

דבר תורה (Sermon) for Parshat Ki Tisa
"Birthday Sermon"
3/10/2007
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Note: This *devar Torah* was delivered on 3/10/07, where Temple Israel celebrated "Birthday Shabbat" honoring January through March birthdays.

This week, the Torah talked to us about the value of שבת (Shabbat). Even as God instructs משה (*Moshe*, Moses) regarding how to build the משכן (*Mishkan*, Tabernacle), which was to be a Temple to God, we are told that the Shabbat is an important symbol of God's relationship to the Jewish people. God instructs *Moshe*:

ואתה דבר אל בני ישראל לאמר אך את שבתתי תשמרו כי אות הוא ביני וביניכם לדרתיכם
לדעת כי אני ה' מקדשכם :

You shall speak to the Children of Israel saying: However, keep my Sabbaths, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, to know that I am *A-donay* who sanctifies you.

Exodus 31:13

By observing the Sabbath - by setting aside that special time in their lives - the people will be reminded that they are holy, and that they are holy because of their relationship to God. The Shabbat, we are told, is a sign of more than this:

ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת לעשות את השבת לדרתם ברית עולם : ביני ובין בני ישראל אות
הוא לעולם כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ וביום השביעי שבת וינפש :

And the Children of Israel shall keep the Shabbat, to observe the Shabbat throughout their generations, an everlasting covenant. Between me and the Children of Israel, it is an everlasting sign that in six days *A-donay* created the heavens and the earth, and on the Seventh day rested and was invigorated.

Exodus 31:16-17

We see here, that the Shabbat is a sign of our relationship with God and with the whole world. Shabbat is a sign that God created this world, and that we are simply the Earth's stewards. The Shabbat is a sign that God has sanctified us - giving us a unique responsibility toward the earth and all that are in it. Each week, we are to rest on the Shabbat. This will be a reminder that our purpose in life is not simply to work, to earn a living, and to pursue personal achievement. Our responsibility is also to find spirituality, to find a relationship with God, and a way of living our lives to the benefit of others.

Shabbat is but one reminder that we have in Judaism as to our responsibilities. For example, we have holidays such as Passover which reminds us of the importance of freedom and human dignity, and the 10 days of repentance to focus our attention on how we can better live our lives.

Today, we are celebrating birthdays. Much like Shabbat is a weekly reminder of our place in this world, birthdays also serve as an important reminder of our place in life. If we use our birthdays correctly, they are an opportunity to reflect on the past year, as well as the years in the future. We can celebrate the opportunities that we had this year, and dedicate ourselves to seizing the opportunities in the years to come. Many of us take birthdays as an opportunity to make resolutions as to how next year will be better than the last.

The truth is, we all need reminders. Oftentimes, we simply lose perspective over time. It's inevitable. There are many things we want to do. But if we don't keep those things on our minds at all times, they are simply forgotten.

Shabbat and Holidays, birthdays, and the like, are special times on the calendar that serve as a reminder, and hopefully refocus our efforts on where we should be in life. On the other hand, in many of our lives, it is events that occur in our lives, and not on the calendar that bring us into greater focus. A couple months ago, a congregant came to see me in the office. She had had a health scare. She hadn't yet been to the doctor to see what the story was, and of course, she dreaded the possibility of bad news. She came to ask me if there were prayers that she could recite to ask for God's help at this time in her life. Our conversation was far ranging. As I tried to provide some comfort in this time of high anxiety, we discussed the advancements in medicine that were cause for hope even if there was "bad news," and we discussed some meaningful prayers for health and healing. Some days afterward, she saw the doctor and, thank God, received a clean bill of health. When we spoke again, she made some very important points. She spoke of how this moment in her life changed her perspective so. A week or two prior, she had worried about how her son hadn't mowed the lawn yet, or how her hair stylist had to change an appointment. Now, those trifling matters seemed like nothing. She was elated that her scare was over, and wanted to say prayers of thanksgiving. But she also expressed a very important concern. How could she hold on to some of her current feelings. After all, a while after a traumatic event, she knew that we tend to go back to the same-old-same-old. How could she hold on to the sense of thanksgiving for the many wonderful things in her life - her husband and family, her health, etc. How could she hold on to the perspective that she had - to understand what was really important in life?

