

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5781  
Rabbi Brad Levenberg

Before I share some thoughts and comments on this sacred occasion, I do want to make sure that you take the opportunity following the service to go to the Temple Sinai website where you will find the schedule for our Tashlich service, which has moved to our campus on Dupree, the annual cemetery services at both Cestlawn and Arlington, and information related to our “click-a-mitzvah” annual food drive benefitting the Sandy Springs Community Assistance Center.

I’m going to start by talking about politics, but, fair warning, this is not a political sermon. A fan of *This American Life*, I had the opportunity this week to catch up on the last few recent episodes, including one from this past Sunday. The second act in the show featured commentator Ben Calhoun reflecting upon the five-and-a-half-hour video of the Wisconsin Elections Commission deciding whether hip-hop star and Kardashian Trophy Kanye West would get to appear on the state’s election ballot this coming November. “Like many states,” Mr. Calhoun begins, “Wisconsin law states that a candidate needs a certain number of signatures to get on the ballot. In Kanye West’s case, a company flew in canvassers who started circulating petitions just one day before the signatures would have to be turned in to state elections officials, and here’s the kicker - not later than 5 pm. So, they collect, and the next day – August 4 – comes along and we arrive at the deadline, 5 pm, a tiny moment cradled between 4:59 and 5:01, a speck on the surface of American history but one that would spiral out into a rather intriguing political debate” (NPR, *This American Life*, 9.13.20).

As the story unfolds, we listeners hear clips from the state election committee hearing where 6 committee members – 3 republicans and 3 democrats – heard arguments from those challenging and those supporting Kanye’s bid to appear on the ballot. One lawyer introduces some evidence and narrates what is being displayed: television footage of the attorney for the West campaign pulling up to the filing office moments before 5, shuffling papers on her dashboard, and rushing in to the building. The time? 4:59 pm. Those pushing to bar his name from appearing on the ballot present a compelling case that, considering the time stamp of her arrival, the attorney couldn’t have left her car, made it into the building, down the hall, called the elevator, made it up 3 floors, left the elevator, made it down the hall to the office, entered the office, and placed the papers on the countertop in less than one minute. Thus, they argue, Kanye did not meet the filing deadline of 5:00. Those advocating for his name to appear on the ballot point that the paperwork was in the building at 5 and that it was turned in before the clock – or, a clock – struck 5:01. Thus, it was still 5:00 when the paperwork was submitted and Kanye should appear on the ballot.

A rather fascinating debate ensues but I’ll skip right to the end of the story: the committee ruled that West would not be on the ballot. Disappointed with the outcome, Kanye’s people filed a lawsuit but the judges upheld the decision of the committee, ruling that the language of the filing process – specifically, the phrase, “not later than 5:00” – is important. In fact, they held that 5:00 on the dot is the deadline, and that 5:00 and even one second is too late. In support of their decision, they indicated that

time is important, even one second, for one second can make a tremendous difference. They pointed out that 11:59 and 59 seconds pm is one day, while one second later it is an entirely different day, and with that same time on December 31, as a matter of fact, one second can mean the difference between entire years.

While I do love the debate about Kanye West, and while I love *This American Life*, what has most stuck with me, what has occupied my mindset, is the importance of the second, this miniscule amount of time that has so much...power.

Since the spring we have all been spending a lot of time thinking about and talking about, well, time. Those with lifecycle events have wrestled with decisions about holding or postponing, those with major life turning points have been dealing with the disappointment that comes from the passage of time that goes unmarked, graduations without ceremonies, first-days without pomp or circumstance, parties without attendants. Many of us have joked or seen circulated online an image with the phrase, “30 days hath September, May and November, all the rest have 31, except March, which has 973.” Along those same lines, we Levenbergs passed a milestone this week: my kids on Monday spent their first day in a classroom in 6 months. In my final and rather heartening example, Rabbi Trief commented at the start of our Selichot services this past Saturday night about the strange juxtaposition of time – that one year prior, we gathered with hundreds of people on our campus to dedicate our sanctuary, but this past Selichot service was delivered to a sanctuary largely vacant and dark. Certainly, this moment of Rosh Hashanah compels that same realization, as your clergy team once again leads a service to a near empty room that should be filled with the faces that comprise this spectacular community. Reflecting on time, I do believe that this is the first time in the history of the Jewish people... that High Holy Day services started on time; I can state with confidence that this is the first time we began our service without the rabbinic invitation to curtail your conversation and take your seats. Goodness how I long to use that rabbinic invitation again.

