

Hitchayevut:
Choosing Life by Keeping Our Commitments
Rabbi Edwin S. Harris, Ph.D.

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Something is different this year, standing before you, on this most holy day. Last year, at this time, Debbie and I had just returned from Israel, and I was still feeling the awe and wonder of being in such a holy place. I remember walking through the streets of Jerusalem, and out of my mouth came the words that Jacob spoke, when he arose from his dream, “*Ma norah hamakom hazeh,*” how awesome is this place. And here, now, I again say, “*Ma norah hamakom hazeh.*” how awesome is this place, with all of you. I also feel that same sense of awe inside myself, having been ordained as rabbi, 12 days ago. Rabbi Susan asked me at Rosh Hashanah services, “Do you feel any different.” I do. I had a strange sensation in my ordination service, when Susan, Randy and Jim placed their hands on me, all at the same time, and blessed me as a rabbi. The sense was, that something was being downloaded in me – not the download of more Chassidic stories, Torah commentaries, or tractates of the Talmud. Because I don’t think I am any smarter now than I was before I was ordained. What was downloaded in me was the history of all the rabbis who came before me, the mantle of responsibility that goes with being a part of that history, and the trust that my rabbis now place in me. My ordination certificate reads, “As Moses entrusted the teaching to Joshua, so do we entrust the teaching to you. This is your *smicha*.” I hope and pray that I use the teachings for good, and for healing, and for the enrichment of our lives as Jews. I also hope and pray that I may uphold all that was entrusted to me. I thank my rabbis and all of you for being on this holy path with me.

But, I have to admit, that I didn’t always have such holy interests or holy pursuits. When I was 10 years old, I did not jump up and say, “I want to be a rabbi.” I jumped up and said, “I, want to play football.” That’s right, football. I wanted to play midget football, which was like little league only for football, for 11-12 year olds -- full pads, full contact, real games, with referees, the whole 9 yards (so to speak).

Now in our family, my mother was the tougher sell. I knew that if I could get her from a “No”, to a, “We’ll see”, I would probably get what I wanted. My father, who was an Ophthalmologist, was the easier one, the one who showed his love, in part by saying, “Yes” to almost anything, almost all the time, **except** when it came to the possibility of getting sick or getting hurt. Then, **he** was the tougher sell. Being an ophthalmologist, taking care of your eyes was of paramount importance for him. Of course, that makes all the typical things that boys want to play with, totally off limits. No slingshot, you could lose an eye. No throwing rocks, you could scratch your cornea. Caps? are you crazy, the gunpowder could burn your eye. A bow and arrow, **with rubber arrows**, no way. You could get a detached retina. Sparklers, definitely out. You could lose an eye and get seriously burned. And firecrackers, the worst of the worst. You could lose both eyes. My father, was, shall we say, a bit overprotective. His overprotective nature was also

evident when it came to pets. We couldn't get a dog because we might get rabies. We couldn't get a cat because we might get cat scratch fever. A turtle could give us salmonella. And of course, a parakeet could give us psittacosis. Have any of you ever heard of psittacosis? I thought my father made it up to avoid getting us a parakeet. It's actually a real disease and we could get it if we ever had a bird. **We**, had goldfish. You can understand why.

So, getting my father to allow me to play football was going to be an uphill climb. But I wanted it so much that I was up for the task. "Dad, can I play midget football?" "No." "Why not?" "You could get hurt, maybe break your leg, or even get paralyzed. That's all we need is for you to be paralyzed." "That is ridiculous. What are the chances of me being paralyzed?" "It's too dangerous, end of discussion." Well, it wasn't the end of the discussion for me. Debbie and I have a friend, who describes her daughter as someone who could "talk the legs off a table." I was a bit like that in my own family, so I knew our discussions were not over. I kept at it, and we went back and forth for days. I finally said, that I would even put on extra weight so I could handle the bigger 6th graders. He paused. Either this made sense to him, or I was just wearing him down. "What if I worked really hard to get up to 95 lbs. Would you let me play then?" He paused again. "I don't know." And then, just like my mother, he said, "Well, we'll see." I knew at that moment, I was going to play football. The next day I said, "So, Dad, can I play?" He paused again, and reluctantly said, "OK, if you get up to 95 lbs, you can play." I was the happiest 5th grader at Braeburn Elementary School. But, just to be sure, I drew up a contract. That's right. I wrote out an agreement. "I, Louis Harris agree to let my son, Ed, play midget football if he reaches 95 lbs. by the registration date." And he signed it.

