

In these times, this verse takes on added meanings. To choose life, to honor the Source, we must honor all life, all living creatures. Like the dying, we are called to transform and radically change our lives. If God calls heaven and earth as our witnesses, we must honor heaven and earth: wind, sky, air, earth, river, forest.

Death, is not a curse unless it is the deaths we consciously and unconsciously inflict through pollution, greed and through violence against each other and all life forms. Increasingly, people, Jews included, are choosing death rather than life. Each conflict we indulge undermines the fragile net of all life and the earth itself.

Choose life that you and your offspring may live speaks most directly to the earth's jeopardy. Each of us is the dying person, Rabbi Eilberg speaks of because the earth itself is dying. But as the living also "gain a renewed clarity of purpose and priorities" in the presence of the dying, a "remarkable transformation" is possible. By truly choosing Life we can assure the future. To choose life for the sake of our offspring is not a personal life choice, but means choosing Life for the sake of the future.

Deena Metzger is a writer whose books include: *What Dinah Thought*; *Tree: Essays & Pieces*; *Looking for the Faces of God* and *Writing For Your Life*.

at the end of life — *how much more so throughout the course of life. Any religious system has rituals for and beliefs about birth, marriage, death, and other transformative moments. Judaism gives the Jew the opportunity and the spiritual equipment to make holy every moment of day-to-day life. A blessing for studying Torah, guidelines to make kosher ("fit") our dietary habits, a sabbath day of family, community, and focus on spirituality; giving and living charitably; these mitzvot are all chances to sanctify what could be mundane moments, days, years in our lives.*

Traditional Jews are asked — *are only traditional Jews asked to bless? Does God prefer the blessings of a traditional Jew? Certainly the blessings of all of God's children are precious.*

choices that give honor — *our choice to study and live Torah and do mitzvot not only gives honor to God but also connects the Jew with God in a profound way (mitzva is similar to the Aramaic term tzavta, a connection) and brings Godliness into every moment of every day. "Choose Life" recalls (Prov.3:18) "She is a Tree of Life to those who grasp Her." The Torah cannot save us from dying, but it saves us from being dead (i.e. cold and indifferent) to spiritual reality while we are still alive.*

Joseph Kanofsky holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature and is a student at the Rabbinical College of America in Morristown, NJ.

"Choose life, that you and your offspring may live."

Deuteronomy 30:19

ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך

דברים ל"ט

Anyone who has cared for a dying person knows what remarkable transformations can unfold at the end of life. Although the days and weeks before death can bring great suffering, this period can also bring a rebirth - a deepened awareness of the preciousness of life, a heightened feeling of gratitude and appreciation, a renewed clarity of purpose and priorities, and a more profound sense of love and faith.

Jewish tradition, in its great wisdom, guides us to integrate these gifts into our lives before we and those we love reach the deathbed. Traditional Jews are asked to recite one hundred blessings every day. When we are able to do this - not, of course, mechanically reciting written words, but really opening our eyes to the many blessings around us through the day - we find ourselves living with the full awareness and clarity that dying people often have. Each night of our lives we recite the Shema at bedtime, practicing for the final occasion when we will entrust our bodies and souls to God's care. Then each morning we thank God for life's wonders and blessings once again. If we could perform these rituals with open hearts, we would go through our days conscious of the gift of life.

God calls out to us with the challenge: Choose life. Choose to embrace the gift of life fully, even when you believe you have many years to live. Fill your days with choices that give honor to the Source of life. Stay awake to life's blessings. Live this day knowing that it is as precious as your last. If you live this way, God's blessings will be yours.

Rabbi Amy Eilberg serves as a pastoral counsellor in private practice in Palo Alto, and teaches and consults around the country on issues of Jewish spirituality and healing.

Our mystical tradition sees all commandments as falling within two over-arching principles. These are: "turn away from evil" and "do good" (Psalms 34:15). Reciting blessings and saying the bedtime sh'ma are examples of "doing good."

Rabbi Eilberg writes, "If we could perform these rituals with open hearts, we would go through our days conscious of the gift of life." This is a big "if," for it is difficult to maintain an open heart and easy to gather a list of grievances which close the heart.

