

Netzavim 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/1/16

Albert Einstein (some say it was Louis Brandeis) once startled an audience when he announced, "I'm sorry I was born a Jew." The people were shocked. How could this great man make such an outlandish statement? With a smile, Einstein then impishly continued, "Because it deprived me of the privilege of choosing to be a Jew." Most of us are not Jews by choice. We were born into our faith. It is, however, a little known fact of Jewish law that when a boy or girl is converted to Judaism as a child, he or she actually has the chance to opt out. That's right. Because as a child the little one did not really have a choice, the Rabbi has to ask the student some time before the actual ceremony if he or she WANTS to be Jewish. Of course, by that time the hope is that every kid will say, "Well that's a silly question. Of course I want to be a Jew!" But most of us, we did not have a choice or a say in the matter. And it is not simply that our parents educated us as Jews. Moses actually sets the precedent in this week's Torah portion.

It's the very end of his life and Moses must ratify the covenant with the new generation of Jews who stand before him. They are not the slaves who left Egypt. They are the children born to those parents, the generation of the desert. Moses wants them to know that simply by being born to a Jew they themselves are now Jewish with all the responsibilities that that entails. He says, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing with us this day before the Lord our Gd, and with those who are not with us here today." And here he could not mean people who were elsewhere for all of Israel was gathered as one. No, he meant that all subsequent generations are also bound by the covenant that Gd makes with those standing there that day, just as Gd made with their parents at Sinai. And so, to this day, we don't really have a choice if we are Jewish or not. And yet, we know that we always have a choice when it comes to deciding what kind of Jew we want to be. And this Moses makes very plain when he says at the end of this same portion, "U'Vacharta Ba-Chayim" - choose the path of life. In other words, each and every one of us decides how to take the religion we have been born into and make it into a living faith. Not just a name, not just an "identity", but a living faith that enriches our lives and those of our families.

I want to emphasize that fact: Each of us has the choice of deciding what our Judaism looks like in our lives. No one else in the world does Judaism the way you do! U'Vacharta Ba-Chayim means that you choose the shape and structure and depth of your own spiritual life. This is especially important to remember this time of year. Very soon we will be back in shul beginning a new year. Now is the time to evaluate where you are at Jewishly. The fact that you are here today, without our having a bar or bat mitzvah or other simcha to celebrate tells me that you have already chosen to take your Judaism seriously. But I think it will serve us all well to think about where our spiritual and intellectual life as Jews will go in the year to come. We need to set an agenda for personal Jewish growth. What are areas you are curious about? What are practices, holidays or observances that you aspire to make more a part of your routine? What are the books you want to read, the courses you might want to take, the ways you want to challenge yourself intellectually as a Jew? What fascinates and intrigues you about the history of our people, the philosophies of Jewish life, or the way Judaism is practiced in different parts of the world? Where is the edge of your Jewish comfort zone and are you willing to go one step beyond in order to feel a sense of growth and accomplishment? That's where true spiritual growth takes place.

Very soon we will be reaching the end of the Torah scroll, and the last of the 613 commandments is a very interesting one. We get to it next week in Va-Yelech. Moses commands the People, on Gd's behalf, that each and every Jew should write a Torah scroll, or at least one new letter in one. Commenting on this mitzvah the Rambam says that even if a person was given a Torah scroll by his or her parents or ancestors, each person is *STILL* required to add one new letter in his or her hand. Why? Because each of us has something unique to contribute to the unfolding of Torah and Jewish life. We each have our own, unique set of experiences on which to draw as we interpret Torah and put it into practice. Each of us adds color to the black and white on the page.