

Ani Chai: I Am Alive!

A sermon for Yom Kippur
delivered by Rabbi Bennett F. Miller

Temple Emanu-El: Westfield, NJ
October 9, 2019/10 Tishri 5780

In 1966, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, known as Shai Agnon, was Israel's most accomplished novelist and short story writer. He was old and in a miserable emotional state. He was grieving his wife who had recently died. His Jerusalem apartment was in disarray. As accomplished and successful as he was, his life was a mess. Even the plumbing in his apartment was broken. He left a note on the plumber's door asking him for a repair, but days passed without receiving the needed repair.

At the crack of dawn early one morning there was a loud pounding on the door of his apartment. Elderly Agnon finally made his way to the door, stumbling around the clutter lying in his way. Upon opening the door, a tall 6'4" Swedish officer in full military regalia faced Agnon and announced, "I stand before you on behalf of the King of Sweden, Gustaf VI Adolf to announce that you have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature!"

In astonishment Agnon replied, "Do you mean to say that you're not here to fix the plumbing?"

I

A number of years ago I came across one of Agnon's stories that I found particular powerful for a day like today. It is a story that has never been published in English. The story is called, *Al Hatorah – For The Torah*. It is a tale about a man who lives just a short distance from his synagogue, who wakes up on Yom Kippur morning, but is too tired to go. He knows that this is the day when Jews gather to reflect on their lives during the past year and to consider the meaning of life for the year to come. But he is too tired; as the author writes, he is "too weak to get up." So, he remains in his bed.

While lying there in bed he hears the beautiful sounds of the prayers emanating from the synagogue. He listens to the Cantor chanting the stirring melodies and he also hears the harmonious sounds coming from the choir. He is aware of every part of the service, knowing when people are standing and sitting. He loves listening to the sound of the *Unetane Tokef*, that powerful prayer which describes the Book of Life being opened and how a person's deeds are written and recorded on its pages.

As the Torah is taken out of the ark, he gets a twinge of remorse about not being in the synagogue. He misses the pageantry and the melodies. So, he inclines his ear and listens because he wants to see who is called to the Torah, who is given the privilege of Aleeyah on this special day.

Suddenly, he hears the *Gabbai* call out his name: “*Ya-amod*,” he calls the gentleman’s name. But there is silence; no one stands up. He’s not there.

Agnon tells us that at that moment someone in the congregation calls out: *Adam ha-zeh k’var Met!* That mean is dead!

The narrator jumps up and shouts from his bed: *Ani Chai! Ani Chai! M’yad A-ni Bah!* I’m alive. I’m alive. I’ll be there right away!

Agnon continues the story. As I said, it is a very powerful one, indeed. I have read it to myself over and over again, each year discovering new meaning for myself as I approached these days. This morning, I won’t tell you the rest of the story, but I will tell you that this small episode in the story should demand questions of each of us.

II

Who here in this sanctuary is truly alive? About whom in this sanctuary should we call out: *Adam ha-zeh k’var Met!* That person is already dead!

I ask these questions of you because they are the existential questions of this day. Who among us truly is alive? Who here feels that their life has real meaning, that every day is a gift, that no matter what befalls us, waking up each day is a precious reward to behold? After the destruction unleashed by hurricanes in the Bahamas or Puerto Rico and Houston, and mass murders and scorching fires in California, you and I sitting here today should be shouting to the rafters: *Ani Chai!* I am alive! Nothing else matters.

Who among us is living a life worthy of human existence? How often I have seen loved ones berate each other, speak harsh words, and permit malice to roll off their tongue. How many times I have watched parents and children engage in argument, not about principle or idealism, but about power, money, or control. How many times have I witnessed siblings fighting with each other and losing the meaning of the bond that should bind them together in powerful ways? Isn’t life too precious for it to be squandered away for position or for ego or for covet?

What is the meaning of the name of a living person about whom it is said that he or she is already dead? I think of all of the excuses I have heard over the years from people who tell me that they don’t have time to live, that they can’t make time for the sacred experiences of life, that they wish they could engage in Torah Study, or participate in helping at Temple but time just doesn’t permit them to do so. And I think of all of the people who tell me that they don’t have time to take care of themselves; that, some day they will find time but not now. To you, and to them, I ask: do you have to wait for us to pronounce you dead among the living before you will respond? If you do, it may be that by the time you hear your name mentioned, it will be too late; *Adam ha-zeh k’var met!* That person is already dead!

Over the years I have watched as many who have been called to the Torah for an *Aleeyah*. You and I know that it is a symbolic honor that possesses much meaning. How many *Aleeyot* have we seen over the years who have become nervous and anxious about this honor?