We need a practice of "turning away from evil." Rabbi Eliezer said: "Repent one day before your death" (Shabbat 153a), meaning that we need to repent daily. Before saying the bedtime Sh'ma, Hassidim and others recite a meditation forgiving all those who may have sinned against them in any way. In doing this, we liberate ourselves from that list of grievances and become free to make life-affirming choices. I know of the transformations possible when death is imminent. I have also experienced the suddenness with which death interrupts life. These experiences give meaning to the importance of clearing my slate daily, helping me to accept the loss of others and the possibility of my own sudden disappearance from this life plane.

Rabbi Daniel Siegel is the Executive Director of ALLEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

Recently, I was watching a program about dare devils on the Discovery Channel with my children. The program chronicled the exploits of an acrobatic pilot and his partner. This partner climbs outside of the plane during flight, walks on the wings and swings from the landing gear. The acrobat said that he did not view his acts as death defying, but rather, as affirming all that life has to offer. My kids and I watched spellbound and concluded that he was crazy. As I read Rabbi Eilberg's words about choosing life, I thought of this fellow. He is obviously one extreme of her advice... an extreme that I can barely fathom. Less extreme and far more palatable to me are the thoughts of Professor Morrie Schwartz, z"l, subject of the best seller *Tuesdays with Morrie*. He said everyone knows they are going to die, but no one believes it. He said that if we were prepared for death at any moment, we would be more involved in living the present moment. To me, "being involved" or *choosing life* means pausing to appreciate the small details of life that we tend to take for granted like the smell of freshly cut grass or the unique laugh of each person. *Choosing life* also means contemplating the big issues, asking ourselves: "If today were my last day on earth, what would I regret not doing in my life? What should I be *choosing* to do differently with my *life*, so that on my dying day, I have few regrets?"

Gil Mann is the author of *How to Get More Out of Being Jewish Even If...* and facilitates an AOL area (Keyword: Judaism Today, email manngil@aol.com).

Bradley Shavit Artson

I have always loved *Sh'ma* for what it brings to the Jewish community: a lively, engaging exchange of views; a rich diversity in how Jewish identity and mission are perceived and expressed; a sense of passion and purpose; and a surprising commitment to a shared memory and common future. I hope that these virtues will retain their place in the new *Sh'ma*.

My one concern has been the gradual increase in "heat" at the expense of "light." In that regard, I fear that we have substituted the ethos of journalism for that of Torah. Rather than reveling in controversy (a capitulation to our desire to be titillated and indignant), we ought to insist on learning from each other, clarifying and modifying our own views in the process.

One of my favorite talmudic passages notes that "when two sages sharpen each other in *halakhah*, the Holy One grants them success... not only that, but they rise to greatness. When two sages are pleasant together in *halakhah*, the Holy One listens to them (Shabbat 63a)." Note that the exchange of dissenting views, when offered constructively, grants success and greatness to the disputants. But when they actually listen to each other (and, God forbid, learn from each other), only then does God consent to hear them. Those ancient sages, debating with passion and with mutual affection, are the proper guides in our renewed venture. May our exchanges deserve God's attention, and our's.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson is the Executive Vice President of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California.

Vanessa L. Ochs

The thing I've always liked about *Sh'ma* is that it's been a forum for intelligent and thoughtful people to think aloud together about important Jewish issues as they emerge. Such conversation neither replaces learned studies and sermons by professional Jews (from academia, the pulpit, or Jewish communal service), nor does it have a lesser status—it's another critical view, grounded in reality

and real experience. I hope that *Sh'ma* will continue to nurture and honor the voice of Jews who bring diverse wisdoms to the task of figuring out how to be deeply and compellingly Jewish, right now. The task for *Sh'ma* is to locate all the new, bright voices and assure them that they have meaningful Jewish perspectives to offer, even if they themselves think they are not "Jewish enough."

Vanessa L. Ochs, a CLAL senior fellow, teaches in the Department of Religion at the University of Virginia.

Jonathan D. Sarna

As an historian and one-time New Yorker, I reflexively look backward before moving forward. As *Sh'ma* enters a new era, I urge it to do likewise. Back in 1970, when Eugene Borowitz inaugurated *Sh'ma*, he called for a "vigorous dialectic of opinion." Describing *Sh'ma* as a "forum," he sought not "common answers" but instead an uncommon understanding of "what the various views entail and what seem their major drawbacks." He advocated both realism (no "suffocating euphemisms") and criticism.

