

## MORAL AGENTS IN A BROKEN WORLD

### A Devotional Meditation on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Leviticus 16:1-34, 18:1-30; Isaiah 57:14-58:14; Hebrews 7:23-28

Albert J. McCarn

October 12, 2024

In this season of confession, I confess that I get annoyed at complaints about having to make choices between “the lesser of two evils.”

That’s a common statement at election season in the United States. I’ve been hearing it since I became politically aware when Richard Nixon ran for president in 1968. What I did not understand then, or now, is why people hesitate about exercising their responsibility as American citizens, and why they complain about having an opportunity most people in history have never dreamed of having.



Photo by Sasquatch I, May 28, 2012, [via Flickr](#).

The truth is, we have to make choices between the lesser of two evils every single day. Sometimes it’s a big choice, like who will be the better leader of our country. Sometimes it’s a smaller choice, like deciding to miss a meeting because a more important meeting is scheduled at the same time. Sometimes it’s a matter of life and death, such as during a boating accident when there are three people in the water, but you can only save one of them.

We have to make these kinds of choices. It’s why our Creator made us. He didn’t call us into existence simply to be ornaments decorating heaven. He made human beings to be His moral agents in this world. In Genesis, we read that the Garden where God established the habitat for us humans was the only settled place on this planet. Everything else was still wild and chaotic, which is why the Creator used some specific terms in His first commandment:

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land, and conquer it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the flying creatures of the sky, and over every animal that crawls on the land.”

Genesis 1:28 TLV

*Conquer it* means exactly what we think it means. The Almighty intended for us to bring order out of chaos, just like He had done in creating the heavens and the earth. That meant clearing land, burning acres of wild vegetation, terracing hillsides, domesticating animals, and everything else required to conquer a wilderness. It would all be done according to what God said was right and good – until our first ancestors decided they would determine what was good and what was not. That’s when the task became more complicated and messier, because then it took on the dimension of determining who would live and who would die.

The complications to our existence multiplied as each new human came into the world. Every unique person, each made in the image of God, had the option to choose God’s

definitions of good and evil, or establish definitions of their own. Before long, that meant those who were able to impose their definitions on others would do so. The story of the first two brothers tells us how that would go. Those with power to compel others to obey their decisions would use that power. Those who had less power would find ways to mitigate the oppression of the strong and powerful. Somewhere in the process, the ways of God became difficult to discern, and even more difficult to carry out. Even worse, when those who did know and follow His ways achieved a measure of power, they eventually tried to impose those ways on others. Instead of establishing righteous societies, they robbed others of their free will, and became just another set of tyrants.

This is what it means to live in a fallen world. It's why we have to make choices between the lesser of two evils. There is no absolute good except what comes from our Redeeming God. The only way to come close to His definitions of good and evil are to choose Him first of all. That's not a one-time thing; it's a choice required of us in every situation – especially those situations when there are no right choices. He tells us to choose life, but usually there's no straight and clear path to life. Instead, there are only dark, twisting trails that lead vaguely in the right direction. More often than we like to think, the only way to negotiate those trails is with the help of others, even if they aren't as morally upright as we like to think we are, or perhaps even if they oppose us on some matter that may or may not be important when our grandchildren are our age.

This is why we need Yom Kippur. After a year of slogging through the muck of half-measures and compromises, we need to be reminded of God's perfect standard, and of how far short of it we continue to fall. If we have pledged allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then we know the atoning blood of His Messiah has brought us into the path of life. That's a heavenly process that can only be accomplished by our heavenly High Priest, as the writer of Hebrews explains:

Now on the one hand, many have become *kohanim* [priests], who through death are prevented from continuing in office. But on the other hand, the One who does remain forever has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him, always living to make intercession for them.

For such a *Kohen Gadol* [High Priest] was fitting for us: holy, guiltless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need to offer up sacrifices day by day like those other *kohanim g'dolim* [high priests]—first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people. For when He offered up Himself, He did this once for all. For the *Torah* appoints as *kohanim g'dolim* men who have weakness; but the word of the oath, which came after the *Torah*, appoints a Son—made perfect forever.

Hebrews 7:23-28 TLV

Our destiny is settled permanently in heaven once we have made the choice to pin our identity on our heavenly High Priest. It's probably the only time we will ever have a clear choice between life and death, good and evil. What happens after that is an endless series of choices that either enhance or obscure our identity in Messiah. If we choose consistently to be transformed by His Spirit into better likenesses of His image, then our identity becomes steadily clearer. Yet if we choose to remain in our old ways of thinking, then it's less clear who we are and whose we are.

This is why our Redeemer established Yom Kippur as our annual appointment to set the record straight. It's why we search ourselves for weeks beforehand, seeking His revelation on where we have fallen short of His standards and created obstacles to fellowship with Him and with others. Even if we're making consistently good choices, they are inevitably imperfect choices in this still-broken world, and we need the course correction He offers to start fresh. If we don't get that course correction, then we might continue to drift into muddier waters, so that in time we no longer choose the lesser of two evils, but abstain from choice and allow evil to have its way.