

Julia Bender Stern at Yom Kippur 2008 Family Service

A wise old man once said, “You have to make the choice between what is right and what is easy.” This old man is named Albus Dumbledore, and his words of wisdom resonate with me far more than one might expect from a *Harry Potter* book. So much of life boils down to this choice. While sometimes the right decision and the easy decision are the same, this is rarely the case. In my life and in our world, we are forced to choose between the easy path and the right path not once, but again and again. At Yom Kippur, we should reflect on our decisions that shape who we are. Do we stand up for what’s right? Or do we take the easy way out?

At Yom Kippur, we apologize to those whom we have hurt and in turn forgive those who have hurt us. These acts of apologizing and forgiving are often difficult to do, but they are nonetheless crucial. Ultimately, no one benefits by refusing to apologize or to forgive.

Around this time of year, people often tell the Bible story of Abraham and Isaac. According to the Bible, God ordered Abraham to kill his son, Isaac. Abraham had a very difficult decision to make: Did he want to follow God’s will and murder his only son, or did he want to go against God’s orders and save his son? Although choosing to kill his son is hardly an easy choice to make, it takes much more courage to disobey God and incur his wrath. Abraham chooses the path of least resistance, deciding to kill his innocent, trusting son instead of standing up to God for what he knows is right. God tells Abraham that this was a test, but I believe that Abraham failed. A righteous person would

have listened to his own sense of justice instead of blindly following someone else's orders. Abraham chooses the easier path instead of the right one.

In middle school, I noticed that my friend was losing a lot of weight. Mutual friends who I spoke to agreed that they had also noticed the change. My friend, who we'll call Sara, would talk nonstop about how fat she was and refuse to eat anything with more than a few calories. Often, she would skip lunch altogether. My friends and I were faced with a very difficult decision: Should we tell someone that we were afraid Sara was starving herself, and risk losing her friendship? Or should we say nothing? We eventually decided to tell our guidance counselor. Sara burst into tears when she found out why the guidance counselor was calling her down to her office. She was furious at us for a few months, and then school ended. It was terrible to have her be so angry, and to feel that we would never go back to being such good friends. Today I am friends with her again, although not as close as I once was. She is healthy and is less preoccupied about food. I hope that she realized that we did what we did because we were worried about her and cared about her. Countless others have been in the same position as I was—not knowing whether to tell someone that they were worried about a friend, whether because that friend wasn't eating enough, or was being abused, or was hurting themselves. Friends are forced to decide between the easy choice—turning a blind eye—or the right choice, acting and risking the friendship.

From kindergarten on, we are taught to stand up to bullies. Bystanders, we are told, are just as bad as bullies. Witnesses of elementary school bullying and of the Holocaust are equally compelled to take action. When we stand idly by, we allow terrible things to happen, and we send a message of support to the bully. We are often afraid of

what will happen if we stick up for others; we fear becoming the new target. But if we do not, we risk more. We risk being responsible for cruelty. We risk losing our sense of compassion. In Washington, D.C.'s Holocaust Museum, an inscription reads, "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander." Even though it is easier to turn away and ignore injustice, we must be brave enough to stand up for what is right, or we are responsible for what is wrong.

The earth is seemingly crumbling around us. We hear on the news that global warming will submerge multiple cities completely underwater. We read in magazines that 74 species of plants and animals go extinct every day, or that 2 ½ acres of rainforest are cut down every second, or that our air and water are dangerously polluted. But we often fail to realize how great an impact we can have on the environment by making small changes in our lifestyles. By turning the light off when we leave the room, and recycling, and reusing. By planting a tree, by cutting down on our paper usage, by buying more fuel-efficient cars. With such small changes, we can make a real difference in our world. We just need to make the effort to do what we know is right.

There are an infinite number of other instances that force us to choose between the easy path and the just path. On November 4th, for instance, Americans will be asked to take the time to vote. By going out to the voting station, we are taking action and making the effort to choose the candidate we believe will better our world. On a smaller scale, we choose the right instead of the easy path when we give up our seat on the T to a parent holding a baby or to an elderly person. Any time we give to charity or help others, we are going out of our way to do what is right. When we decide to tell the truth instead of lying to get out of trouble, or when we decide to stop eating meat to stand up against

cruelty to animals, or when we make a special effort to be friendly to a lonely person, we are making the right decision, not just the easy one. We face these decisions, whether minute or life-changing, every day. By acting on what we believe to be right, regardless of whether it's an easy choice, we can better the world.