

Boker Tov, Good morning. On Rosh Hashanah, I introduced a new program CJC is going to experiment with in the coming year. We are going to have a congregation-wide theme. This year the theme is *atz chaiim*, a tree of life. One of the most famous prayers using this theme is said during the Torah service when we return the Torah to the ark. **עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה**. This prayer is actually a quote from the Book of Proverbs. Traditionally in this prayer, the tree of life is a metaphor for the Torah, not just the five books of Moses, but all of Jewish tradition. We are commanded in this prayer **למחזיקים** Judaism. My question for us today is, what does it mean? **למחזיקים** Often this verb is translated as to get hold of, grasp and/or keep. I must admit I do not like the translation to keep or to get hold of. Let me explain why. You can get hold of something in a museum, in a drawer and never use it. You can even keep it behind glass and only take it out on special occasions. But Judaism is not a twice a year object, or at least it was never meant to be a twice/year religion. It was meant to be worn to the point of needing to buy a new pair because it was worn out. I love seeing *haggadot* with grape juice stains, Shabbat table clothes with wine stains, and candle stick holders with hardened wax on them, because that means they were used.

The other translation I do not particularly like is the one I grew up with and that is to grasp. We are to grasp onto Judaism. I always had an image in my head of being caught outside in a horrible wind storm, grasping onto Judaism for dear life. Can Judaism serve as a life saver in a horrible storm? Absolutely, but if it is only used in dire straits, how does that reflect on our everyday life? How do we integrate Judaism into all aspects of our life?

On some level I wish the verb was not **למחזיקים** at all but rather **לעסוק** which is found in another prayer, the one we do before we study Torah, or work to improve our community *laasok*. For *laasok* is defined as to deal with, to pursue, to be busy with, to occupy, and/or to engage in. What would our religious life be like if we truly pursued Judaism, occupied ourselves with Judaism and engaged in Judaism on a daily basis? Now before you all get up and walk out, I am not suggesting necessarily that you all become *shomer Shabbat*, keep kosher, and pray three times a day. Although, would it be so horrible if you did? But rather that at some point during the week, you thought about

what does Judaism teach me about a, b, c? What would it mean to really engage in Judaism so that we were not just Jewish but also actively choosing to live “Jewishly” every single day? What would it mean that when we were presented with ethical dilemmas, we took the opportunity to look into what Judaism has to teach about business, medical, and/or family ethics? Not to do what it says without thought, never to follow blindly, but to consider what it has to teach before making up one’s own mind. What would it mean to apply *halakhah*/Jewish law to our everyday life?

Unfortunately *Halakhah*/Jewish law gets a bum rap in the progressive movement. We, like most of the Jewish community, mistranslate *Halakhah* as Jewish law. The word is derived from the verb “to go” and so a more accurate translation would be “the way or the path,” implying the Jewish path we are on. *Halakhah* never was meant to become a final legal document fixed in stone. Rather, it is a well thought out, diverse way of engaging in the many different challenges life brings our way. As Rabbi/Dr. Moshe Zemer wrote in [Evolving Halakah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law](#), “Halakhah is by nature and practice evolutionary, flexible, ethical and progressive. It has roots in the distant past, but its methods allow it to deal with contemporary conditions. It can be applied to almost every human situation. Its determinations are a matter not only of ancient law but also of social justice and human rights. In other words, it deals not only with the dry letter of the law but also-and perhaps chiefly-with human beings as human beings and with Jews as Jews. “

As some of you may remember, when I interviewed at CJC I informed you that I was *shomer Shabbat*. And though I have always respected different ways of celebrating Shabbat, being *shomer Shabbat* for me included that I did not drive on Shabbat. Instead since I was a junior in college, I have lived in walking distance of my *shul* on purpose because regardless of the weather or the convenience, I had taken upon myself the commandment to walk. For me, this practice is a meditative practice. During that time I get myself into the mood of Shabbat, into the right frame of mind. I liked it on the rare occasion I had company, but the truth of it was that it often is one of the quietest times of my week. In addition, I do not just walk during Shabbat, but I had developed a practice of walking close to 2 miles 5 days a week. I was very proud of my twenty minute mile-my cardio work out. This had so many

different benefits for my psyche, my heart muscles, and my soul. And then a little over a year ago, I started to have extreme pain in my left calf. At first, it only affected my personal life-I couldn't walk as far, or go as fast as I would like. But eventually, you all started to watch me limp more and more until I could not get through one *Amidah* without being in excruciating pain. There was no way I could walk to *shul*, lead services, and walk home. For that matter, there was no way I could stand and lead the service as I wanted to without pain. And so, I was confronted with a very difficult decision or, at least for me, it was a very difficult decision. I had to determine if I was going to continue walking to *shul* against doctor's orders or start to drive. Now I am quite aware that for most of the progressive world, this is a no brainer. It is nice, Rabbi, that you walk, but the truth is we really don't think that practice is very meaningful anymore.

