I turn for support. The choices we make in re attitude, action, and reaching out to God, family, and friends can make all the difference in our ability to cope and live in the face of challenge. As Rabbi Kushner reminds, we are not alone and unsupported; we can reach out and find ourselves embraced.

As I ponder the wisdom of Rabbi Kushner's work I am reminded of a 1995 book by Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Power of Hope. Utilizing case histories drawn from a lifetime of chaplaincy, Rabbi Lamm teaches us well in the active access, development, and application of hope in our efforts to live with and through the realities and crises of our lives. He teaches us to see and draw strength from the fact that, "Like the bond in good paper, hope is the watermark that is found in the very texture of the human condition itself."

This power of hope takes me back to one of the most significant books I have ever read. In 1991 Mr. Steve Lipman, a journalist, wrote Laughter in Hell. This book, subtitled "The Use of Humor during the Holocaust," is drawn from 20 years of interviewing survivors and researching a vast body of documentation; it chronicles the various ways that humor was employed by those who actually lived the unspeakable hell of the Holocaust. While humor may seem totally incongruous in the context of the Holocaust, it was nevertheless present and a tool of significant use and value in framing, facing, and coping with the horror beyond our understanding.

We are not powerless in the face of crisis. While we may be powerless in regards to averting, avoiding, or ending crisis, we have great power and range of choice in how we respond. We may be beaten badly by challenge, but we do not have to be broken. The perspectives brought by faith and hope and the use of tools such as relationships and laughter can lead to a triumph of spirit that carries us above the pain of the day.

I invite you to read these books and apply their insights. I pray that each of us can face the difficulties heaped upon us with the triumphant power of faith and hope and that we emerge with a firm grasp on the blessings to be found in each of life's days, the dark ones as well as the bright ones.

Shalom u'v'racha,

Norman Koch, Rabbi