

One Day More – Shemini Atzeret Yizkor 5778

Just two days before his death, John Shields woke up in his hospice room in Victoria, British Columbia, with an unconventional idea. He wanted to organize an Irish wake for himself at the Swiss Chalet restaurant down the road, complete with music and alcohol and one of his most favorite meals – rotisserie chicken legs with gravy topped off with gluten free, organic cake. He wanted his friends and family to be present, and he wanted to celebrate the incredible life he had lived for the past 78 years. Indeed, the funerary rites would be most traditional in every possible way except for one: he, himself, planned on attending the ceremony while still very much alive.

Mr. Shields' planning was made possible by a Canadian law legalizing what is termed "medical assistance in dying," whereby competent adult patients who are near death and suffering unbearably from incurable disease are allowed to receive a lethal injection administered by their doctor. It is not my intention this morning to explore the many religious and ethical considerations that might be brought to bear upon such a law, but the provision did allow for Shields to do what most of us never get the chance to - to plan his very last day on earth. So often, even when our loved ones are terribly sick we can't quite predict when the end is coming, or by the time it arrives the individual is too ill to really enjoy last hours spent together. And, of course, there are sudden deaths that come completely by surprise, leaving no time at all to prepare or to savor moments that will end up being our final ones. If we had just one more day with those whom we love, now departed, how we would spend it? Would that we could have such a tremendous opportunity!

In truth, as much as we would snatch it up in a heart-beat, even if we were miraculously given that one final day with our loved ones, still - it would never be enough. Even if we had that one last day – to hear

their voice and listen to their advice, to look at old pictures together and reminisce over a lifetime of memories, to bask in the proud glow of children and grand-children, to laugh, to touch, to share a favorite meal, to say “I love you” or maybe “I’m sorry” – still, we would always, always want for more. Indeed, time spent with loved ones whether alive or no longer with us – is so very precious that it never seems to be quite enough; the days go too quickly, the children grow up too fast, the end of the visit is here before we even know it. It is not only with the dead but also with the living that we often wish for just one more day. How we treasure these special times spent together!

This morning we celebrate Shemini Atzeret, literally the 8th Day of Assembly, which comes immediately after the festival of Sukkot. While often thought of as the end of the Sukkot holiday, Shemini Atzeret is actually an entirely separate occasion in its own right which is why we no longer wave lulav and etrog on this day, nor do we recite the blessing over dwelling in a sukkah should we choose to eat and sleep in one. Without these observances and without the special emphasis on completing the yearly Torah reading cycle that accompanies tomorrow’s observance of Simchat Torah, we are left wondering just what, exactly, Shemini Atzeret is all about. In truth, it is much connected to this idea of “just one more day.”

A beautiful rabbinic midrash (story) compares God to a host who has invited visitors to his home for a week of celebration and fun. When the time arrives for his guests to leave, the host is disappointed; he has enjoyed the company so much that he can’t bear for them to go just yet. So he invites them to remain for one final day, to extend the special time spent together. This, explains the rabbis, is Shemini Atzeret, the 8th Day of Assembly. When Sukkot finishes, God doesn’t want to conclude the sacred days of prayer and festivity that we’ve spent with one another; indeed, God realizes that the entire period of spiritual intensity that began with the High Holidays is now drawing to a close. So the Divine asks that

we stay one day more, that we extend the visit just a little bit longer. How much both God and we have valued this holy time spent together in community!

It is, of course, on Shemini Atzeret that we also recite Yizkor prayers, reciting words of affection and honor for those whom we have loved and lost. How much we wish we had not just one day but many, many, many more with them – to feel their attention, to delight in their companionship, to share all the different things we've been aching to tell them since they left us. If we knew, for sure, that it would be our last day with them we'd listen harder and speak more openly; we'd let the trivial things slide and concentrate on the essential ones; we wouldn't take a single moment for granted but would rather savor each and every very last one. If we knew, for sure, it would be our last day with them we would ask her to tell that story just one more time and we'd finally get an answer to the nagging question that's been bugging us since he passed. We'd tell a joke just to hear her laugh again and we'd make sure to pay attention to the feel of his hand in ours so we'd remember it just so. If we had one last day we'd show her how the kids have grown and boast of their accomplishments; we'd tell him all that we've learned to do in his absence and assure him that we're making it through, even without him there beside us for support. Ah, if only we had but one more day.

On John Shield's last day, the dying man surrounded himself with the people whom he cared about most. By that time, he was too weak to make it to Swiss Chalet but they ordered in rotisserie chicken legs and gravy instead, serving them in the hospice solarium. Once Shields had finished his meal, a life-cycle celebrant invited guests to share words of blessing with Shields and one after another, declarations of love, respect, and appreciation flowed forth. Friends lifted up Shield's wisdom, his courage, his eloquence, his care for others. They thanked him for teaching them how to live, even in these difficult moments when he lay dying. Shields, too, had the opportunity to address the crowd,

expressing gratitude to those assembled for touching his life and easing his final days. At 7:40 he was wheeled back to his room. The next morning, he was gone.

Zichronam livracha – may the memories of our loved ones, those with whom we desperately wish we had just one day more, be for a blessing.

We now rise for the Yizkor service on page ____ as the Torahs are lifted.