

# What if **LOVE** is the **REAL CHOICE**?

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I was a fierce, unhappy, intellectual twenty-eight-year-old, still uneasy with all things “mystical,” stalking in old jeans and cheap army boots around Jerusalem. My guide to the mysteries of the Old City was “Isaiah,” plump, bald, late-middle-aged Israeli poet and mystic who looked, as he himself said often, “like a semi-enlightened sunburnt frog” and who had, over two days, become a friend. I loved his sardonic wit, his baroque flights of phrase, his kabbalistic learning, the way his eyebrows twitched asymmetrically when he got excited, which he did often. On this particular day, he was wearing bright red sneakers and a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt with great orange suns on it. Our talk was light, fact-stocked, and airy until we found ourselves in the early afternoon on the Mount of Olives, and stood, suddenly silent, in the stubby ochre olive grove where Christ wandered on the night before His crucifixion.

Even on a cloudless afternoon like this, Isaiah whispered, “this place is so sad. It is as if you can still hear Him weeping for all of us, for what must happen.”

He stretched out his arm and pointed to the bricked-up golden gate in the wall of the Old City opposite us.

“Some Jews believe that the Messiah will come through that gate.” He started to laugh. “Don’t hold your breath. And suppose He’s a She? Wouldn’t that drive all the old boys in black out of their curled heads?”

It was then that I noticed the faded black numbers on the bare arm sticking out of his Hawaiian shirt. I gasped; the afternoon before we had walked in silent anguish together through the Holocaust Museum. Isaiah had said nothing then. Now, he turned slowly and stared at me, into me, steadily, as if weighing my soul.

Then he began to talk in a low, even voice I had not heard from him.



“Yes, I was in Auschwitz. As a child. From nine to thirteen. I don’t know how or why I survived, but I do know what I learned.” I waited. He opened his mouth, then stopped, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Words are hopeless. I want to say something so big, but I only have small words to say it with. That is why I speak of these things so rarely, and to so few people. Perhaps the old Jewish prophets were right; some things are too terrible and too holy to be spoken of.”

The afternoon darkened slightly. He paused, as if to gather strength, and went on: “I am not going to dishonor the horrors we all lived through in that hell by going over them. You know many of them, and you have the heart to imagine more, although nothing you can imagine can come close.”

“But it is not of these things that I wish to speak to you. I want to tell you what I discovered in hell. It may shock you.”

“In Auschwitz, I discovered that there was one thing I was even more terrified of than death. When you live in an atmosphere of terror, you realize that all the fears you shrink from in ‘normal’ circumstances are relatively minor and that there is one terror that everyone has which is overwhelming, and that hardly anyone ever talks about, because very few have gone through enough to find it out.”

“And what is this terror?” I asked, a little afraid by now.

“The terror of Love, of Love’s embrace of all things, all beings, and all events. Everyone pretends they want to know and experience Love, but to know and experience Love is to die to all your private fantasies and agendas, all your visions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; even ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Everyone who comes to that death is dragged to it kicking and cursing and screaming and weeping tears of blood, just as Jesus was in this garden.”

He breathed deeply as if to steady himself.

“I was twelve years old. It was mid-winter. I was in despair. My mother, father, and sister had all starved to death. I knew by then that the chances of surviving or of being saved were very slim. There was a guard who was particularly sadistic who used to beat me with his leather strap until I bled.”

“I was only twelve. What did I know about anything, about God? All I knew was that I had to decide, once and for all, whether the horror I saw around me was the ultimate reality or whether the joy and tenderness I could still feel stirring inside me was the truth. I knew that they couldn’t *both* be the truth; if the horror of the camp was the reality about human nature and life, then what was stirring in my heart was some kind of mad joke. If what was stirring in my heart was real, then it was the horror that was the mad joke.”

“I thought about this for months. ‘Thought’ is too polite a word. I *bled* about this, I wept over it, I wrestled with it as Jacob must have wrestled with the angel, for my life. I had to know, or I would drown in the darkness. For the first time, I started to pray. My prayer, which I began to repeat at every moment, was only four words: ‘Show me the truth’. Nothing came. Not a single insight, not a single vision, no dream with any comforting angel. Nothing at all.”

