



Rosh Hashanah 5779 -- Rabbi Aaron Alexander -- Adas Israel Congregation

We've Not Been Here Before

"He brought something intriguing to the modern politics of fear in America: a visceral connection to his crowds, an appeal that confounded elites but which gave him a durable base. He was "simply more alive than all the others," a noted journalist remarked. "You saw those people in that auditorium when he was speaking--you saw their eyes. He made those people feel something real for once in their lives. You can't help but respond to him. Me, my heart was pounding. I couldn't take my eyes off him, there were all those people screaming. You *almost* love him, though you know what a little gremlin he actually is. He provoked devotion and rage. Many adored him, revering him as a new savior; many others despaired of a future under his rule."¹

Want to take a guess at who that paragraph, from a recently published book on American politics and history was describing? George Wallace, in 1963, the infamous defender and promoter of Jim Crow-style segregation. Too soon?

It's statements like these, yes, taken out of context and offered in another reality, that invite the saying: *We've seen this before. Or, We've been here before.*

Like me, you've probably heard or said that phrase, or some version of it, a lot over the past few years.

I've been thinking about these cliches and aphorisms, because it *actually seems* like history is repeating itself. Like there's some kind of cosmic loop, a ferris wheel of eternally similar events, none of us able to get off the ride no matter how dizzy we become.

And for some of you, particularly those slightly or significantly more seasoned than me --it probably not only *seems* this way, but palpably *feels* this way.

But the more I think about the idea that history repeats itself, the more I question the idea itself, and its utility as an aphorism.

1. *The Soul of America*, Jon Meacham, 219

Take Santayana's famous quip: Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Read critically, history shows that *both those who do, and do not*, learn history are condemned to repeat it. If it's also true that those who *do* learn history are condemned to repeat it, then the saying adds no real value in-and-of itself.

And yet, we cannot deny, no matter the intellectual scrutiny, that the idea resonates strongly. There is an obviousness to it, based on near identical historical patterns, only discernable from one another by the images that accompany them.

Many historians contend that almost every development in modern times has an equivalent in the past, that the rise and fall of empires and dictators, wars and political conflict, socio-economic factors leading to revolution, genocides and racial/religious persecution are just repeating occurrences throughout time. It's all happened before, and it'll happen again. Count on it.

Add a little sociology and anthropology into the equation, and, history still shows to repeat itself, because humanity itself is so consistent. And predictable. No matter how far we have come or how far we go, there are very few things that truly change. There always have been, and always will be, charismatic leaders--some good, some bad--that will compete against each other, that shape, uplift, or destroy, innumerable human lives in the process. Realizing that history repeats itself, many claim, is the point of learning history. You learn history to recognize the signs of war, famine and evil-lying-dictators, so that maybe you can try to circumvent them. But we don't--as you know--because history, well, repeats itself.

This idea has HHD & Aseret Y'mai Teshuvah--*10 days of repentance--application as well.*

We'll need a quick refresher course on repentance. If you currently sit in someone's doghouse, you may want to pay close attention.

Repentance, *teshuvah*, literally means to turn. Back to our truest selves, to God, or to whatever or from wherever we've strayed. The process of teshuvah enables us to repair broken hearts, asking for, and granting forgiveness. This is the time of the year when we remember, especially, that we are far from perfect--that our actions—deliberate or unintentional—have caused others pain and heartache. And, this is the time of year that affirms--it doesn't have to remain this way. We just need to be willing to take the necessary steps.

Six of them, to be precise--based on the most famous and authoritative Medieval Codes of Law, Mainondies Mishneh Torah.

1) **Stop doing** the thing you shouldn't be doing. I know, easier said than done. Maybe even trite. Either way, stop. We can't simultaneously turn from the thing we are doing, while actively engaged in it.

2) **Internalize regret.** Real regret. I regret you ended up hurt probably isn't sufficient. It's more: I regret that I did that thing that hurt you.

