

The Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins
Shabbat Emor 5780

Proclaiming the Day

One of our great challenges is to understand the significance of the moment and to act accordingly. In the third century before the Common Era, the Roman poet Horace wrote “*carpe diem*” to exhort his readers to “seize the day” (Odes 1.11). The great poet counseled against worrying or even calculating our mortal end. Rather, focus was on enjoying life while one can.

Dum loquimur, fugerit invida aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

While we talk, envious time will have fled: pluck (seize) the day, trusting as little as possible to the future.

Preceding Horace by at least few centuries, the wise author of the extraordinary *Kohelet* in the Hebrew Bible wrote:

¹⁵ I therefore praised enjoyment. For the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself. That much can accompany him, in exchange for his wealth, through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun. (8:15. See also 9:7-9)

Kohelet is traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, the wisest of all rulers. If so, his teaching predates Horace by over 900 years. Even so, as concerns the importance of the day, there is an even earlier, more exalted and inspiring teaching in this week’s Torah portion, *Emor* (Leviticus 21:1- 24:23).

This *parashah* contains descriptions of the three pilgrimage Festivals (*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*) as well as the High Holy Days, Rosh HaShanah (*Zikhron T'ruah*) and Yom Kippur. Each of these sacred days is a central experience in our Jewish heritage and honored part of our calendar. And it is important to note that before describing these Holy Days, the Torah gives the following commandment:

Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the Eternal, which **you** shall proclaim as sacred occasions. (Lev 23:1-2)
These are the set times of Adonai, the sacred occasions, **which you shall proclaim** each at its appointed time: (Lev 23:4)

The rabbinic authorities of the Talmud emphasized that God taught us that “**you shall proclaim**” the sacred days. Indeed, in the calamitous era after the destruction of the second Temple, the Rabbis struggled heroically to save our people and our faith. With the Temple and Jerusalem in ruins, our ancestral homeland brutally occupied by the Romans and the surviving remnant of our people wondering if we would be able to survive, the great sages of the day rallied together. They created a modern Judaism that continues to this day. In those early days, however, there was still great debate and confusion about certain ritual observances...including the exact days on which the Holy Days would fall.

After one very emotional and upsetting debate about the correct date on which Yom Kippur should be observed, it seemed as if the *Sanhedrin*, the rabbinic assembly, might divide which would be a terrible setback for the efforts to save Judaism. The conclusion of one such debate illustrates the significance of this week's teaching.

Rabbi Akiva went and found Rabbi Yehoshua distressed that the head of the Great Sanhedrin was forcing him to desecrate the day that he maintained was Yom Kippur. In an attempt to console him, Rabbi Akiva said to Rabbi Yehoshua: I can learn from a verse that everything that Rabban Gamliel did in sanctifying the month is valid. As it is stated: "These are the appointed seasons of Adonai, sacred convocations, **which you shall proclaim** in their season" (Lev. 23:4). This verse indicates that whether you have proclaimed them at their proper time or whether you have declared them not at their proper time, I have only these Festivals. (Tractate *Rosh HaShanah* 25a)

Our current world is also in chaos and disarray. We are unable to attend the most sacred of our life experiences: Shabbat services, Passover Seders, Festivals, weddings, funerals, baby-namings, and *B'nei Mitzvah*. Instead, we do our best to "come together" by means of online resources like LiveStreaming and Zoom. Yes, there are those who say, "Why bother? If it can't be done right, then just give it up." And in response we point to this week's teaching, "These are the sacred occasions that **you shall proclaim.**" Yes, we have to make compromises. Yes, we are reinventing what it means to celebrate Shabbat and our life-cycle simchas.

Yes, we even have to reimagine and recreate what it means to attend a funeral and sit *shiva*. And yet, just like our ancestors before us, the creative power and determination of our people prevails. We **are** coming together...even while maintaining a safe social distance. We are proclaiming the sacredness of our experiences and we refuse to quit!

God willing, this time of separation will soon be over. In the meanwhile, we'll be smart, we'll be safe and wear the masks, keep our distances, and, oh yes, wash and wash and wash our hands. Still, we most emphatically will continue to proclaim the day "Holy!"

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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