I ate like crazy, and worked on my passing and catching, and my falling and hitting the ground, just to make it a little less likely that I would break my leg or get paralyzed. And then, the day came. I stepped on the scale and, behold, 95 lbs. I was thrilled. I ran downstairs with the registration form in one hand and the signed agreement in the other. "I weigh 95 lbs.," I said proudly. "Sign me up." He paused yet, again. This was a longer pause, and I was worried. "You're not going to play. It's too dangerous and I won't let you do it." "But you promised.....You even signed this note" "It's just too dangerous. I'm sorry," And I think my father was genuinely sorry. It didn't matter. I was devastated. "A promise is a promise", I said, with tears in my eyes. "It's just too dangerous." "But a deal is a deal." "No." And that really was the end of it. No deal, no football, just a broken promise, and a lot of hurt.

In Hebrew it's called *hitchayevut*. It means to keep one's commitments. It comes from the verb, *l'hitchayev* which means "to commit." But interestingly enough, the verb *l'hitchayev* is in the reflexive form, which means its something we do to ourselves. So the verb to commit actually means to commit yourself. Not commit yourself in the sense of, now you are going to drive over to Metropolitan Psychiatric Hospital and sign yourself in. Not that kind of committing yourself -- but rather, making a commitment, a vow, a pledge, a promise, and committing yourself to fulfilling it.

Last night, Rabbi Susan taught us that the *Kol Nidrei* is a way to free ourselves from some vows that we were just unable to keep, but it also may be a *kavanah*, an intention, for us to work to keep other vows that we have made. Today we focus on *Hitchayevut* -- the work to keep our vow, promises, and commitments.

Jewish texts are filled with references about the importance of keeping one's commitments. First we read about promises made between God and us. Each of these is referred to as a *brit* or covenant - a kind of sacred oath. God makes a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the earth by flooding. God makes a covenant with Abraham that Abraham will be the father of a multitude of nations and in return Abraham's descendents shall circumcise every male on the eighth day of life - *brit milah*, as it's called - the covenant of circumcision.

Then we hear about promises that we make to God or to each other. The Torah teaches, in Numbers, 30:3, that if a person makes a vow to God or promises to do something, or takes an oath, the person must keep that vow or promise or carry out that oath. In the 16th century, Rabbi Yosef Caro, who codified many principles of Jewish Law in the *Shulchan Aruch*, had much to say about the laws of vows and oaths. One particularly important one states that a vow is not valid unless, "The mouth and the heart were as one" - you have to mean what you say.

And in our liturgy we recite "*Baruch she amar v'hayah ha olam.*" Blessed is the one who spoke, and the world came into being. That God's words of creation, "*Y'hi Or*, Let there be light", brought the world into being. This spiritual notion leads the Sefat Emet to suggest that since God's words are holy, the words we use in our vows and pledges are also holy. We see this in our wedding ceremony, appropriately named *brit ha nisuin*, the covenant of marriage, where the couples' holy words to each other are often written in their *ketubah*, their marriage contract, as promises that they make to each other.

A few years ago, CRC asked a high profile, then, Jewish Renewal rabbi to be the scholar-in-residence for our annual study weekend. The rabbi agreed. The date was set and the arrangements were made. Three months before the weekend, he called us to ask if we could change the date of the weekend because he was asked to teach the same weekend at Harvard University, and he wanted to teach there. CRC both could not, but mostly would not change the date. The rabbi took the Harvard offer, and canceled us, saying that he hoped we would understand. We didn't. And he said he really wanted to come to our congregation and hoped that we would ask him for another weekend. We didn't. *Lo hitchayevut* - not keeping one's commitments. Many of us had the same reaction, "What are we, chopped liver? Are we not good enough?" We did our own study weekend, that year, with many wonderful teachings. I regret this incident, especially since I was the one who suggested that we invite this particular rabbi. I am sorry if the incident was hurtful to any of you here at CRC. And, if in the last year, I have hurt any of you here today, either by word or deed, know that I am sorry and ask your forgiveness.

When our daughter, Eliana, was mid-way through her sophomore year of high school, she came to me and said, “Can I get a new computer?” “What’s wrong with the computer we have now?” “Well, nothing really, other than it’s a little slow, but I mean my own computer than I can have in my own room.” “Oh.” And then, she began to make a case for why she should have her own computer. She was very clear and persistent and we talked about it many times for many days. She, too, can talk the legs off a table. It must be genetic. “Let’s see how you do for the remainder of school year, and if you can handle school and lacrosse and CRC confirmation class, we’ll get you a computer.” Eliana said, “OK.”