3) **Confession.** We've got to name the things we've done. Aloud--so that it can be heard. Otherwise that prior regret is pretty much a tree that falls in D.C. during the month of August.

4) **Reconciliation** - A sincere apology, followed by time and energy tending to the victim of our misdeed--should they be open to it, and interested in our continued involvement.

5) **Making Amends**--what was taken must be returned. There ought to be a tangible witness to one's sincerity.

6) **And, 6** -- where we come full circle:

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה?

What is complete repentance? How does one successfully complete the steps I've just outlined.

זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו, ופירש ולא עשה.

According to Maimonides, complete repentance is achieved when a person confronts the same matter in which she or he sinned--has the potential to commit the sin again--but nevertheless abstains and refrains.

In other words, a full, 360 degree repentance, requires being in a present moment that's--to a certain degree--already happened at least once. It is re-inhabiting the past, and generating a efferent future.

Good thing the past repeats itself. Repentance may depend upon it.

But there's another side to the History repeats itself debate. And it's much shorter.

It doesn't. And we all know it. It is scientifically impossible.

There's a theory of time, or timelessness, philosophers call: Presentism: it claims that the only events and objects which exist are those that exist in the present. Which means the past and future do not exist – they are not real or objective, but rather, subjective, only.

But that's crazy you are thinking. I have memories. I have pictures. Thousands and thousands and thousands of selfies. If that's not absolute proof that the past is real, what is? Turns out, according to this theory, those don't prove an objective past, they only offer blurry snapshots--representations and misrepresentations of some other abating moment--primarily perceived of, and constructed, by the initial mover, or audience, of the image.

So too with our memories. The more we allow ourselves to exist in a particular memory, the more we rewrite it according to our current reality. That means by the time you are interviewed for the history book--especially if you've prepared--you've already rewritten the memory in some significant or small way. By the time I get to my journal, even minutes after the event upon which I'm reflecting, I've not simply played the movie, but actively become its new artistic director.

For this reason, that memory long-tucked away, but abruptly emerging, is probably a closer representation of an original moment, since it has been untouched by our unconscious reconstruction.²

Ha-Mechadesh B'Tuvo B'Chol Yom Tamid Ma'aseh Bereshit - God creates and recreates the world anew in every single moment. This line appears in every traditional morning liturgy, including ours today. What often goes unnoticed is that it is repeated about 30 seconds after its first mention--almost word for word. It's as if the liturgists, even 1,700 years ago, fully knew how difficult it would be to internalize how dynamic creation is. In form and content, the morning service reminds us--You are not the same person you were just a few seconds ago.

We are simultaneously entering and exiting the present in every given moment. We perish, we emerge. We perish, we emerge. (*Go ahead... pinch yourself if you need to.*)

2. Many thanks to my teacher, mentor and friend, Rabbi Brad Artson, for being my *hevruta* for this part of my preparation.

Pocohantas was right -- I can't believe I just said that.³

What I love most about rivers is

You can't step in the same river twice

The water's always changing, always flowing

This matters--it suggests that we do not need to be not trapped by our past, as we so often believe, or are told.

Everything is always new. What will you do with this information? Who will you turn toward? To whom will you finally apologize? Who might you finally forgive? And, who or what needs to be released, set free, the friction that stunts your ever-becoming?

We choose which aspects of our past, real or reconstructed, to bring into the present. And we make our future, in symbiosis with the rest of creation--and God's extravagant offering of infinite possibilities.

Back to Maimonides, who taught that complete teshuvah requires being in the same situation again, but making a different choice.

Here's what I believe he was saying: When you confront moments which feel recurring, which produce emotional reverberations of a past you regret or brings you shame--awaken to the fact that you are no longer that same person. It's not a second chance. It's another first chance.

That's *teshuvah gemorah* - complete repentance -- an active awareness that in fact we have been recreated several times over since that thing we did or said, or didn't do or didn't say. We can be, each of us, unencumbered by a past that *isn't*, potentially even *wasn't*, to now to choose in the only moment that's undeniably real--*right now*.

