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Choose Life

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Cover Page Footnote

Rabbi Irving Greenberg is the president of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation. This talk was delivered as the Undergraduate Commencement Address at Sacred Heart University on May 14, 2006.

RABBI IRVING GREENBERG

Choose Life

I thank Sacred Heart University, President Cenera, Vice-President Coppola, and faculty for this honor which you have bestowed. Mark you well: a Catholic university is honoring a committed Jew, and in extra measure for being rooted in Hebrew scriptures and upholding the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant, which has never been superseded.

This is not the first time in history that an Orthodox Jewish rabbi has received a doctorate, *honoris causa*, from a Catholic university in appreciation of work to strengthen Jewish-Christian relations, but I would guess that it is not the tenth time in history either. This type of recognition is not yet a routine act. It bespeaks a new heart and a new spirit that has entered into Jews and Christians in the past few decades. The moral reformation and theological revolution of recalibrating the relationship of Judaism and Christianity is only in the beginning stage. The creation of a relationship based on love, equality, and partnership in service of God for the purpose of *tikkun olam*—the healing of our broken world—is underway. I dare say that the discovery and articulation of an authentic committed pluralism will prove to be as momentous and transformational as was the axial age of both religions.

What can I do to repay in some small measure your gracious and loving act? I should like to share some wisdom drawn from the

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Jewish tradition which expresses a core value held in common between our faiths. Perhaps it will help you, the graduates, go forth into life imbued with the core values as you apply the wisdom which you have been given by this faithful Catholic university.

You will recall that, as told in Matthew (22:36ff), a lawyer asked Jesus “Master, which [core value] is the greatest commandment in the Law [of Moses]?” Jesus replied, like the good Jew and inspired wise teacher that he was: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:8). That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Everything in the Law and the Prophets hangs on these two commandments.

Let me explore with you: What is the core value underlying these two commandments? How do we apply love of God to our life? What does it mean to love your neighbor? What does it mean behaviorally to love yourself? The answer, I submit, is found in another one of the summaries of the Torah, in this case, Moses’ summary in Deuteronomy 31:16, 19: “Behold, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God . . . and to keep God’s Commandments. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life that you and your children may live.”

Judaism and Christianity teach that there is a constant and continuous struggle between life and death in this world, and in our lives. God, the Living Source of Life, is on the side of life; the Eternal loves life and especially loves human beings as the highest, most developed form of life. God asks us to join in this struggle on the side of God—that is, on the side of life. By choosing rightly, we will help God assure that which God loves and wants—the final triumph of life.

Please note that the command says: *choose* life. One must *choose* life; it is an act of volition, commitment, love. If we do nothing, life loses. If we drift, we drift toward death. If an individual grows up and makes no choices, then death wins.

Consider: a baby is born and grows up. He faces the choice of staying inside himself or opening up to friendship. Making and keeping a friend takes much effort and struggle to grow beyond the family. Then there is the choice of entering into relationship or not. Relationship means that she must open up, must risk failure, embarrassment, and hurt in order to mature into love. If you do not choose, you grow old alone. Next is the choice whether to commit to this love by entering the covenant of marriage. Marriage escalates the risks, the pains, the rewards, and the fulfillment. Then the ultimate choice is whether to have children—to come together in love and together with God—to create life. If we make this choice, it takes up so much of our days, our love, our effort. We undertake the ultimate risk of disappointment, failure, loss. This state gives us joy and (sometimes) pain, fulfillment and (sometimes) failure, beyond our wildest imagination. But if at any stage along this life journey we do not choose life, then we grow old and die, and leave no life behind. Then we have chosen to be on the side of death.

In Genesis, God commands humanity “to be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1: 26). In the Talmud, the Rabbis respond: What is the minimum fulfillment of such a command? The Rabbis initially conclude: well, have two children. (That translates into leaving behind no less life than we—the two parents—represent, so we do not cause a net loss on the side of life.) Then the Talmud cites the prophet Isaiah’s words: “God did not create the world to be empty and void; it was brought into being to be settled [filled with life]” (Isaiah 45:18). This is a call to choose to have a third child and beyond. Thus before we pass away, we have assured an increase in the presence of life on this earth. Then we (our lives) are solidly on the side of life.

