



The Yom Kippur Debate

5779

Are we *always* responsible for our actions?



Supported by



US FUTURES

<u>CONTENTS</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Introduction to the Yom Kippur Debate	2
Introducing our topic	3
Notes for the Moderator	4
Arguments for the motion	5
Arguments against the motion	6
Appendix	7

Motion:

**This House believes
that a young person
brainwashed by a terrorist
group is not responsible for
their actions.**



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Yom Kippur Debate 5779!

This is an immense opportunity to capture the imagination of the many youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

This year, rather than providing a single debate motion, we have for the first time expanded the debate resources to include three stand-alone topics which can be used during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or at any other time.

The debate motions are:

- 1) This House believes that a young person brainwashed by a terrorist group is not responsible for their actions.
- 2) This House believes that you should kill one person to save the lives of many others.
- 3) This House believes that structured prayer is out of date

Each topic has its own set of materials which consists of: **a)** A promotional clip for you to share on social media in advance of the debate; **b)** An information pack which contains notes for the debate moderator and presenters; and **c)** A short movie clip which summarises the topic, for you to share on social media after Yom Kippur.

The key theme of the High Holydays is **Teshuvah**. Commonly translated as 'repentance', *teshuvah* literally means 'return'. These discussions provide a forum in which we can return to a reflective space at the start of the year and spend time considering principles that will help to guide us in the coming months.

Tremendous thanks to Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, the United Synagogue Israel Rabbi, for his expertise in writing the information booklets; to Oliver Anisfeld of JTV and his team for producing the clips; to Rebbetzen Lauren Levin, Luis Herszaft and the students and staff of JFS, for participating in the filming; and to Rabbi Michael Laitner, David Collins and Sharon Radley for reviewing the debate content. I also want to acknowledge David Turner, the Chairman of South Hampstead Synagogue and the young people of the South Hampstead community for helping to initiate the Yom Kippur debate project.

I hope you have stimulating conversations, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Eli Levin

INTRODUCING OUR TOPIC¹

Over the last few years, we have seen haunting scenes of young Britains inspired to go and fight for Isis. Even more terrifying, we have witnessed them returning to Britain to carry out terror attacks on these shores.

Strangely, whenever friends and relatives of the terrorists are interviewed, they often offer the same response. "He seemed like a perfectly normal boy to us. Never did anything aggressive. Wouldn't hurt a fly."

So what is turning young Britons to terror and should they be held responsible for their actions? Nikita Malik, a senior research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society has pointed out that it only takes a very short time for a charismatic preacher to radicalise, sometimes just a matter of months. One of the key preachers has been Anjem Choudary whose preaching and organised brainwashing campaigns are said to have inspired between 100-500 people to turn to terror.

Perhaps most frightening of all, Choudary was able to do this under the noses of the British police. He was featured on television documentaries and was even reported to the police on numerous occasions. But the police were powerless to act. Sometimes, he got away with it because he and similar characters were dismissed as clown like fanatics. Yet even those who recognised the poisonous influence were unable to stop them. Commander Dean Haydon, the head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command, said: "These men have stayed just within the law for many years, but there is no one within the counter-terrorism world that has any doubts of the influence that they have had, the hate they have spread and the people that they have encouraged to join terrorist organisations."



Faced with these strong influences, our debate asks whether young people can be held responsible for their actions.

¹ Much of the information for this introduction was drawn from an article published in The Independent Newspaper 6 June 2017 by Lizzie Dearden entitled "London attack linked to hate preacher Anjem Choudary's extremist network" and in The Guardian of 16 August 2016 by Vikram Dodd and Jamie Grierson entitled "Revealed: how Anjem Choudary influenced at least 100 British jihadists".



NOTES FOR MODERATOR

While our debate is focused on the contemporary phenomenon of people being brainwashed to commit acts of terror, its roots lie deep in the world of Jewish philosophy.

Our religion is firmly focused on our responsibility to obey God, live good lives and make the world a better place. At the heart of this lies the idea that we have freewill and therefore we are responsible for our actions.

But our very presence in synagogue today, on Yom Kippur testifies to the fact that even with the best intentions, all of sometimes succumb to different temptations and get things wrong. As King Solomon said "There is no one on earth who is so righteous, who only does what is right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

If we repent, God is forgiving of our inconsistencies. But how far can stretch this? If we blame others for leading us on a bad path, are we making an honest evaluation of our situation or simply trying to pass the buck.

Our debate therefore primarily focuses on the idea of free will in Judaism and its limits. However, please feel free to discuss and debate other issues around the motion.

Let the debate begin!

