

Teshuva: Another Day is Not Promised Yom Kippur – Yizkor 5781

Jerry Givens was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1952. He remained a Virginian his whole life. Much of his career was spent in a line of work that one does not encounter on a daily basis: he worked for the Virginia State Penitentiary as a guard and became the chief executioner of the state. Yes, he personally carried out the death penalty. A total of sixty-two times, Givens killed state prisoners condemned to death. Thirty-seven of those instances were by pushing the button of an electric chair, and twenty-five of those instances were through lethal injection.

However, at the end of his seventeen-year career in this role, Givens had a change of heart. He nearly presided over the execution of a person who was found to be innocent, thankfully before the punishment was carried out. As a result, he became a strong activist, lobbying lawmakers to *oppose* the death penalty. Givens, in fact, became known as one of the United States' fiercest critics of capital punishment.

Another Day is Not Promised is the title of the book Givens wrote professing his philosophy of life and death. He is a man of faith. Every day, when he woke up, he would touch his Bible and thank God for another day. God is our employer, Givens wrote. In Pirkei Avot, we learn that “time is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, and the employer chastises.” Indeed, Givens has his own conception of being an עבד ה', a servant of God. Givens learned the importance of life that God grants us every day – we are given a series of twenty-four-hour days, and each of these days includes “death.” We therefore have to thank God when we wake up every morning because *another day is not promised*. This concept is apparent in many brachot we say – Elokai Neshama each morning, and Modim in every Shemoneh Esrei. Our souls are deposits with God and are returned to us each day we are alive. What particularly reminded Givens the importance of gratitude for life is that he began to realize how each individual executed lost their chance for repentance. Each day is an opportunity to repent, and we must take that opportunity because *another day is not promised*. He himself spent time in prison after his career as an executioner, and his time in jail empowered him even more to take advantage of every moment to be one of repentance.

Rabbi Eliezer teaches us in Pirkei Avot (2:10): שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך – repent one day before your death. According to the Avot D'Rabbi Natan, his students immediately objected – how can one know when one is going to pass away? The answer, Rabbi Eliezer said, is obvious: we must do *teshuva* every single day. Of course, we do not know when we will die. However, if we live with the possibility that tomorrow may be our last day, we will be sure to do *teshuva* while we still have the opportunity, as *teshuva* can only be done in this world.

This is a difficult concept to live by. It is one thing to remind a person who perhaps is coming closer to encountering death to work on *teshuva*. But if a person lives 120 years, are they really going to be focused on *teshuva* every single day? It is hard to do this if we do not feel an imminent threat. *Tiferet Yisrael*, a commentary on Pirkei Avot, points out that the reason why the Mishnah did not say “repent today, for you might die,” is because if we feel fine today, we have no reason to suspect that we will die tomorrow. But the same thing is true here – if we feel fine today, we assume we will be fine tomorrow! And yet, this is the reminder that another day is not promised.

While admittedly, full engagement with *teshuvah* on a daily basis is a great challenge. But at the same time, we must not forget that there is night that stands between today and tomorrow, and our souls are loaned to us by God each day. Moreover, if we think all is indefinitely open-ended, we will never remember not to take life for granted. The tradition of Rabbi Eliezer's teaching at least allows us to give pause to the idea, if we do not fully embed it into our consciousness, that we can only go so long taking it for granted that we can live life correctly and fix our mistakes. If we procrastinate and let it go too long, we will overestimate how much time we have. God will wait for us, as we say in Unetaneh Tokef – אם ישוב מיד תקבלו, עד יום מותו תחכה לו, God will wait for our *teshuvah* – God wants our *teshuvah*, God is הרוצה בתשובה. But if another day is not necessarily promised, we ought to not wait until it is too late!

The mandate to be engaged in *teshuvah* every day and to live meaningfully every day goes against the popular phrase “YOLO” – you only live once – as used by youth. “YOLO” is often an excuse to engage in unseemly activities because you will only get one opportunity to do “crazy” things. Instead, Yom Kippur and the mandate for daily *teshuvah* remind us that living every day is a gift, not a given. We must see each day as our only opportunity to live, so we should do it right, walking in God's path. YOLO – it is time for *teshuvah*, every single day.

What was the ultimate fate of Jerry Givens? He passed away due to COVID-19 on April 13, during the peak of the crisis in the United States. The irony of his philosophy of life is that he succumbed to an illness that came and killed swiftly. So many people like him were alive and well just weeks beforehand, only to lose their life unexpectedly to a lethal disease. An important lesson of this pandemic is that in fact, another day is not promised. As is described in Unetaneh Tokef, we do not know who will be struck by plague in the weeks and months to come. We never know when a novel but deadly force of nature will come at us.

But Givens would not want us to despair at this thought. Instead, he would beg us to strengthen ourselves all the more so to value life and appreciate the chance of every day. To remember what our values are and to live by them. To use every moment available to serve God. To see each and every day as a prospect for becoming better people. To live with an attitude of gratitude.

In thinking about it, it is quite strange that we say Shehechyanu on Yom Kippur. Are we full of joy that our fate is on the line? But Givens has reminded us the true meaning of this bracha: We are ever grateful to God for yet another Yom Kippur in which we are able to complete the process of *teshuvah*. We are grateful that a year has passed and that we still have another chance at life. When we are aware that another year is not promised, we have greater appreciation for that gift. We made it through a frightening six months, and we are here to give gratitude for the life that we can still improve and enhance.

As we recite Yizkor, we pay tribute and respect to those we love who are no longer with us. Especially this Yom Kippur, the first time we are saying Yizkor in person since the pandemic began, we remember those who did not receive the opportunity to live to this moment. So many different stories have been published about those who the world has lost since March. What were their contributions to life? What can we learn from them in order to make each of our days count? Take time between now and the Yizkor we will recite on Shemini Atzeret to research the stories of Jews and non-Jews alike who passed away before their time. What would they have

done for an extra day? We, who have been given that extra day, must not let it pass. While we do not know what our last day is – and may it not be soon – we have this moment that we are in right now to gain a new opportunity for *teshuvah* and coming closer to God.

Another day is not promised – what will we do to make that day count? As we remember our loved ones, we reflect on their strengths and contributions and incorporate them into our way of life. We remind ourselves to live up to their legacy – to perform acts that would make them proud. Their memories serve as guideposts for how we can make sure that we live every day purposefully, learning from their triumphs and trials. The lessons we learn from them can help us make today the best day we can have.

As we remember our loved ones who have passed on, we also remember the importance of nurturing the relationships we have with our loved ones who are still here. There is not enough time in life to put off our most important relationships. We must not allow ourselves to create the potential for regret that we did not spend more time or do more to help the people most important to us. Another day is not promised – it is not too early to reach out and call.

What we can learn from Jerry Givens and Rabbi Eliezer is that when we wake up and say *Modeh Ani*, what is the one thing I will do today to have made today worthwhile? What *mitzvah*, whether between God and me or between another person and me, will I do today to have made myself more complete than I was yesterday? What opportunity for *teshuvah* is attainable for me today?

May we have the wisdom and strength to work to make each and every moment count.

May God accept our *teshuvah* with love on this Yom Kippur and at every moment in which we live the opportunity of today.