And to be honest, even for me the lesson wasn't about whether or not I would walk. The lesson as so many other lessons have been was about how was I going to make the decision? Was I going to follow my doctor's orders and let him be the determining factor? Was I going to follow the customs of my community and do what they would do? Or was I going to really think about Judaism and what Judaism had to offer me in this moment. I chose the latter. I studied concepts like *pekua'h nefesh*, the commandment to break any other law if it would mean saving a life. Of course, that led me to a contemporary discussion of is saving a life only the physical life or was it a quality of life issue? I studied the laws around pain and what the rabbis believed we were required to live with and what we did not have to withstand. I know that modern medicine is revered as a profession that enhances our lives. I know that Gd created a world that had embedded in it solutions to our ailments, if we would only spend the time and resources to find them and then, of course, make them affordable for all who need them. I looked at the role of the service leader, and how I was to enhance your spiritual needs and not cause the focus of every Shabbat to be on me. And in the end, after Simchat Torah last year, I started to drive to *shul*. For close to a year I have been driving to and from *shul* every week. I decided to keep the radio off so that the car would be as quiet as the walk had been. I made sure my car was filled with gas before Shabbat started so that I still did not use money. And I only went to and from *shul*. I changed my

decades old Jewish practice based on *Halachah*, Jewish law as a response to my changing physical needs. I learned and studied and engaged in Judaism not as an abstract distraction but as a relevant practice for a real problem I was having. At the same time, like any other person I went to different doctors, tried physical therapy, different orthotics, and alternative medicine until the only other option was surgery. May 22nd I had surgery. My birth defect of a flat foot was corrected. According to my physical therapist, I now have a beautiful arch. And my mostly torn and tattered tendon was severed, reattached and another tendon was used to bolster the first. Finally in mid-August I was in less pain than before surgery and I can say with extreme gratitude I am now back to 85 percent of all my activities. I feel so blessed. For I am quite aware that a 1 1/2 year infirmity is different than a life-altering one, as all too many of you are dealing with. What if, for that matter, my injury had been a progressive version of MS, as my brother has, or extreme arthritis, as my father has, or cancer, as some of you have? What if it never was going to get better? Do I stop going to *shul*? Or continue to drive? And most important, how do I decide?

What would our lives be like if we *laasok*/engaged in Judaism on a daily basis? What would we be learning about? How to treat our employees? What to do when we pass a poor person on the road? How do we confront the challenges of living with a spouse, children, and/or an aging parent? What could keeping kosher mean in our contemporary lives? What would my spiritual journey be like if I learned Hebrew, understood the prayers, and/or played the mp3 of the morning service in my car every morning on my way to work? How do I engage in my Jewish life?

I have always been frustrated with how the religious left politically and religiously handed over our way of interpreting our tradition to the ultra-orthodox. As Rabbi/Dr. Zemer wrote, "*Halakhah* is ethical in its very essence. What is the import of the term ethical? For the sages, discrimination against the destitute, widowed, and orphaned, or exploitation of the weak persons, constitutes injustice." Can you imagine if we incorporated that ethical statement and all the behaviors that would naturally come from it into our lives?

The Spanish Philosopher Rabbi Joseph Albo wrote, “The Written Law cannot be understood except with the Oral Law; and the law of Gd cannot be perfect so as to be adequate for all times, because the ever-new circumstances of human relations, their judgments and their actions, are too numerous to be embraced in a book.” Wouldn’t it be cool if once or twice a year we all met in our ever expanding library and brought all of our real life questions? We could search out answers in the books we have, share our collective knowledge, and engage experts for the answers that at the time seem elusive.

I want to be clear I am not a *halakhist* - a specialist in Jewish law. Nor do we need to be in order to engage in building a Jewish way of life for ourselves. Our tag line is “wherever you are in your journey, you are welcome here.” I could not agree with that more! Wherever you are in your journey, you are welcome here. And if you are happy with how you live out your Jewish life, then you are truly blessed. But for the rest of us, what would it mean to expand our knowledge, apply it to contemporary challenges and to continue on that Jewish path wherever it may take us? What new topic, new Jewish book/movie/idea/practice are we now going to incorporate into our new year? Am I going to learn at home and/or in community? How am I going to engage in my Jewish life? What does it mean to live a particularistic life with a Universalist lens covering my eyes? In the coming year, I hope we all avail ourselves of the many opportunities to *laasok*/engage in contemporary Jewish life. Please contact me if you would like to learn with me or have an idea for the congregation. Come to the program on Nov. 14th at 7:30pm in our library-bring your questions, concerns, and challenges. In a moment we are going to rise as we turn to our *musaf amidah* on pp. 868 in the *mahzor*. This *amidah* contains many of the prayers unique to Yom Kippur. It pleads with us to look deeply into our hearts and souls, determining what to build on and what to change. Let us continue our spiritual journey together, engaging in our Jewish community as a vibrant contemporary addition to our lives. And may we be given the gift of time-another year. If only we knew what to do with it. Please rise