

The Rules We Live By

Goal of Shavuot Prayer

To hold in awe

Those words of law

Inscribed on stone

Which God had hewn

Then to cause truths

Those laws impart

To transpose to

The human heart.¹

It's not fair-why are there rules? Why can't we live in a time of איש איש
הישר בעיניו יעשה, every person does what is right in his own eyes?² After
the giving of the Torah and the conquest of the Promised Land, our
ancestors make this same mistake again and again. There were forty
years of turmoil wandering in the desert because of the bad report given
by the spies. Then there was calm with the conquest of the land. Yet
throughout the Book of Judges G-d sends an adversary to rule over

¹ Lucille Frenkel, "Goal of Shavuot Prayer," in *A Jewish Adventure* (Milwaukee, WI: The Eternity Press, 1983), p. 159.

² Judges 17:6

Israel (as a punishment for Israel engaging in idolatry), Israel cries out, G-d sends a judge to defeat the adversary and then the land was quiet for 40 years only to have the same cycle be carried out again and again and again.

People of my generation often shy away from rules, wanting to do whatever they feel like at any given moment. We are a generation of choice-as Peter Berger teaches, “we are all Jews by choice.”³ However, is that necessarily a good thing? Sometimes having too many choices can be overwhelming; seeking freedom might actually be more enslaving. By having boundaries and a blueprint, even though it is limiting, it can keep one on the straight-and-narrow as opposed to being wound up in chaos.

Social scientists say that our basic personality formation is complete by age seven.⁴ We might not know yet who we are but we know what we value and what’s important to us. Much of this is learned behavior primarily from our parents, then our siblings then our teachers

³ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory* (New York: Integrated Media, 1967).

⁴ Studies by Christopher Nave, UC-Riverside and Ganz Ferrance, PhD.

and our friends. As we grow older, we often lash out against those areas of our personality that we see as weaknesses passed on from our parents. My teacher, Dr. Mona Fishbane, says, however, that as we mature we transition from viewing ourselves as victims to becoming the authors of our own lives. We recognize that our parents did the best they could in raising us, we give thanks for all the wonderful things given to us in our upbringing. As for those things we don't like, we actively work to change them.

In life we often dwell on the negative and forget the positive. When we are in the middle of a tense situation with a loved one, we often see the trees rather than the forest. Yet at Yizkor we attempt to seek out the positive, how a loved one lived their life and the values that s/he taught us. We nostalgically remember the experiences we shared, the lessons learned and how we were shaped by them. The tension and frustration melts away as we turn to the wonderful memories. We start to recognize that some of the rules they set up for us were there for a reason: to protect us and give us guidance through the topsy-turvy road

called life. We also remember the Torah they taught us, for the direct translation of Torah is instruction: the instruction needed to have a positive, meaningful and purpose-filled life.

As we now turn to say Yizkor, let us remember our loved ones, getting a picture of them in our minds eye, thanking them for giving us the gift of life, recognizing that when things were difficult they did the best they could to provide for us and to raise us to go out into the world as strong, independent beings. Whether they were imposing or “loosy-goosy,” libertarian or authoritarian, they strove to do their best for us in their own way. Let us remember them for good (זכור לטוב) and keep them in our heart especially today, at the end of Shavuot.

We turn to Page 16 for our Yizkor prayers to read “as We Remember Them.”