The great call of today, the shofar of Rosh Hashanah and the *teshuvah-work of these* next 10 days?? To recognize my engineered version of the past need not imprison me. I'm not *that* person anymore. He no longer exists. It's true.

You only get one chance to make a first impression, they say. Well, that's kind of true. But there's also no such thing as a second impression. There's only a different opportunity for a first impression, which is a cross-sectional burden. It includes both you's. The you who needs to re-approach *in* your newness, and the you that is being re-approached by their newness.

3. Yes yes... Heraclitus.

Here we go. When I was initially denied admission to the University of Florida for transcripts unworthy of entry (the Grateful Dead was my transcript...also, for those keeping score at home, this was not the time I was thrown out of school), I was terrified. I assumed the worst case scenario...I would have to attend FSU. If that's not motivation, I don't know what is. My mother told me to cut my hair, get in the car, drive to Gainesville and sit down in person with the Admissions Counselor who denied my application. So I did. Well, my brother drove me. I had no license because of..well, my grades.

I didn't need a second chance. I needed a different first chance to make a first impression. I needed her to see that a piece of paper couldn't define me, that my past choices couldn't be the full representation of my capacity to learn.

I needed the newest me and the newest her to meet for the first time, to provide a different possibility. Thank God we met that first time. Otherwise....

It's not the same person in front of you. No matter which direction you are facing.

My favorite Invisibilia episode adds some meat to this idea. If you haven't heard the popular podcast, you'll have a chance to interact with Haannah and Alix on Yom Kippur afternoon. Whoever you are then, you should come.

The episode is called The Pattern Problem. It begins like this: 'On November 16, 2017, the Washington state Supreme Court was called to session, a responsible-looking woman named Tarra Simmons who had graduated near the top of her law school class and was now trying to become a lawyer.

The question in front of the court was, would this version of Tarra, the responsible citizen Tarra, last? Or would *that* Tarra be undone by the *other* Tarra, the one who had demonstrated a clear pattern of criminal behavior? After all, Criminal-behavior-Tarra *did* have a long history of undermining responsible-citizen-Tarra. So which would appear in the future, and could you tell by looking at the patterns in her past?

"We are always trying to find patterns," Haannah and Alix continue, "quietly but compulsively searching for them. We meet an attractive man, then find out that he cheated on his ex. And instantly the possibility of a pattern haunts us. Would he cheat on us, too? Is *that* his pattern?"

We go to the doctor. He asks about the family cancer history. He's looking for a pattern. We hope he doesn't find one in us. Every time we go online, to Amazon, Google, companies are tracking our patterns, using them to guess what we'll do next.

So the thing we're trying to figure out, is, how much does pattern predict in an individual life, in a living, breathing person, like Tarra Simmons, but also in ourselves?"

Well, there's an app for that. Or, soon there could be. Haaannah and Alix spend time talking to programmers who are trying to build a system that can use somebody's past decisions and action--to predict their future decisions and actions. By placing millions of data points about a person's life as they grow up, into a highly sophisticated algorithm, by a certain age, they hypothesize, one should be capable of reliably predicting the kinds of choices they will make. So they tried it.

And it failed. Over and over again.

I don't want to spoil the episode for you. It's worth having a listen. But needless to say, we are not as predictable as our past choices and patterns might indicate. To date, no computer program, no matter how much data input, no matter how sophisticated, that can accurately predict the choices a human being will make.

There are larger--communal and national implications as well.

Make America Great Again. #MAGA -- Yes, I'm going there. Take a deep breath. It'll be over soon. Not the sermon. Get comfortable. But this section is fairly short.

But this popular slogan deserves as much scrutiny, if not more, than Santayana.

Who, precisely, will that greatness benefit, and who will it put back in the back of the bus? Who will be embraced, and who will be kept out of the country club in this great America? Who will be able to vote, and who will be locked out of the booth?