In truth, every act, every day, is a choice between life and death. Take food and eating, for example. If I do not eat, I will starve and die. If I choose to eat, what will I choose? A balanced diet? A healthy meal? I have chosen life. Deep-fried, high-fat junk food? Then I have chosen death. Dangerous diets can lead to obesity, diabetes, cholesterol-driven heart conditions. All these conditions can be

ameliorated by choices of life-giving food regimens, even as they can be worsened by death-dealing eating patterns. Jewish tradition points out that the way we raise the animals and kill the animals that we eat can be a statement of reverence for their lives or a way of inflicting pain and degradation on their lives, as in factory farming or anemia-tenderized veal or *pate de foie gras*.

Consider speech: every word we speak in every encounter with another human being can be a word of life, of respect, of encouragement, of appreciation, or of empowerment which enhances life and gives dignity to the other. Such speech is on the side of life. Or the word can be one of dismissal, degradation, or devaluing the other, which is to be on the side of death. Jewish tradition calls such words *lashon hara* (evil tongue). Even if the words are true, they are sinful because they push us or others to the side of death.

One must choose life qualitatively, not just quantitatively. Every human being, says the Bible, is created in the image of God. This means, says the Talmud, that each and every human being is born with three fundamental dignities: the *infinite value* of their life, *equality*, and *uniqueness*—their own irreducible, irreplaceable, and distinctive self. We can honor and enhance these dignities. Or we can deny, reduce, or neglect these dignities, thus reducing the life of the other. If we love the other, we will honor these dignities and enhance their lives. That is what it means to choose life.

Humans are in the image of God also because we are gifted with consciousness (a mind) like God; for example, in our lifetime, the human mind has deciphered DNA, the code of life, which God has implanted in every living cell. Then we must choose through education to develop our godlike minds. We can keep growing and learning all our lives. Or we can choose to dumb down, to pass on becoming enlightened. In school we can get by and get away with as much as we can and thus impoverish our lives or we can take advantage to learn, grow, and blossom with life.

Humans are gifted with a capacity for love and relationship, which can be godlike. They can imitate God, as described in

Psalms: “God is good to every one because God’s mother love is on all God’s creatures” (145:9). We should choose through relationship and understanding and religious nurturing to expand our divine capacity for love. Or we can fill our hearts with hatred and self-centered ego, and then choose death of the soul or death of the other.

Through our work, in every field, we can improve the world, or we can rip it off. We can build or make or sell schlock, and thus support less life, or we can build value and enhance life. The choice is ours.

True religion teaches us to choose life more deeply. This is the meaning of the instruction in Leviticus: “You shall be holy because I the Lord am holy” (19:1). Holiness is about intensifying life, living it fully, turning it toward God. To be holy is to choose the fullness of life.

Let it be clear that although being holy requires commitment and discipline, holiness is not about asceticism. True religious restriction is about denying myself that which is wrong, i.e., that which undermines life, while at the same time, embracing the joy and depth of life. Ideally, we should meet God and love our fellow human being in the peak of joy and fulfillment. One Talmudic sage states that when we are judged in the world to come, we will be held accountable for every permitted joy that we denied ourselves. We are at fault for every positive pleasure—for every loving gift of God—that we failed to take in our lives. It is important to know this because we live in a culture that offers so much pleasure and opportunity to choose life. Of course, this Talmudic profound insight must be balanced by Pope John Paul II’s wise warning that if we choose unwisely, unthinkingly, or trendily, that we can turn all these individual choices of life, in their sum, into a culture of death. We have seen how broadcasting visions of beauty turns into commercialized pornography. We have witnessed how industry unchecked unleashes toxic pollution. Therefore, we must constantly choose and we must constantly monitor and regulate our choices.

The choice of life must be made by us collectively as a people and a nation, as members of a faith and as citizens of the world. If we choose wisely, we can continue the centuries-old explosion of industry, technology, and communications that has raised living standards, improved public health, and extended the lifespan of billions. But if we choose wrongly and fail to control waste, pollution, and resource-stripping, we degrade the environment and cause global warming. Human behaviors are threatening to wipe out the greatest number of species since the Cretaceous age; thus we bring about a triumph of death. If we go on choosing this unbridled way, there is the risk of making the earth uninhabitable.

