

Question - Who is Malcolm Butler?

Malcolm Butler is the New England Patriots defensive back who secured a victory in last winter's Super Bowl.

With less than 30 seconds left in Super Bowl XLIX, the Seahawks trailed 28-24, but appeared to have the Patriots right where they wanted them.

Seattle had the ball on New England's 1-yard line with one timeout remaining.

In their backfield was All-Pro running back Marshawn Lynch, who had already carried 24 times for 102 yards.

But rather than trying to punch the ball in for a touchdown on second-and-goal, the Seahawks called a quick slant play that backfired disastrously, when Malcolm Butler intercepted the pass that ended the game.

Seattle head coach Pete Carroll admits to “giving the game away,” – his words, yet, Carroll at the same time believes he made the right call.

He's never wavered there.

Where many people say “it was the worst possible decision,”

he says “**it was the worst possible *outcome*.**”

That's his distinction, and I think it is a distinction worth pondering today as we begin a new year.

This year and every year is filled with a multitude of moments which require us to make decisions.

Perhaps some of us would be quite appreciative and grateful if when given the moment to make a decision, God, or someone else would lead us to make the right decision.

When we are children, the younger we are, the more our parents decide for us.

The older we get, the more we have to decide for ourselves.

It is guaranteed that we will have to make decisions, and it is guaranteed that many of those decisions will have to be made without our knowing the outcome in advance.

That is very much what this holiday presents to us, even by its very name – Rosh Hashanah -the beginning of the Shannah, which of course means year.

But let's look at that word a little bit more carefully –

The word Shanah is related to:

Sheni – two – repeat the same decision,

or Shiniui (Israeli political party) - something new and different –

Lishnot – to repeat, or L'shanot – to change!

Mah Nishtanah –Shanah - how will this year be the same as previous years, and how will it be different?

I don't know and neither do you.

But of this I am certain.

I am certain that the degree to which it will be the same or different will depend quite a bit on the decisions we make, and whether they lead to an expected or unexpected outcome.

The sad reality for many of us is that from year to year we make the same decisions over and over, and somehow expect the outcome to be different than it was in the past.

Perhaps the outcome could be different, but if the decision is the same, then some factor in the process has to change, otherwise the outcome will remain the same.

Something has to change for the outcome, the result to be different.

I promise you, that in next year's Super Bowl, if Pete Carroll finds himself in that same situation against the

New England Patriots, he might again throw the ball instead of run, but the ball will be thrown nowhere near Malcolm Butler.

Decisions are hard for many of us, so hard that often we make the same decisions over and over again just because that's what we're used to, even though the outcome has been less than desirable.

Isn't that true when it comes to decisions about food, exercise, relationships, sleep habits, and many more important *and* mundane aspects of life?

Let me point out that there is quite a difference between making the right decision and a good decision.

And a good decision is not necessarily always the obvious decision.

In my opinion, after hearing his reasoning I think Pete Carroll made a good decision, just not the right decision, at least when you judge the decision based on outcome.

So my advice for us today is to realize that even when we make good decisions, they may not always turn out to be the right decisions.

And when that happens, it's better to try to do as Pete Carroll is saying he has done – namely, move on, and don't beat yourself up.

A decision and its outcome can be separate and distinct.

Our goal should be to make the best decision possible under the circumstances, then release from the outcome.

Don't blame *yourself* if the outcome is not what you wanted or expected.

One of the most powerful moments in the high holy day service confronts this aspect of life head-on.

We will get to that moment pretty soon.

I am talking about the Untetaneh Tokef prayer.

B'Rosh Hahanah Yikatayvun U'vYom Tzom Kippur Yichtaymun - on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on the day of the fast of atonement, is sealed –

it is a special moment in every congregation, and it is quite special here.

Howard Salob does a magnificent job in drawing all of us into the power and majesty of this prayer.

Let's try to think of this prayer as more of a poem than a statement of fact.

It provides a metaphor that depicts our lives as entries in a book of life comprised of the decisions we make.

Judaism is an action oriented religion and our actions are determined by our decisions.

The prayer prompts us to make good decisions and if we are fortunate, more often than not those good decisions will be the right ones for us.

But, the prayer has an almost subversive message which warns us that not always, even when we make a good decision, will the outcome, the results, bring us what we expect and hope to achieve.

That is life and there's no getting around it.

Let's try to look at the prayer together a little more closely.

Please open your Machzor to page 143.

When you look at the first two lines in Hebrew or English after the refrain, do you see something strange?

Notice the reversal of themes – we'll get back to that.

At least part of the theme seems to be repeated –

"how many will pass on... And who will die." What's the difference between "pass on" and "will die?"

The word “Yibarayoon”-in biblical literature usually refers to something that only God creates.

Cite the beginning of Genesis.

Perhaps we can interpret this phrase a bit differently –
"how much needs to be put away, and how much needs to be created anew?

How much space in our lives do we need to clear out, in order to make room for something new, energetic, vital which has not been created before?

Or will it be same old, same old?

Perhaps the interpretive reading on the left-hand column of page 143 has it right – look at the fifth line - where it says, "who shall be truly alive, and who shall merely exists.”

Perhaps, this poem is saying, that this is the time of the year when we must begin to examine the tendency to always evaluate our decisions by the nature of the outcome which follows.

Yes, this prayer powerfully presents to us the notion that much of life is not in our control.

But it also demonstrates, in its very makeup, that life is filled with *peaks and valleys, ups and downs*.

And our tradition suggests that over the course of time, not always, but over the course of time, if we try to make **good decisions** we will be more likely to arrive at outcomes which will demonstrate that the decisions have also been **right**.

Let me show you the ups and downs in the prayer and how the author plays with them:

Let's read through the prayer in English - demonstrate the ups and downs with the congregation responding:

Notice how near the end the pattern changes and while there is a heavy emphasis on the downs, the valleys,

after all we are Jewish and we are very good at complaining –

nevertheless, the prayer ends with the emphasis on being raised up.

The question is, how do you get there, after you have been knocked low to the ground?

Our prayer presents a prescription – some medicine, an antidote suggested for help.

Look at the bottom of p.143 – lower left hand margin –
“But repentance, prayer ...”

The decision has been made.

We may not be able to do anything more to change what might happen *to us*, but there is always more we can do to change who we are and what we can do for others.

As I near the end of the sermon, let me go back to where I began, with Malcolm Butler in last year's Super Bowl.

You know where Malcolm Butler was just a little while before making his championship securing interception – he was beat, down field, lying on his back, after failing to prevent the Seattle receiver from making a miraculous catch which at that moment seemed to set up the winning touchdown.

In reviewing research for this sermon, I watched a short clip that dramatically portrayed these last few plays of the Super Bowl.

Don't I have a great job – I get to watch football while I'm working.

After failing to break up that pass, on the this video I watched a few seconds of Malcolm Butler stomping on the sideline, angry, despondent, almost defeated.

He indeed was brought very low, in front of almost the whole world, and yet just a moment or two later he was able to do something very special that allowed him to be raised up in victory and glory.

Therein lies the power of sports for many of us who are sports fans.

The ability to overcome terrible defeat, and to move on toward a most unexpected victory.

Yes, in life, there are decisions which lead to the worst possible outcomes, but there are also decisions we can make thereafter, which help and sometimes lead us to unparalleled achievement.

Pete Carroll made a good decision with a terrible outcome.

Sometimes in life that happens.

Malcolm Butler made a good decision with a wonderful outcome.

Sometimes in life that happens as well.

Either way, Let us resolve, decide, to repent, to pray and to do good deeds, so that we may begin a truly new year.

Shana Tova u'metukah