In Jon Meacham's recent book, *The Soul of America*, he notes that "there's a natural tendency in American Political life to think that things were always better in the past. Nostalgia is a powerful force, and in the maelstrom of the moment many of us seek comfort in imagining there was once a Camelot--without quite remembering that the Arthurian legend itself was about a court riven by ambition and infidelity."⁴

4. Meacham, 5-6

Rabbi Harold Kushner says it quite well: "I may be nostalgic for the world I grew up in, Brooklyn in the 1940s, a world of stable neighborhoods, stable jobs, and stable marriages, until I remember that that superficial stability rested on the assumption that blacks, Jews, and women would "know their place" and not aspire to too much, that people born gay would live a life of pretense and denial, and that people trapped in abusive or unsatisfying marriages would endure them rather than face social disapproval."⁵

#MAGA is meaningless. There is no again. If we are to be great (and we often are), then it is the greatness of now that we must seek and then construct. Whatever was or may have been, we'll never fully know, and either way--it can't be again. Thank God.

Ha-Mechadesh B'Tuvo B'Chol Yom Tamid Ma'aseh Bereshit - God creates and recreates the world anew in every single moment.

We've not been here before. To deny this is to ignore the moment in front of us in which real people are having their very real lives destroyed. In every moment that the reconstructed past overinfluences or fossilizes the necessity of now, in every moment we rest on the laurels of progress, a trans-child in front of us is bullied to the brink, a loved one with disabilities is without healthcare, an American citizen is de-naturalized, a veteran abandoned, homeless, a black boy is shot while unarmed, a grown woman stripped control of her own body, an addict, shunned & labeled weak, a rabbi cleaning a swastika off her synagogue walls. That still happens!

For which of them does it matter how far we've come? On that day, in what way does the past alleviate their suffering?

This is a moment, here and now, that demands some very unpredictable responses.

Thank God we are human.

This doesn't mean we stop writing history books, or reading them, or that we avoid therapy because the memories don't matter or lack any influence, God forbid. It doesn't mean investigative journalism isn't essential for understanding stories and how they fit together. They all serve essential purposes - we draw from them values, records, wisdom, heroes, villains, ideas, creativity--all of which become part of our newness--the very stuff that makes us inherently unpredictable.

5. *Conquering Fear*, 63-64

Ha-Mechadesh B'Tuvo B'Chol Yom Tamid Ma'aseh Bereshit - God creates and recreates the world anew in every single moment.

In Gary Younge's [The Speech: The Story Behind Martin Luther King's Dream](#), he writes, based on people reflecting back--on the moment:

The night before the [March on Washington](#), August, 28, 1963, Martin Luther King asked his aides for advice about the next day's speech. "Don't use the lines about 'I have a dream', his adviser Wyatt Walker told him. "It's trite, it's cliché. You've used it too many times already."

King had indeed employed the refrain several times before. As with most of his speeches, it had been well received, but never regarded as momentous.

This speech had to be different. King went to sleep at about 4am, giving the text to his aides to print and distribute. *The "I have a dream" section was not in it.*

King started slowly that day, and stuck close to his prepared text. "I thought it was a good speech," recalled [John Lewis, the leader of the student wing of the movement](#), who had addressed the march earlier that day. "But it was not nearly as powerful as many I had heard him make."

Then, behind him, Mahalia Jackson cried out: "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin."

A smattering of applause filled a pause more pregnant than most.

"So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream."

"Aw, shit," Walker said. "He's using the dream."⁶

King recalls, leaving out a few key details: "I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point. The audience response was wonderful that day... And all of a sudden this thing came to me that... I'd used many times before... 'I have a dream.' And I just felt that I wanted to use it here... I used it, and at that point I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether. I didn't come back to it."

And at that point I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether. I didn't come back to it.

6. I said shucks in synagogue. :)

There may be a script in front of us. Maybe we wrote it, maybe somebody else placed it there--the question is: does it have to dictate what's next?

Today tells us--it does not. Welcome to the newest version of you.