

Sermon | Parshat Ha'Azinu
September 18, 2021 | י"ב תשרי תשפ"ב
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

If you grew up playing boardgames, then it is safe to assume that you either owned or at least played "The Game of Life." In the earliest stages of the game, you decide whether you are going to jump straight into a career or spend time receiving a college education. Perhaps you get married, have some children, and fill your plastic station-wagon-like car with blue and pink pieces as you traverse the board and head towards retirement. Well, this past Tuesday, Reuben Benjamin Klamer, credited with inventing "The Game of Life," died at the age of 99. Klamer's version of the game was based upon Milton Bradley's original "Checkered Game of Life," allegedly the first game that he created. Klamer's refashioning of the game was a celebration of the centennial of the Milton Bradley Company. Boardgames like the Game of Life are a mixture of strategy and luck. We plan our moves and calculate our decisions according to the rules of the game, and we accept that even when we make the best decisions, we may wind up landing on "Taxes Due" and lose most of our money, or on "Midlife crisis. Start new career" and then we feel as if we have lost a lot of ground. I guess that really is what it feels like to "play" the actual game of life: we set out with a vision and a plan, knowing that we might hit some obstacles along the way. But boardgames are supposed to be fun, and I try to have fun even when we reach the point in the game where it becomes abundantly clear that I may not win. Generally speaking, I aspire to approach life in the same way: well-aware of and prepared for the potential challenges ahead, but even enthusiastic about the possibilities for success.

For the past two weeks, we the Jewish people have thought a lot about our lives as we closed the book on 5781 and opened up a new one for 5782. The High Holidays are a time for

introspection and reflection. Looking back at the year that has ended, we recall the times when everything went just as planned, and we recall the times when we were surprised, both for good and otherwise. As we turn our attention to the year ahead, we can reasonably expect similar experiences. There will be moments when life will go smoothly and as planned, and other times when we will encounter unexpected surprises.

This Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot is a unique one. It does not have a special name, because sometimes there is no Shabbat between the two holidays. Last year we observed Yom Kippur on a Tuesday, and thus Sukkot began that Shabbat. But this year we have a break between the two observances, a time when we can pause and consider what we just accomplished on Yom Kippur, and what we have to do in order to adequately prepare for Sukkot. The former requires a great deal of introspection and reflection, and the latter requires, well, a ladder. Yom Kippur is cerebral, and Sukkot is physical. One asks us to use our hands to turn the pages of a *mahzor*, and the other asks us to use our hands to build ourselves a temporary dwelling. Yom Kippur is tense and challenging, whereas Sukkot is joyful and celebratory. We even refer to Sukkot as *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our joy.

But before we get to Sukkot, we have this Shabbat. Parshat Ha'Azinu is a relatively short *parsha*, containing just one chapter of 52 verses, mostly arranged as a poem or song that Moses offers to the Israelites. He is, as we learn at the *parsha's* end, about to perish from this earth, so this is one of his last chances to put the finishing touches on his life's work. For forty years he has helped to build a nation, and these are his final opportunities to make sure that their foundation is secure.

Moses says to the people, “Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children, that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching.”¹ Admittedly, it sounds a bit repetitive. Moses wants the Israelites to take this very seriously, and make sure that they share it with our descendants. But Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, known as the Netziv, sees each clause in this verse as teaching something unique. “Take to heart all the words which I have warned you this day” refers to the narratives of the Torah, or what we call *aggadah*. These are the stories of our people which teach lessons about ethics, morality, and how to live as a Jew. Then there is the second clause: “Enjoin them upon your children, that they may observe faithfully all of the terms of this Teaching.” This refers to the laws of Jewish life, or what we call *halakhah*. Moses is telling the people that they will need to utilize both, *aggadah* and *halakhah*, the stories and the laws, as they cross the Jordan and begin their lives as a nation in its own land. We need our narratives, our history, and our stories. *And*, we also need our laws, our traditions, and our rituals. Jewish life is animated by the interplay of *halakhah* and *aggadah*, law and lore. Moses knows that if these people are to succeed without him, they must hold on to both. Together these are the pillars upon which the nation will stand. When these foundations are in place, the future is brimming with potential. It is in this moment that the people can rejoice and celebrate what Moses has accomplished.

My post-Yom Kippur plan each year is to go home, break my fast, and then construct my sukkah. I have done just that for many years, but this year the weather did not cooperate. With the rain and the late hour, I did not get it done. So I have my work cut out for me tonight and tomorrow. But building the structure, looking forward to dwelling in it with family and friends,

¹ Deuteronomy 32:46.

those are aspirations bring me joy. Sukkot is, as I mentioned, the festival of joy, *z'man simchateinu*. At least three times the Torah instructs us to be joyous and celebratory on Sukkot, where we are not told to be joyous on Passover even once! Why is that? Because Passover is the beginning of the harvest, when we are anxious and have no way of knowing whether the crop will grow. But on Sukkot, the harvest is over. We have gathered from the fields and from the trees, and now it is time to celebrate our bounty.² The same feeling of relief and elation is what we feel after Yom Kippur—forgiven for the errors of last year, and starting off the new year with excitement for the potential that lies ahead. This time of the year reminds us to approach life with gratitude and joy. We have learned our lessons, we carry with us our experiences, but they no longer weigh heavily on our shoulders. Now, we look to the future, to the year that spreads out in front of us, with a sense of relief, joy, and anticipation.

This is the feeling that I get whenever I sit down to play a boardgame. I go in mentally prepared: equipped with what I have learned from past experiences, just like the Israelites stand ready to enter the Promised Land. And I know that not everything is going to work out precisely as planned. I am prepared for the eventuality, and I do not allow it to minimize my excitement and joy for the potential ahead. On this Shabbat after Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, and before Sukkot, the season of our joy, may we too feel grounded by the lessons of last year, and joyously optimistic about the blessings and possibilities that the new year holds.

Shabbat shalom.

² *Yalkut Shimoni*, Emor, 654.