This story demonstrates something very important. There are times in life that we are very aware of God, where we are very aware of what we are supposed to do with our lives, and aware of what is genuinely important in life. This may be during a birthday or a holiday, or when we experience a traumatic event in our lives. If you stop and think about it, it is during these moments that we are theologically the safest. We feel God in our lives, and understand our responsibilities. It's amazingly easy to do the right thing during these times of reflection or times of crisis. It's easy to do the right thing on a holiday. It's easy not to get bent out of shape over the little things when we are in touch with our mortality. Where we are really in the most theological danger is on the average days, where there is no crisis hanging over our head and no holiday looming large. It is on those days, that we are most in danger of losing perspective, and forgetting what it's all about. Those are the days where we're most in danger of cheating a little bit in our business or in our taxes. It is on those days where we are most likely to wrong a coworker, or to forget to show extra caring to a friend who is sick. It's those days that we simply wake up like any other, that we are most in danger of going wrong.

Those of you who have seen Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" will be familiar with a very enlightening fact that he teaches about frogs. Apparently, if you take a frog, and drop it into boiling water, the frog will immediately jump out. And if you take that frog, and drop it into a bowl of ice cold water, it will immediately jump out. On the other hand, if you take a frog and put it into a pot of room-temperature water, and then turn on the burner under that pot, the frog will simply continue to sit in that water as the water heats and heats to boiling point. The frog will continue to sit there until you take it out . . . in whatever condition it may be when you take it out.

Our lives are much like the frog. In moments of crisis, or special moments on the calendar, we have a heightened awareness. We know who we are, and what we must do. But for so many days of our lives, we are simply sitting in that pot of water, as the water continues to get continually hotter. We hardly even notice how we are living our lives, and how we might live those lives in a better way. Every once in a while, we are thrown into boiling water and we jump. And it is at that moment that our relationship to God and God's world comes into perspective. It is the moment that we are theologically safest. But it's on those average days that our lives are as if we were in a pot of water, as it continues to heat up to boiling point, without our even noticing.

So, how do we answer this congregant's question? How do we keep perspective? How do we remember to always be thankful for our blessings? How do we teach ourselves to remember what is important in life - not only at moments of crisis, but more importantly on the days that are just like all the other days? Judaism teaches that we do this through ritual. We have ritual in Judaism for every day of our lives and every moment of our lives. Judaism teaches that we are to pray three times a day. In the morning, our prayers can give us strength and conviction for the daily grind. In the afternoon, they can remind us of our most important responsibilities, even as they might be obscured by the business we are conducting. Evening prayers are a moment to reflect on what we did right that day, and where we may have gone astray. Each of these prayers is also a moment to celebrate the gifts that have been bestowed upon us that day and throughout our lives. Judaism also asks us to say blessings, to praise God for those little things that are so important in our lives. Therefore, we say blessing before we eat, and even have a blessing to be said when we behold the beauty of an ocean or the splendor of a rainbow. We are asked to engage in regular study of Torah in order to gain enlightenment toward God's path, the path of peace, justice, and spirituality. Jewish ritual is our reminder of who we are, and who we should be. And if you think about it, from the perspective of our lives sitting in a pot of water, hoping to notice if it starts to get warmer, those little rituals, for example a prayer said on an average Wednesday afternoon is as important for our spiritual wellbeing as is the Musaf service on Yom Kippur.

In order to maintain constant vigilance toward our behavior and perspective toward what is important in our lives, Judaism asks us to keep ritual as a regular part of our lives. We have Shabbat every week to remind us that the world we live in is God's, and that God endowed our community with sanctity and with purpose. We have holidays that come around from time to time to focus our attention. But our prayer, on this "Birthday Shabbat" is that we not need to wait another year, or for another holiday to bring things back into perspective. Our prayer is to make Judaism a more constant driving force in our lives. We pray that the rituals of Judaism become a regular fixture in our lives, providing moments each and every day for us to remember what is really important in life, and how we should live our lives. Let us not become like the frog sitting on the pot of water. Instead, let us be ever aware of our spiritual wellbeing, thankful for our gifts, and mindful of our responsibilities. And let us say, Amen.