At the end of the school year, Eliana came to me and said, “Well, I did pretty well in school, lacrosse is over, and so is confirmation. Let’s get the computer.” I paused, just as my father did. Eliana looked worried, just as I did. I realized I had made a promise to her that I did not want to keep. I didn’t want to buy her a computer. It was expensive, we didn’t really need one, and, she was leaving for Israel in three weeks, all of which was my avoidance. “Let’s wait,” I said. “But you promised.” “I know.” “A deal is a deal.” “I don’t want to buy it now. You’re going to Israel in three weeks. We’ll get it when you come back from Israel.” “That’s not fair.” “I’m sorry.” I couldn’t even tell her, as my father told me, that buying the computer might result in her getting a broken leg or being paralyzed. I was aware that I broke my promise to her. *Lo hitchayevut* – not keeping my commitment. I thought about it much of the time that Eliana was in Israel. Soon after she came back, we went together and bought a computer. She said, “It’s not even my birthday.” I said, “You’re right. It’s not for your birthday. It’s because we promised it to you and we want to keep our promise.”

So think for a moment about the commitments you made this past year, and what you did with them. If you made any promises that, for whatever reason, you did not keep, can you rectify it? If not, can you make amends for it? That’s also part of the spiritual work of this season. To recognize how we have hurt one another, take responsibility for it, make amends, and vow not to do again, what was hurtful. Sometimes the person knows when the commitment has been broken. This was the case with Eliana and the computer. Sometimes the person doesn’t know when a commitment has been broken. And these broken commitments are often more serious. Breaking a marriage vow or similar relationship vow, or a financial agreement can be devastating to a couple or family.

The Hebrew word, *chesed*, almost always means love, kindness, or caring. *Chesed* also has another meaning. *Chesed* can also mean shame or disgrace. It is amazing that the very word in Hebrew that means, kindness and love can also mean shame or disgrace. And we can see these two meanings when we look at our promises and agreements. Keeping our agreements can be filled with *chesed*. It can be a most loving thing, to do what you say you’re going to do. And, not keeping our promises can also be filled with *chesed*. It can result in the experience of shame or disgrace when a commitment is broken or when there is betrayal or other abuse.

In the torah portion that we just read, it says, “*Ha chaim v’hamavet natati lifanecha*”, life and death I place before you. “*Ha bracha, v’hak lala*,” the blessing and the curse. “*U’vacharta bachayim*”, it says. Choose life, *l’ma aan tichyeh atah v’zarecha*, so you and your offspring will live. “*U’vacharta bachayim*. Choose life! This is the spiritual work during these ten days and maybe during the rest of the year as well. And one way to choose life may be to work toward keeping our commitments and promises, especially with the people that are the closest to us. This notion of choosing life by keeping our commitments is supported in the actual Hebrew word, *hitchayevut*. Right in the middle of the word, *hitchayevut*, is the word, *Chai*, life. The Hebrew language is telling us that there is life in keeping one’s commitments.

And as you think about the promises that you have made this past year, know that our tradition recognizes that no one is perfect. That’s why we are all here today. There will be times when we make a promise, fully intent to keep it, and just can’t because, not everything is in our control. We get stuck in traffic, we run late, or someone gets sick or someone dies. Then, there will be times when we make a promise, fully intent to keep it, and we don’t because we change our minds or have a change of heart. We might realize we agreed too soon, before we had all the information. Or we come to know that to make the most loving or best decision means that we have to break a promise. Maybe that’s what happened with my father. Even though things will come up that may get in the way of keeping our promises, I hope and pray that we all move toward a little more *hitchayevut*, working to keep our commitments, in this New Year.

In the end, I think it takes some time and some forgiveness to heal from the commitments that we don’t keep. I came to understand how afraid my father was, and to appreciate how much he, in his own way, loved me, and valued life. When I became a parent, I understood even more. He and I talked over the years about the football incident. He even said he was sorry about the pain that he had caused me, and assured me that, if he had it to do over again, he would **still**, not let me play football.

I trust in the healing that is possible between people when we approach each other with an open heart and a sincere desire to do *teshuvah*, to turn toward the good, especially with the people who matter to us the most.

May we look seriously at the commitments that we have made in the past year. May we approach each other with the *chesed*, the love and kindness that we know flows through us from one to the other. And may we practice a bit more *Hitchayevut* – a bit more working to keep our commitments. And when we do, “*U’vacharta bachayim*”, we will be choosing life, *l’ma aan tichyeh atah v’zarecha*, so that we, and our children, and those whom we love, may live. *Gemar Chatimah Tovah*. May you all be sealed for a good life, in this New Year. Amen.