

“Todah Today” – Sermon for Parshat Kedoshim
May 11, 2019; Congregation Sinai; San José, CA
Doug Brook

Todah is a Hebrew word that means “thank you.” Change one letter and you have “today,” which is a Hebrew word that means “that thing between yesterday and tomorrow.” Today is wedged in between the future and the past. It’s the present tense, so named because today – every day – is a present. A present that we should be thankful for, every day, because each one will never come again.

As all of you just heard, today’s Torah reading is pretty bossy. This parshah, Kedoshim, is in the middle of the book of Vayikra, or, in Hebrew, Leviticus. Now, Leviticus has a reputation for focusing on things we’re not so interested in these days: Sacrifices. Arcane rules about naughtiness. Barry Manilow. But if you’re willing to indulge me for a few moments, and even if you’re not, I’ll give you a sample of exactly how boring this most uninteresting part of the Torah can be.

Rachel related to us תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְאֶת־שַׁבָּתוֹתַי “Guard my Shabbatot.” That’s the plural form of Shabbat, not a special Shabbat tote bag that one’s allowed to carry on Saturdays. Why guard Shabbat? Because it’s precious, and we guard things that are precious. It’s the holiest day of the year. How do we know? The Torah says so. But here’s another reminder. How many aliyot are there? (On a normal Shabbat, not when we’re getting the whole class up there to do their thing.) Seven. How many on Rosh Hashanah? Five. Yom Kippur? Six. If those are the High Holy Days, Shabbat with seven aliyot must be the Higher Holy Day. And we get 52 of them every year. That’s 52 todays each year to be *especially* thankful for.

Rachel also read אַל־תִּפְנוּ אֶל־הַהֲאֱלִילִים “Don’t turn to worthless idols” which means to not start watching American Idol until they’re up to the semifinals. Then Benjamin read several rules detailing exactly how to do a successful sacrifice, which make the infield fly rule seem comprehensible by comparison. He also read to us about charity, specifically about not harvesting the corners of fields or collecting fallen grapes so they’re left for the poor to have.

Alexandra got right to it. תִּגְנוּבוּ לֹא “don’t steal,” just in case anyone missed The Ten Commandments last month on TV. Then לֹא־תִשָּׁבְעוּ בִשְׁמִי וְלֹא־תִשָּׁבְעוּ “don’t lie.” לֹא־תִשָּׁבְעוּ בִשְׁמִי “don’t swear falsely by my name.” Not my name, the Big G’s. Or mine, since you asked.

She didn’t stop there. לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק אֶת־רֵעֶךָ “Don’t oppress your neighbor.” וְלֹא תִגְזֹל “Don’t rob.” Of course, the difference between rob and steal is another drash just by itself. לֹא־תִקְלֹל חֵרֵשׁ “don’t curse a deaf person” and לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשָׁל עֵוֶר לֵבִי “don’t put a stumbling block before a blind person” – those two alone are so meaty that we spent a whole week on them in one of my JTS courses this semester.

Hannah reminded us לֹא־תִעֲשֶׂוּ עֲוֹן לִפְנֵי דָם “don’t be unjust in judgment.” Also בְּעֵמִיד רַב־לֹא־תִלְךְ “don’t walk around as a gossip.” And not to be forgotten,

בלבבך את-אחיך לא-תשנא “don’t hate your brother in your heart.” Since this is the Bible, we can assume that also applies to sisters.

Naomi felt it important that we לא-תקם ולא-תטרל “don’t take revenge or bear a grudge” and then played for us one of the Torah’s greatest hits, right up there with the Shema, Ten Commandments, and the Burning Bush song “We Didn’t Stop the Fire”, קְמוּד לְרַעַה וְאַהֲבַת, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Emboldened by that, she read some things that she’s too young to read, but then felt bad and read about guilt offerings.

Sonia got back to nature relating to us that when you plant a food tree you have to give it time and not eat from it until its fifth year. This teaches us to be patient... we’ll get to the kiddush soon. (I was going to say “soon enough” but decided not to push it.)

Daniel had a lot to say, including תַּנְחִישׁוּ לֹא “don’t act based on omens” which is the same thing my fortune cookie said yesterday. He then told us to not round off the corner of our head, which sounds like good medical advice until you realize that’s where payot came from. He then said to not destroy the edge or your beard, obviously because the Sharks are still in the playoffs.

Levana decided to repeat תִּשְׁמְרוּ אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתַי because there can always be more guarding of Shabbat. She then raised with תִּירָאוּ וּמִקְדָּשַׁי “and revere my sanctuary.” She also read וְהִדַּרְתָּ “and respect the elderly,” which all together beg the question of how even more one must revere and respect an older sanctuary.