One second. One second is the focus of debate for five and a half hours. 6 months. 6 months is the amount of time that we lost here in Atlanta, time filled with stories and opportunities and more regret than can ever be counted.

So you see, I was ruminating on the importance of one second when, as fate would have it, I received an invitation which jarred my thoughts about time in the opposite direction. Many of you know that I am in the dissertation research phase of my Ph.D. journey, though not as many of you are aware that the subjects of my dissertation are five civil-rights era rabbis about whom precious little has been written. The methodology of my research is archival, though due to the pandemic, my research has involved less traveling to the various archives and much more reliance on staff members of those archives. Which brings me back to the subject of time and the invitation to shift from the passage of each second to, in fact, the passage of a life.

The email came from the archives of the Southern Jewish Historical Society located in Charleston. I had inquired about primary source documents related to the life of Rabbi Burton Padoll, a rabbi who was active in the civil rights movement and who for a time

served congregation KKBE in Charleston. Over the last several months I have received sermons and letters written by Rabbi Padoll, newspaper clippings and lots of photographs and notes. But on Tuesday morning I opened my email to find a link to a massive google drive containing a scanned copy of Rabbi Padoll's journals, his private journals, that had been discovered in a box of items delivered to the archives after his passing.

It turns out that Rabbi Padoll kept a daily journal throughout his life. While most of his entries are of the mundane events and the ebb and flow of his feelings, the details of his day and the people who mattered to him, there are also some rather exciting entries as well. These entries capture his courtship with his wife, Natalie, and his feelings upon the birth of his son, Bill, on March 20, 1962. I was able to read about the hard days, about the hardship of supporting his family, about struggles with his own expectations about his role as rabbi. Every day in his journal has a date at the top, so I know what Rabbi Padoll was thinking about and struggling with in May of 1954 and August of 1974 and January of 2004, the year that he died. Though I never had the opportunity to meet rabbi Padoll, I feel deeply connected to him through the stories told to me by his congregants and colleagues, by the writings he left behind, and, most of all, through his pages and pages of journal entries.

One second. One season. One lifetime.

And now, tonight, one new year.

At our core we are people who count. We are a people who count our days, our weeks, our months and our years. In one of the more beautiful Psalms, the author meditates on the passage of time and says: *Leem-not yamaynu kein hodah v'na-vee choch-mah*. Teach us to count our days rightly, so we may obtain a wise heart" (90:12).

In their own way, the words of the Psalmist reflect words written by Horace Mann, founding President of Antioch University, thousands of year later. Mann once put this announcement in a newspaper's lost-and-found column: "Lost somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with 60 diamond minutes. No reward is offered, for they are gone forever" (Horace Mann).

Since the spring we've been moving through a frightening and strange period of history. Time has warped, and our days and weeks have tended to flow together. While months seem to have disappeared, hours have tended to feel interminably long and the seconds, powerful as they are, are now gone forever. As a friend mentioned to me this week: "I can't believe Rosh Hashanah is this weekend. For a year that was moving so slowly, it seems to be chugging along" (Adam Mayer).

We stand on the cusp of the New Year, a fresh start, and yet it begins with so much of the baggage of the one previous still very much impacting our lives. While we may not be able to return to normal – whatever that is – for some time still to come, we can try to seize control of the passing of time, or at least, to how we mark the passage of time. For when we mark the passage of time, when we take stock and take an accounting of our

time and how we use it, we give ourselves the opportunity to spend our time consciously, asking ourselves: for what is this day? For what purpose is this week? We are not simply in a state of waiting and enduring. Though we are bound by circumstances and though we are finding our schedules dictated by the unknown, we do have a choice about how we relate to this second, this season, this life, and this New Year.

May we count this time, and appreciate that we are more than the makeup of its passing, that in fact we belong to a greater, unfolding story that spans years and generations. In this year of 5781, may we, as I tweak the familiar adage, count the time, so that we can make the time count.