

Vayeileikh Sermon 5779

A great Jewish sage once said ‘Repent one day before your death!’ When his students asked how one could know when that would be, he explained: We should repent for our sins every day, knowing it may be our last. I thought of that tradition when reviewing this week’s parshah, in which God instructs about the end of Moses’ life. It was a singular life, unlike that lived by anyone before or since, and even how it ended is instructive for us in the midst of these days of reflection and repentance.

What were the things that Moses did in preparing for his imminent death? He appointed Joshua as his successor, as God instructed; he addressed the people to remind them of their responsibilities and to warn them about their future sins, as God instructed; he left behind a written testament to the conditions of the *brit*, the covenant, between God and the people, as God instructed. Moses was, to the end, a faithful servant to God, implementing God’s final instructions to him.

Those directions amount to three different forms of continuity: of leadership, of behavior and of binding responsibilities. God wants Moses to take no chances. The people will have an oral and written reminder of the covenant, as well as a leader chosen to fulfill its details. The transition from wilderness wandering to settled life in Canaan is meant to be seamless, despite how different their new circumstances might seem. Conquering the land and settling it, becoming farmers, living a life of mitzvot, and doing all of this without Moses, might otherwise be too unsettling. God ensures that the end of Moses’ life will, like the rest of his life, serve as a model of propriety and inspiration to those he leaves behind after death.

When contemplating our own deaths, as we are meant to do on Yom Kippur, how many of us will be able to do as Moses did? I meet many people who struggle with the problems of their aging parents, which is to say the parents' problems and the problem of the parents themselves. Too often I speak with the adult children of elderly parents who have not taken the time to talk about and write down what their parents want to happen after their deaths, or who do try to do so and are rebuffed. But I have also had the experience of talking with someone whose own death is imminent and wanted to talk through all of the implications of it for their family.

That kind of conversation can, of course, carry risks. Inevitably, the subjects of money and possessions will have to be addressed. Whatever things are left behind have to be distributed, sold, given away or even thrown away, and how and when that is done has to be handled sensitively. One person's treasures are another person's trash. Money, too, may be distributed or given away, and those decisions must reflect shared values and shared decisions. Up until a death, discussions should be about what the person approaching the end of life wants so that after death we minimize potential conflicts among their survivors.

But what to do with the money and the 'stuff' after a death should not merely be dealt with as a practical problem but also as a journey of discovery. Going through each file of papers, each drawer and each closet holds the promise of memories unearthed and memories shared. We can go through that process together with our parents and learn the meaning of their lives and the values that they want us to continue through their things, money and their memories.

And that is the same process that we should engage in during the High Holidays each year in our own lives. We need to prune away the unnecessary and talk about what is left with our own children or heirs. What would we want done with our 'stuff' if it had to be dealt with

now? If we were to write a 'living will' now, detailing how to dispose of our possessions and what our expectations are for our children and those we would leave behind, how would it read? Whom we appoint as the new 'head of the family,' what would we say, and what record would we leave behind of what we say? What matters most to us, right now, and how can we express that to those closest to us?

With the death of Moses in the parshah this week, we see that there is no question about future leadership of the people or what God expects of them. Moses' actions and words ensure that all that can be done will be done. But I also try to imagine Joshua and Moses' remaining sons going through his belongings after Moses' death: Remember the times he hit the rock with this staff? Who wants it? Here's the veil he used to wear when he was out in public; what should we do with it? What about his Dean Martin records? Each object we will leave behind tells a story about us and illuminates who we were. Hopefully, finding new homes for them will be a process of love and devotion, in which stories are passed down to others, even when that means getting rid of some things. Given the certainty of death, we should plan and discuss its implications with at least as much care as we would any other significant life cycle event, and make it a moment of meaning despite its sadness. By opening ourselves up to that kind of process, we repent of the sin of silence, and we sanctify life.

Shabbat shalom