“But I went on praying, more and more desperately, and then early one winter morning I heard a quiet voice say to me, ‘You must decide’. What did it mean? For a week, I wrestled with this. What could

the voice mean? Was this the devil laughing at me? Was I god in disguise? The maddest thoughts swirled round my brain.”

“Slowly, I began to understand. I understood that I was always free to decide whether the world I was being shown was the real one or whether the world I felt in my heart was the truth. When I really thought about it, the second choice seemed even more frightening than the rest. What if Love was the real choice? Would I have to love the guard who had beaten me? Would I have to forgive the apparatus that had killed my parents and hundred of thousands of others? Would I even have to forgive in some mysterious way God Himself for having allowed these horrors to take place?”

“I lived through indescribable torment, much worse, even than what I had suffered in the camp at the hands of the guards. A twelve-year-old soul, let me tell you, has abysses some of the angels would be scared of.”

“Then, one morning, I awoke and knew quite simply what I had to do. I had to choose what was at the bottom of my heart, the fire I felt there when I thought of my mother, or our cat at home, or the flowers and vegetables in our kitchen garden. So I went out into the camp yard, covered with snow, with a gray, lowering, hopeless sky overhead and, closing my eyes, I screamed with my whole being silently, ‘I choose Love! I choose Love! I choose Love!’”

“And then it happened. When I opened my eyes, a sun not of this world had come out and was blazing in glory all around me. The snow along the barbed wire glittered like diamonds, and the air was sweet and hard like the skin of a cold apple against my cheek. The guard I hated at that moment came out of another building, smoking a cigarette. He didn’t see me, but I saw him and— this was the miracle—I felt no fear at all, and no hatred, only a burning pity that scalded my eyes with tears. I did not feel vulnerable as I had feared; the *Thing* in me that was crying was stronger than anything or anyone I had ever encountered. It or He felt like a calm column of fire that nothing could put out.”

“Somehow I survived for another year until release came. Whenever I could, I would gaze at the way the ordinary light changed on the ground, along the wires, on the roofs of the huts and the crematoria. I knew now Whose light it was a reflection of. The fire in my chest did not leave. It has never left. I have tried to live and breathe and act from it and from its laws.”

The sun was setting in a riot of rich red light in the sky, setting the gold dome of the Temple Mount alight. Isaiah took both my hands in both of his.

“I doubt if we’ll ever meet again. You are leaving tomorrow, and I am in the last stages of cancer. I am not afraid. The Glory is here always. I see it with open eyes, every day; I am not unique; there are thousands of us, maybe millions, all over the world, of all kinds, classes, sexes, and religions. The Glory gave me life and It is giving me now my death; but through another death long ago It gave me a Life beyond all dying. And it is into that Life that I am going.”

“You have a long journey ahead of you. I have a feeling it will be a difficult and wonderful one. Remember always three things—forgive me for being so ‘rabbinical’, and in such a shirt and wearing such sneakers—but write these down in that black notebook of yours. (And you don’t have to worry about your ideas being stolen; not even the seraphim could read *your* writing.)”

“Pain can be terrible beyond any human description, but it is transient; Bliss is eternal.”

“Evil is real, but only in its dimension that includes this world; the Glory shines forever here and everywhere in a way evil cannot stain or defeat.”

“Horror has its day, or year, or decade, or century; the Sun of Love has never, and will never set.”

“And here’s a fourth: whatever you have to go through to come to know this, beyond any shadow of a doubt, it is worth it.”

“And now I am going to buy you a dinner of the best shish kebabs in Jerusalem in a little place off the Via Dolorosa.”

“I thought you only ate kosher food!”

“Are you mad? Arab cooking is wonderful. One way to start making peace with your neighbor is to eat his food. Don’t they teach you anything in that university of yours?”

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*This piece is adapted from “Prologue to Sun at Midnight: A Memoir of the Dark Night,” included in Radical Passion: Sacred Love and Wisdom in Action by Andrew Harvey (North Atlantic Books, 2012).*

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