

## “Why should I want to live?”

*The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ ethical will to the Jewish people. Like Moses, we should all be asking ourselves: “What is the meaning of my life?”*

Two years ago today, I received a phone call that I will never forget. I was working as a chaplain at UCLA medical center and the call was from the psychiatric wing of the hospital. A nurse called to request assistance with a Jewish patient who was being belligerent and was demanding to see a Rabbi. It turns out that the patient was a fourteen year-old boy (who I’ll call Razi) who was hospitalized for anorexia and severe depression. When I arrived, I was greeted by a very stern nurse who didn’t seem to care much for chaplains. “Rabbi,” she said, “Raz is very sick and will try anything to not eat, now I think he’s trying to trick us. He says there’s a Jewish holiday tonight when Jews have to fast; but I checked, and ‘Yaum Kepper’ isn’t until September.” I told her that I had better have a talk with the patient. You see Raz was from a very committed Conservative Jewish family that kept kosher and attended shul regularly. Raz himself had graduated from a Conservative day school and he was not, in fact, trying to trick the nurses... it was Erev Tisha b’Av and he wanted to observe the fast.

So the nurse brought Raz out from his room to meet with me. Raz, was about my height, but he weighed only about a 100 pounds. His cheeks were gaunt and his shirt hung on his shoulders as though on a coat hanger. He complained to me about his nurse and how she wouldn’t let him fast. I explained to Raz that his treatment – which included a strict eating regiment – was a matter of *pikuah nefesh* – a matter of life and death – and that he was not only exempt from fasting, but that it was imperative for him to follow his doctor’s orders to eat. Though he didn’t like my answer, he acknowledged that I was correct. {pause} We read a little bit of Eicha together from the Tanakh he had in his room: “*Eicha yashva badad ba-ir* – Alas, Lonely sits the city, Once great with people! She that was great among nations Is become like a widow; The princess among states is become subjugated. Bitterly she weeps in the night, Her cheek wet with tears. There is none to comfort her, Of all her friends.” I looked up at Raz and he was crying. “I feel like Jerusalem right now,” he wailed, “I’m so alone in this awful place.” And then he got very quiet and I waited... and when he looked up at me with his sunken eyes he said, “Rabbi... I have a question for you! No one around here has been able to answer it for me and I want to know what you think.” “Rabbi: why should I want to live?”

That question knocked the wind out of me! You see, what Raz didn’t know is that I had asked myself that very question when I was his age. {Pause} Then I said to him, “Raz, only *you* can answer that question for yourself. *You* have to believe that there is something worth living for.” He cried even more and then he looked back up at me and said, “Well, Rabbi, you’re a grown-up... you’ve made it this far. From where you are in life right now, is it worth it?” {Pause} In that moment I recalled my own struggles, but I realized that I *did* have clear answer to his question, “Yes, Raz... yes, I believe it’s worth it. I know that this is a very broken world, but I also believe that we have it in our power to fix the brokenness... I believe that healing is possible – for the world and for ourselves... I guess what I’m saying is: I believe there is hope... Right now you feel destroyed, like Jerusalem... but even in Eicha there is hope.” And we turned ahead in the book to chapter 3: “*Zot ashiv el-libi, al-ken ohil*... [Whenever I recalled my distress] this is what I call to mind and it gives me hope: The kindness of the Lord has not ended, God’s mercies are not spent. They are renewed every morning...’ (from Lam 3:19-23). So, I guess what I’m saying Razi is that change is possible,

every day gives us a new opportunity... nearly 2000 years have gone by and Jerusalem is still not rebuilt, but little-by-little we'll get there."

After that first meeting, Razi and I met regularly over the next several weeks. And I'd like to think that he gained hope and some healing through our conversations. I know that my encounter with him changed *my* life. And to this day, his question echoes in my mind: "Why should I want to live?" I don't take that question for granted. Razi was on an honest search for meaning in life. Razi asked that question in a moment of despair, but there are many other ways to ask that question. Instead of asking "why should I want to live?" we should all be asking ourselves, "what do I have that is worth living for?" Or "what is the meaning of my life?" But, our culture isn't too open to asking that question out loud. Try going to a dinner party and asking your friends: "what is the meaning of *your* life?" or try it as a pick-up line the next time you're at a singles bar, "hey, what's *your* name... and what give your life meaning?"

In our culture, "the meaning of life" is joke or cliché. But those of us who have sat at the bedside of a loved one have asked that question. Those of us who have confronted our own mortality have asked that question. Those of us who have looked into the face of our newborn children and wondered what kind of world we're bringing them into have asked that question. Those of us who have felt the brokenness of this world, who have felt the pain of suffering... *all of us*, at some point in our lives, have asked the question: "What is the meaning of my life?"

And the most tragic thing I can think of is if you can't find the words to answer that question. But in a culture that doesn't often ask the question out loud, where should we turn for answers? I want to suggest to you that a good place to look is in the Jewish tradition. I read the Torah through the lens of that question all the time. And this morning we beginning reading my favorite book of the humash – sefer devarim – the book of Deuteronomy. Even more so than the other 4 books, Devarim recognizes a world that is broken in need of healing, a world in chaos in need of justice. Sefer Devarim does not take for granted the question of meaning and it offers a clear a vision of the world as it ought to be. And Sefer Devarim puts the responsibility squarely on our shoulders. Repairing the world is our choice. Transformation is possible... healing is possible.

And our guide through sefer Devarim is himself an example of this. The Book of Deuteronomy is narrated by non-other than Moses. Moses himself was transformed by his encounters with God and his struggles as a leader. This man, Moses, who once protested to God "*Lo ish devarim anochi?*" – "I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10) now has something profound to say. Deuteronomy opens, "*Eleh ba-devarim asher diber Moshe el kol Yisrael.*" - "These are the words – devarim – that Moses spoke to all of Israel." This once timid man, who fled from his destiny, has discovered his voice, his message, and the meaning of his life's struggle. And the book of Deuteronomy is his ethical will to the Jewish people.

In the weeks ahead, I encourage us to read Moses' words together for their sublime wisdom. And I'm going to give you some homework. I want you to consider writing your own ethical will. It doesn't have to be the book of Deuteronomy. It just has to be a sincere statement of the wisdom you want to leave to your children and grandchildren. What has life taught you? What have you learned from your own struggles, from growing up, from what you've read and what you've seen in life, from marriage (or divorce), from raising children, from making a living, from building a community, from love and from loss? What has life taught you?

It might take years to craft and you may revise it many times, but cherish that will. You deserve to know the wisdom and meaning of your own life, and your children deserve to know it too.

My prayer for us this morning is that like Moses, we learn to find those words and that we too should have the courage to share them.

Shabbat Shalom