Saul let us know to treat strangers well מִצְרִים בְּאֶרֶץ הַיִּתְּחֵם כִּי-גֵרִים “because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” If you need another reason, see the aforementioned love your neighbor as yourself. Just in case anything else was missed, he finished with אֲתֵם “guard all my statutes and laws, and do them.” Hey, I’m not the one being bossy. Saul told you to; I’m just repeating it.

Last, Danny related that *Moses* took over relaying the rules, starting with some guidance about how to interact with strangers.

They covered a lot of ground up there, didn’t they? And those were just the highlights. But one other piece might relate more to today’s occasion than any of these. Rachel led off today’s readings with what might be the mitzvah that’s most directly relevant to today’s celebration. תִּירָאוּ וְאָבִיךָ וְאִמֶּךָ “A man will fear his mother and father.” Now, תִּירָאוּ is “fear” in the more biblical manner of respect and awe, though if any of our rising b’nai mitzvah have a reason they should be תִּירָאוּing their parents by today’s more common definition...

I’ll just point out the part I read included אִישׁ כִּי-אִישׁ יִקְלֹל אֶת-אָבִיו וְקִלְלָ אֶת-אִמּוֹ “Any man who curses his father or mother shall be put to death.” The Talmud later teaches us that this was just for the first offense. The second offense would lead to an even worse fate: losing your iPad privileges for a week.

That's what was in today's parshah. In today's B'nai Mitzvah Inauguration, we celebrate the beginning of this class's year of taking on adult obligations. It's fitting that there are ten of you, as ten makes a minyan – and starting to count toward a minyan is one of the new opportunities that begins after your bar or bat mitzvah.

When I first meet with the parents and student for each student I tutor, I point out that the bar mitzvah is a unique opportunity in life. Of the major life events, first you're born which you typically don't remember very well. You have your bar/bat mitzvah, which is all about you. You get married, which if you're the guy – let's face it – is all about her. And if you're the girl, it's all about you but there's some guy standing next to you in all the pictures. Of all your todays, your bar/bat mitzvah is the one major event that's all about you. Make the most of it.

One way to make the most of it is to make it easier for yourself. It's cliché to say “don't put off til tomorrow what you can do today.” But every cliché became a cliché because it's based in truth. It's tempting to try to get out of doing whatever we can get out of doing. Sometimes we put in more time trying to get out of doing something than it would've taken to just do the thing in the first place. It's even more of a waste when you'll end up doing that thing eventually anyway. When that happens, you have to cram which makes it less enjoyable and a less pleasant experience. That adds up to a less pleasant memory. That's not treating today with todah. It's not treating the present like a present.

Several years ago, at High Holy Day services, a guy in his twenties came up to me. He said I wouldn't remember him, but I did. I'd taught him for his bar mitzvah ten or so years prior. He was one of those students who you knew would never step foot in the synagogue again after his bar mitzvah even if he'd forgotten his wallet there that day. (None of our students are like that. I mean elsewhere.) He apologized to me for how difficult he was back then, and thanked me because years later he became interested and what he'd learned for his bar mitzvah gave him a foot in the door. I don't recall anymore if it was starting to go to Hillel in college, maybe because of a girl. It doesn't matter. Even he didn't know at 13 he'd ever use any of it again. But he did. And he had a foot in the door to be more comfortable and not feel like a stranger in a strange land.

It's incumbent on us to learn from what we do, no matter how insignificant or painful it is. It can be a hard lesson; I know, I'm a lifelong Mets fan. So, today it's incumbent for each of you to learn from your Torah readings. Rachel, guard your Shabbat tote bag, don't watch American Idol until the semifinals, and fear your parents for the good reasons and don't do anything bad that'll make you fear them for the other reason. Benjamin, be charitable, and in case you're called on to sacrifice practice your bunting.

Alexandra, don't steal or rob, but do ponder the difference. Don't lie, don't oppress, and be kind to less advantaged people. Hannah, be fair in judgment, don't gossip, and like your sibling. Naomi, don't be vengeful, don't hold grudges. Love your neighbor as yourself, and if you do something you shouldn't go ahead and feel guilty about it. It's the Jewish way. Sonia, love nature and be patient. Daniel, don't pay attention to omens or

signs, except for the ones you'll see during your driving test. And go Sharks. May they finally win the Stanley Cup before you can grow a full-on playoff beard.

Levana, guard the Shabbat, respect important places, and respect the elderly no matter how old they are. Saul, treat strangers the way you'd want strangers to treat you. Danny, you had the last reading of your class, but it was the beginning of a new chapter, so remember that every ending is really a new beginning.

And to all of you, remember that the Torah teaches you to always practice between your tutoring sessions. Be a part of services when you're at services, because we learn by doing. Make each today count. On the next day, you'll be thankful that you did.

Shabbat Shalom.

My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like:

- *My monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>*
- *My eternal project translating the works of Rav Moshe Chafetz, available at <http://brookwrite.com/chafetz.html> and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Moshe.Chafetz>*