In summing up the debate, the moderator may wish to invite the audience to examine its relevance to their own lives. Yom Kippur is the day for examining our actions. Hopefully, none of us is guilty of the appalling crimes of an Isis member and none of us is under the influence of a hate preacher. But how about the principles behind the debate? Are our Jewish lives the result of independent thinking and decision making or are we just following the habits that we picked up from our surroundings, which have led us to observe or not observe various practices? Have we made a real study of Kashrut, Shabbat and all the other laws to make informed decisions, or are we simply continuing to live the way we always have done?

ARGUMENTS FOR THE MOTION

While it is true that Judaism believes people are responsible for their behaviour, it also understands the pressures which mount up upon us. It understands that we are not all born with the same advantages and for some there are real struggles. "Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven²" declared the Talmudic rabbis, by which they meant that we are not born with full control over our lives, much remains beyond our control. The area we grow up in, the teachers and personalities who come our way, the poverty and discrimination which might lead to bitterness. None of this is in our hands. And it's a tall order to respond correctly every time.

The rabbis of the Talmud and after were sympathetic to the fact that a person might be swayed by the power of others. They even created the category of "*Tinok she nishba bein hagoyim*" the child who was taken captive among the gentiles. Just as someone kidnapped by non-Jews and brought up among them cannot be expected to practice Judaism properly, so anybody who did not receive an educational and meaningful Jewish education is not held responsible for his or her actions.

The great scholar, philosopher and physician, Maimonides (1135-1204) championed the idea of freewill. The very fact that the Torah and the Prophets describe times when God was happy with the Jewish people and other occasions when he was angered by their actions, illustrates that it was the people themselves who chose to behave in that way. Surely God would not have forced them to do something and then been angry. Yet, even Maimonides was forced to admit that there were moments in the Torah when that did not apply, such as Pharaoh who had his free will taken from him during the 10 plagues. Similarly, according to the Talmud³, the Jewish people could claim that they lost their free-will and only accepted the Torah under duress, because it was given to them by the most charismatic preacher of them all – God himself – so how could they refuse?

On the day that Adam and Eve were created, God instructed them not to eat the produce from the 'Tree of Knowledge,' a particular tree in the Garden of Eden. When they failed to adhere to this rule, it is true that they were held responsible for their actions but God also accepted that it was not entirely their fault. They were the victims of a brilliant, calculating snake and faced with enormous temptation. No wonder that God did not fulfil his promise that they would die that day, but instead gave them the opportunity to build new lives outside of Paradise.

² Berachot 33b

³ Shabbat 88a

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE MOTION

Common sense and Judaism share the belief that a person who of their own volition goes to commit a terrorist offence either in this country or abroad is responsible for their actions.

One of our greatest philosophers, Maimonides (1135-1204) recognised this. He referred to our free will as a fundamental pillar of the Torah. His argument was very logical. If we did not have the power to determine our own actions, what would be the point of God giving us laws? And if we were powerless to decide whether we were going to keep the laws or not, why would God send prophets exhorting us to do the right thing? And if all our actions were out of our own control, then why would God promise rewards for those who keep His laws and punishments for those who disobey them? Having established that we have the freedom to choose how we act, it was clear to Maimonides that we are responsible for our actions.

Incidentally, for Maimonides, this is fundamental to everything that we do on Yom Kippur. If we are all responsible for our actions, then when we do wrong, we must attempt to put things right by apologising both to those whom we have hurt and to God. While we can do that on any day of the year, Yom Kippur is a day which is dedicated to that purpose.

It's true that sometimes, it's very hard to exercise self-control. Judaism has no illusions about this.

The very first human beings had only one command to obey; the prohibition of eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but temptation got in their way. First of all, Eve was convinced by the snake who was a charismatic and persuasive advocate. Like a fanatical modern day preacher, he argued at length that doing wrong would not bring punishment, but actually it would lead to eternal reward, "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Bereishit 3: 5). When Eve tried to fend him off by suggesting that she was even forbidden from touching the tree, the snake pushed her against it demonstrating that no harm came to her. The wrongdoing was tempting. The fruit was aesthetically pleasing and appeared to be really tasty and healthy: "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" (Bereishit 3: 6).

Under these circumstances, it was easy to sin, but it was still wrong and Adam and Eve had to face the consequences of their actions. God was merciful to Adam and Eve. They were not killed instantly for their crimes, but they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and suffered the price of having to work hard for their food and struggle in childbirth.

Crimes must be punished.

Appendix: Sources

The difficulties of resisting temptation - Bereishit chapter 3

1 Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden.

3 But God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.

5 "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

We all make mistakes - Kohelet 7:20

Indeed, there is no one on earth who is **כִּי אָדָם, אֵין צְדִיק בְּאֶרֶץ--אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה-טוֹב,**
so righteous, who only does what is **וְלֹא יִחַטָּא**
right and never sins.