At its best, *Sh'ma* exemplified what the rabbis called *Makhloket le-shem shamayim*, "disputation for the sake of heaven," responsible debate. That is what it should strive for again. Taking its cue from its own glorious past, it should serve as a forum for the faithful presentation of multiple Jewish views, "encouraging such a dialectic," just as it once did, "as the instrument for fostering Jewish wisdom."

Jonathan D. Sarna is the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.

Barbara Penzner

I have always counted on *Sh'ma* to serve as a gathering place for the divergent streams of Jewish life. I expect it to continue as a forum for regular sharing of the contrasting voices of contemporary Judaism in a respectful and thoughtful manner. I hope that you will bring together lay leaders and professionals from different political, religious and cultural vantage

points to discuss *how we perceive Jewish life, how we experience the world as Jews, and what we dream for the Jewish future.*

I encourage *Sh'ma* to address: sociological topics, like the impact of prosperity on Jewish life; political issues, like how we teach our children and students about Israel; religious questions, like how different streams are responding to the search for spirituality in our day; cultural phenomena, like the revival of Yiddish; and historical issues, like what different historical periods have to teach us today.

May *Sh'ma* continue to be a stimulating and thought provoking arena for creativity and diversity, with an emphasis on civility, in the Jewish world. *B'hatzlachah!*

Rabbi Barbara Penzner is the President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.

Sara Paascha Orlow

What kind of Jewish civilization are we creating? What are the torahs of our diverse communities and how can we each be Torah true? *Sh'ma* can provide a unique forum in which we can deepen and push forward the current level of discourse and gain clarity regarding the meaning of Jewishness.

A few examples of specific questions facing American Jewry include: What are appropriate Jewish responses to poverty? What does it mean to adopt a child into a Jewish home? How is the opening up of Orthodoxy to women's learning affecting the Jewish world? How is our understanding of the Holocaust developing as Jewish communities in Germany are renewed and the generation of survivors slowly dies?

Sh'ma must draw from all the denominations of Judaism as well as those who stand outside denominational definitions, soliciting the insights and learning of Jewish professionals alongside the wisdom of other knowledgeable Jews with expertise in all aspects of life. Such a process serves to counteract the senseless hatred that undermines our peoplehood so that we can move forward and live meaningful lives committed to the values of Tikun

Dedicated to Michael Bohnen

This issue of *Sh'ma* is dedicated to Michael Bohnen, our lawyer, for his exemplary work on behalf of Jewish Family & Life! in acquiring *Sh'ma*.
May he, and we, go from strength to strength.

Chazak v'amatz

נצח וקמץ

Reuven Kimmelman is Professor of Talmud and Midrash at Brandeis University.

Two good formats for this type of debate would be a "point and counter-point" on the model of *USA Today* or one major thesis with several responses. It would be nice if each issue of *Sh'ma* would dedicate one column to cultural literacy on the order of "Did you know about this Judaism" which could be subdivided into issues such as "did you know about the holidays/siddur/parsha/Jewish history, etc."

Perhaps its internal contradiction is now, perhaps, we must hear the graphic word. *Sh'ma* has a distinct language. *Sh'ma* has distinguished itself as a forum in which Jews — from various walls of life, from different locations on the religious and political spectra, speaking very different languages, with different combinations of intellect and passion — express themselves freely and receive respectful responses. But one person's heard is another's nudnik. May the new editors have the wisdom to balance their sense of judiciousness and urgency with the desire that we all share to hear compelling voices in whatever language.

Hillel Levine is Professor of Sociology and Religion at Boston University. His most recent book is In Search of Sugihara.

How do we hear a print journal? The oral and aural are collective experiences. The visual is individualizing, even isolating. So much of modern communication confines us to our arm chair. How can a journal stimulate community and provide collective experience? At Mount Sinai we see the voices:

Hillel Levine
Rabbi Sara Paascha Orlow, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, is the Program Officer/Educator at the Jewish Life Network in New York.

Olam, repairing the world, and Or'l'goyim, being a light unto the nations.

Reuven Kimmelman