If we choose wisely, we can intensify and expand affluence for the entire world. The recipients of this affluence can also choose to abuse their blessings by turning to drugs or sinking into a materialist morass. What kind of car do you drive? Do you use seat belts? Do you use mass transit? These are choices of life and death.

We can use and share our productivity to extend dignity to the billions who live on a dollar a day. Or we can impoverish them further with our trade policies and ignore their desperate medical needs in order to increase our profits.

We read in the papers about Darfur. We can get involved as individuals and as a nation and try to end this genocide. Or we can be bystanders. Bystanders always enable the murderers; apathy is on the side of death. Even religious fervor can be turned to the side of death. Look at the suicide bombers who glorify their own death and the killing of innocents in the name of devotion to God. Thus they commit an additional desecration; they turn God into Molech, an idolatrous God who valorizes sacrificing children's lives, a God of death. Our choices to resist this religiously-driven death-dealing must be complex and wise. If we do not use force properly, we allow terror to win, and thus death will triumph. If we use force unwisely or without controls, we may allow torture or we may inflict death on countless others, unjustifiably.

In this generation, in the presence of extreme mass killings, we must respond by increasing life even more. Both our faiths insist

that life will win out over death. Then when we witness great success for death, we must make an extraordinary effort to restore the balance of life. The Rabbis teach that the Messiah must be born in a generation of destruction. It is no accident that in Christianity, Resurrection follows as the response to Crucifixion. It is no accident that after undergoing genocide and cruelty in the Holocaust, the Jewish people responded by rebuilding Israel, the homeland of Judaism. They went on and generated the greatest outburst of life and renewal of religion and culture in Jewish history.

Repentance also represents choosing life. After the Holocaust, both our faiths were tempted to go on as before. The temptation, which every sinner faces, is to deny the past sin; not to admit that we have gone on the wrong road. We fear that if we admit the sin, our life and dignity will be diminished. But the opposite is true. In the 1960s, Pope John XXIII had to hesitate: would admitting that Christianity had degraded Jews and Judaism, would that not undermine the authority of the Catholic Church, which was already under siege from modernity? In the end, he recognized that it was the past, the path of supercession and delegitimization, that had led Christianity into cruelty and demeaning Jews. That behavior opened the way for evil people to exploit hatred and inflict much greater harm. John XXIII determined to turn from that past evil so that Christianity would be born again. Under his leadership, the Catholic Church chose to turn to love and life. *Nostra Aetate* represents that turn toward Jewry and toward life, even as Vatican II represents a turn toward modern life, toward living the fullness of the life of faith in the world. Pope John Paul II sought mightily to restore the authority of the magisterium, yet he understood that the Church must go further on the path of change toward validation of Judaism and affirmation of the pluralism of God's love and God's covenant. Thus he chose life again and again. Pope Benedict's actions in this year show that he intends to extend the primacy of love and of life in these areas and in all sectors of society and faith.

Jewry is responding also with new understanding that it cannot go on devaluing Christianity, using the excuse of anger at past

persecution. Judaism is opening up to the religious power of Christianity and to appreciating its contribution to the betterment of humanity. Thereby Judaism is healed of hatred and anger and moved toward life. There are extraordinary new understandings growing. They serve as powerful testimony that love of God gives us the power to overcome past evil and to turn to life.

I close with Maimonides's commentary on Deuteronomy 31:16, 19: "Behold I place before you today life and good, death and evil . . . blessing and curse; therefore choose life." Note the apposition in the verse. Life and good are linked together; death and evil are linked together. Says Maimonides, this means life and good are one and the same. Every choice of good—ethical, ritual, physical—is a choice of life; every good act represents our turning toward life. Death and evil also are one and the same. Every choice of evil, every sin, incorporates a choice of death or of moving our life toward death.

In sum, there is no neutral act in life and there is no moment without choice. Not to choose is to choose. Therefore, graduates and friends, in the name of both faiths and of humanity which waits upon your choice, and for the sake of God who yearns for your choice in love, go forth and *choose life*.