

Shavuot Day Two Yizkor Sermon

You go to the doctor for your annual check up. He tells you: "I have bad news and good news. You're suffering from a rare disease. Untreated you will not live more than six months. But there's a new medicine that might extend your life four, maybe five years." In a matter of seconds you face both a death sentence and an extraordinary opportunity to live. How would you feel at such a moment? What would you do?

Second question: What would you say if I told you were living on borrowed time; that you didn't really earn whatever amount of time you have left to live? How would you act if you believed that your life was merely lent to you to use as wisely and completely as possible? Would that effect what you do tomorrow, or even today? Would you live differently than you are living right now? There is so much we take for granted including the years in our lives. What would we strive to accomplish if we believed that our life was a gift of limited duration?

These questions, it seems to me, are actually an underlying theme of Shavuot. Although we associate Shavuot with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, there is yet another subtext to this holiday that is often forgotten and ignored. I would call it the "King David connection." This holiday more than any other in the Jewish calendar is associated with the great king of Israel.

So what does King David have to do with Shavuot? There are two answers to that question. First, according to an ancient tradition in the Talmud, King David passed away on Shavuot. So today we not only recite Yizkor; we also mark David's Yahrtzeit.. Second, the fact that we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot serves to highlight the important role that David plays in connection with this particular holiday. Ruth, a Moabite convert to Judaism, was the great-great-grandmother of David. Shavuot then marks the birth of David's household - as well as marking the death of David, Israel's greatest king.

Judaism is a religion of both law and lore. Imagination sometimes plays a more important role in our thinking than facts. Beyond the solid facts of history there are truths to be learned from the stories we tell. [slight pause] Did David really pass away on Shavuot? We'll never know. But there are stories that we tell about King David that teach us something about the preciousness of life. Shavuot gives us an opportunity to retell them.

We know that the end of King David's life was complicated, rather sad in his deteriorating health and the terrible infighting among his children about whom would ascend to the throne. But we go back to the beginning of his life, and that too – according to legend – was complicated. There is a tradition that, when God created the world, the Holy One allotted a set amount of years to each human being who would ever be born. When God came to David it was decreed that he would die as an infant. Upon hearing this, Adam (the first human being and one with special powers) was distressed to learn that a soul as precious and important as David's would not be given a chance to live more than a short life. Adam asked God to take seventy years of his own more than ample lifespan and turn them over to David. And so it was, according to a legend that I learned from my colleague Mark Greenspan. King David, in other words, lived his life on borrowed time. His years were not his - they were a gift from Adam, the first human being.

I can only imagine that believing that someone chose to give you extra years would affect the way you would live each day. Saving Private Ryan – I watched it again early this week - was ultimately about that very question, and we see Ryan near the end of his life wondering if he had lived a life good enough to merit the extra life he had been given because of the sacrifices of other soldiers. If, he asked and we would ask, my years are not earned but a gift, what should I do with them? People who undergo near death experiences often reassess their lives afterwards. For them, each day becomes a gift. Small bothers and inconveniences become less important. Each day is a celebration. We see David, the author of the Psalms, celebrating each day – at least early on - in song and poetry. No moment of his life could be taken for granted.

But that does not mean that King David was satisfied with the amount of time he was allotted either. Because he was living on borrowed time, legend tells us that David became obsessed with knowing how long his life would be and when it would come to an end. He asked God to tell him how long he would live. But all God would say was, "Look, I can't tell you when you'll die. No human being can know this. But this much I can say: you're going to pass away on a Sabbath."

From that day on David spent every Shabbat endlessly studying Torah without stopping. He knew that the angel of Death could not take the soul of someone engaged in the study of Torah. One Sabbath, however, on the festival of Shavuot, as David studied Torah a wind blew open a curtain in David's room. When he stopped to see what happened, the Angel of Death snatched away his soul. That is the legend. Even King David could not avoid death. Nobody can.

Legends like these are fanciful and imaginative. But what do they say about King David? And what do they say about us? In a sense, I believe all of us are living on borrowed time. Time is not ours; it's a gift that has been allotted to us. We've done nothing to earn it, to deserve it, or to hold on to it. It has simply been given to us. But what will we do with it? Like King David, we are often more obsessed with the days in our lives than we are with the life in our days. People live longer today but do they really live better? The legends about the life of King David say something about how we approach the world and what we will do with our life. We should neither assume life is our right nor bemoan death as a curse. They are simply a part of who we are. And what counts is what we do between the first and the last moments.

So this is why we remember King David on the festival of Shavuot. Shavuot is the shortest of the three pilgrimage festivals. On Pesach and Sukkoth we have an entire week to celebrate and rejoice in God's blessings. On Shavuot we only have two days - in the land of Israel only one day. Yet Shavuot is no less significant than the others, in the particular way we have understood its message today. What counts is not how much time we have – a day or two like this short holiday, a week, a few years or many - what counts is not how much time but what we chose to do with it. There are no guarantees about how much time we have been given. But each day, each hour that we have, is an opportunity to make the most out of lives.

As we come near to the end of this Shavuot service, we pause to recite the Yizkor service and reflect for a few moments on the preciousness and brevity of life. We stop to think about a loved one who is no longer with us but whose presence we still feel so strongly each and every day. Their years are over, but their life continues through ours.

They have lent us their years, in the sense that King David lived out his allotted years but we continue to sing his psalms and to tell his story.

And who will sing our songs? Who will tell our story? Who will follow our example? Yizkor is a portal through which we transcend our earthly years. But now instead of borrowing time we lend our years to others. Have we lived in such a way that those we have loved will learn to love others as well? Have we lived in such a way that the lives of those who follow us will be fuller of appreciation and meaning because ours were?

Friends, Yizkor teaches us to cherish our time, all of it borrowed time. And Yizkor, through the memories it brings, bestows immortal life on those who have died and have blessed us with the gift of their lives as well.

We remember them now. Amen

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