

Right about now, I bet some of you are asking yourselves, why am I here? I could be at the movies, I could be getting work done, I could be meeting friends for lunch. Why am I sitting in this Sanctuary? What if it turns out that you are not entirely here by choice. I'm not talking about the children, who may very well not be here by choice. And I'm also not talking about those who feel compelled to be here by a sense of guilt.

I'm talking about something deep within you that is not under your control. I'm wondering whether you have the free will to decide to be here or not; or at least questioning whether some aspect of what we assume is free will is nothing but an illusion. Could you have been influenced to be here today by something outside of your conscious control? We might tell ourselves that we're in the driver's seat, that we make the decisions about what to eat or how to vote or where to go to pray. But science writer Ed Yong tells us that this is not necessarily true.¹

He shared a TED talk recently on parasites. He spoke about one named *Toxoplasma gondii*, or Toxo, for short. Toxo infects a wide variety of mammals, but for some reason it can only sexually reproduce in a cat. So to get to a cat, it infects rodents. Normally, rodents avoid cats like the plague. However, scientists researching this parasite have shown that it secretes a particular enzyme that stimulates part of a rat's brain in a peculiar way. A normal healthy rat smells a cat and runs the other way. An infected rat smells the delightful odor of cat urine and runs towards the source of the smell. The cat eats the rat and Toxo gets to reproduce.

This single cell parasite, totalling lacking a nervous system, lacking consciousness, lacking a body is manipulating a mammal. We are mammals. We are more intelligent than a rat, to be sure, but our brains have the same basic structure, the same types of cells, the same chemicals running through them as a rat. The evidence is inconclusive, but there is some indication that people infected with Toxo have a slightly higher risk of car accidents and schizophrenia. It is possible that the Toxo parasite is influencing human behavior.

This may be surprising to us, but would not have been a surprise to the editors of the Talmud. In their pre-modern world, there was very little room for free will. A passage in Tractate Niddah [16b] goes:

An angel says to the human embryo at the moment of conception, "Sovereign of the Universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?"

In that world, you would be born into a class and a job or profession. Genetics determined the potential of one's body and mind; class determined the rest. Free will was mostly irrelevant. Nonetheless, the Talmud goes on:

Whereas 'wicked' or 'righteous' he does not mention, ... because: Everything is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of God, as it says, "And now Israel, what does Adonai your God require of you, but to fear God, etc." (Deuteronomy 10:12)

Meaning that "fear of God" is a choice. The only truly free choices that we make are whether we are good or wicked; whether we follow God's path or not.

So you who are sitting here today – could it be that you are all infected with a God-delusion parasite? Who's to say that there isn't some parasite influencing us to gather together in communities rather than go it alone?

There is a tiny brine shrimp called *Artemia*. They are normally transparent little things which live alone. However, there is a particular tapeworm parasite that preys on them, and when

1. https://www.ted.com/talks/ed_yong_suicidal_wasps_zombie_roaches_and_other_tales_of_parasites

Artemia are infected by this tapeworm, it changes their color to bright red and makes them swim in large groups.

Artemia aren't sociable through their own volition. They are being controlled. The tapeworm is a parasite that can only reproduce in the greater flamingo. So to help it get to its destination, it hijacks Artemia and manipulates it into forming conspicuously colored large swarms that are easy for the flamingo to spot and devour. It's not a matter of safety in numbers. It's the exact opposite. The tapeworm hijacks their brains and their bodies, turning them into vehicles for getting itself into a flamingo. Voila! Pink flamingos and baby tapeworms!

We live in a world of parasites. They are an intrinsic part of our ecosystem. A cricket swallows the larvae of a Gordian worm, or horsehair worm. The worm grows to adult size within it, but it needs to get into water in order to mate. It does that by releasing proteins that addle the cricket's brain, causing it to jump into a body of water and drown, allowing the worm to swim out of its suicidal corpse and mate. A Japanese scientist found that in one stream, these things drive so many crickets and grasshoppers into the water that the drowned insects make up some 60 percent of the diet of local trout.

How do I know how much of my decision-making is of my own accord, and how much is possibly being influenced by something like a parasite? Actually, we don't know. However, there is no parasite that distinguishes between gathering in Jewish communities on Saturday versus gathering in Christian communities on Sunday versus gathering for football or basketball games. Therefore, if I am influenced by a better-with-other-people-delusion inducing parasite, I nonetheless know that I am choosing freely to make Torah the center of my life, and moreover I am choosing a particular approach to Torah represented by the Conservative movement, and moreover I am making a conscious choice to live out that life in the community of Ahavas Israel.

So now we have affirmed that you have all made some kind of conscious choice to be here today. The deeper question is how much do you want to make that choice a part of your life, apart from today? A typical person's commitment and involvement in Jewish life waxes and wanes and waxes again over time, as children are born, grow to religious school age, celebrate b'nai mitzvah, mature into college students, as you find yourself aging into senior years and approaching retirement, or as you look back on a life hopefully well lived. When you consider what you want to leave as your legacy, what kind of deliberate choices in the realm of Jewish living might you make?

The purpose of Rosh Hashanah is to mark a moment in your life for you to take stock of who you are and what you want to be. My purpose here today is to be a bit of a parasite, to use principles of Judaism to influence you to expand your Jewish *neshama* just a bit. I represent that little parasite within your mind attempting to influence you to freely choose to live a Jewish life just a bit larger than you have done in the past year. I am here to be the Jewish parasitic earworm, reminding you of the Jewish identity that you inherited or choose. I want you to hear my voice, or better yet, the voice of Torah or the Voice of God inviting you to make a Jewish choice when you open a menu and see the bacon cheeseburger, or when you think about what you're planning to do at the beginning of Spring break, on Friday night, March 30 (hint: a Passover Seder). Before you go to work on a regular Wednesday or Thursday morning, I'm here to ask you to stop by the synagogue to help us make a minyan at 7:15 or 7:30.

Rosh Hashanah is calling you to invest just a little bit more of yourself in our community. Be present for some of the social and learning opportunities. Participate in the prayer gatherings.

Help out in the service opportunities. I think that you'll find the time spent in spiritual contemplation and learning and service enjoyable and rewarding.

Rosh Hashanah is about asking yourself what choices have you made or might you make in the future that strengthen your Jewish *neshamah*. We Jews have been on this earth for about 3,500 years because every generation has made a positive choice to embody Torah as a daily, weekly, and monthly routine. We as a people believe that the world is a better place when it has Jews in it. I want you to be one of those Jews actively living Torah. Think of me as your own private gentle parasite, reminding you of the blessings of active involvement in a Jewish life. Have you experienced the birth of a baby welcomed into the covenant? Have you experienced a Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Have you experienced the power of a community in your home, providing a minyan, providing comfort after a loss? Such is the blessing of traditional Jewish community.

Rosh Hashanah invites you to envision yourself as being precisely half way on the scale of worthy and unworthy. The next choice you make will tip the balance. If the next thing you do is judge someone unfavorably – bang! You've condemned yourself. If the next thing you do is greet someone with a smiling face, especially someone you don't like – bing! You've proved yourself worthy. Such is the blessing of the Jewish voice of morality.

These choices are yours to make, but the fact that you have made the first, most difficult choice, to spend part of your day here, is wonderful. Yasher Koah, may your strength and resolve be firm. May you find what you are seeking here at the synagogue, and dive back in for more. May you make wise choices, influenced by nothing but the voice of Torah whispering in your ear. May all of your choices lead to the books of life and blessing.