When we recite the words of the blessing we not only thank and praise God for the privilege of Torah, we also make a statement: *Asher bachar ba-nu mi-kol ha-amim; we have been chosen from all other people to be God's hands and arms on earth!* We are proud to be Jews! We should live just as proudly as Jews. Too often I hear people proclaiming excuses for not living a Jewish life. I don't have time for Shabbat. I wish I could attend synagogue. Let someone else lead. Let someone else serve. Not me!

And after the Torah is read, we thank God with these words: *v'cha-yeh olam na-tah b'tochey-nu; we thank God for giving us Eternal Life.* Can there be any greater gift? To know that there is an eternity to our life means that what we do has meaning. To know that what we do with our hands, our hearts, and our resources gives lasting meaning beyond our own earthly existence. That is Eternal Life, and we should hold it as a precious gift. I could recite a litany of all those who touched my life, who helped in shaping me and mentored me along my life's path. And, so could you: parents and teachers and children – through you, their lives continue to give blessing.

III

Let me return to the narrator in Agnon's story. What made him "too weak to get up?" What was it about his life that prevented him from joining the community that Yom Kippur morning? Had he done some terrible misdeed? Were his sins so great that *Teshuvah* was impossible? Could it be that in his personal life he had become so estranged from God or from his family or from his community that he could not permit himself to see or be seen by others?

Let me put these questions into our own perspective. Could it be that you and I are afraid to live, afraid to be vulnerable to the touch and feelings of those about us? Is it possible that our own self-image is such that we fear that revealing who we truly are will make us weak, will make us appear frail? Perhaps we are afraid to live because we recognize that our lives are filled with regret. Who among us does not have some regret about living? It is human to live with regret. Yom Kippur comes along and gives us the opportunity to face our regrets, to learn from them, and then choose to live meaningfully because of them.

IV

Permit me to share with you this poem about regret. It is entitled *If I had known*. The author wishes to remain anonymous.

If I had known it would be the last time that I would see you fall
asleep, I would have tucked you in more tightly and prayed the
Lord your soul to keep.

If I had known it would be the last time that I would see you walk
out the door, I would have given you a hug and kiss, and called
you back for one kiss more.

If I had known it would be the last time I would hear your voice lifted up in praise, I would have videotaped each action and each word so that I could play them back day after day.

If I had known it would be the last time, I would have spared an extra moment to stop and tell you that I love you, instead of assuming that you knew I do.

If I had known it would be the last time that I would be there to share your day, instead of thinking: we'll have so many more, so I can just let this one slip away.

I thought: surely there will always be tomorrow, to make up for today, and we will always get a second chance to make up for the mistakes we make this day.

I thought: there will always be another day in which to say: I love you, and surely there will be another chance to say: is there anything I can do for you?

But just in case I might be wrong, just in case today is all I get, I'd like to say how much I love you and that I hope you never forget.

Tomorrow is not owned by anyone, not by the old nor by the young alike, and today just might be the last chance you get to hold your loved one tight.

So, if you're waiting for tomorrow my advice is: do it today, for if tomorrow never comes you will surely regret today

that you didn't take the extra time to give a smile, a hug, a kiss, and that you were too busy to grant someone what turned out to be their last wish.

So, hold your loved one close today and whisper in their ear, tell them how much you love them, and that you'll always hold them dear.

Take the time to say: 'I'm sorry', 'Please forgive me', 'thank you', or 'It's okay'. So that if tomorrow doesn't come, you'll have no regrets about today.

V

You know, I am so glad that we are all here, that none of us has chosen this morning to stay in bed and miss the chance to hear our own name called. How sad it would be for us to miss

this moment, to not take the opportunity to reflect and consider the true meaning of our lives. Today is not just a day to sit in the sanctuary, to complain about uncomfortable pews and chairs, about who is sitting too closely to whom, who has too much perfume, who is sleeping or who is talking. Today is Yom Kippur, a wonderful day for thinking about tomorrow, about whom I am, what I want to be, and about what I will do with the gift given to me, the gift of life.

Many years ago, Rabbi Milton Steinberg, wrote these precious words: “There are texts in us, in our commonplace experiences. If only we are wise enough to discern them.” Oh, how right he was. There are texts in each of us, commonplace experiences that today are revealed as moments of wonder, finitely precious, worthy of embracing, to be held with open arms.

Wake up today to the call of tomorrow. Reflect upon the past with belief in the future. Declare to yourself on this sunlit morn, *Ani Chai!* Today I will live so that my life will have meaning. No other gift can I give to you. No more wondrous gift can you give to yourselves and no greater gift can you give to all who love you and to all whom you love. Shannah Tovah Metuka; ketivah v’chatimah, tovah u’vracha. Shannah tovah to all. May you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for goodness and for blessing!