

Don't Wait Too Long

Rosh Hashanah 5784

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Over the past few months I discovered something pretty surprising. I never would have expected it...didn't see it coming at all. But it has come to my attention that my wife Sari has fallen in love with another man! Truth is, she really didn't try to hide this new love interest from me at all. She literally talked about him all the time. About how relaxed and funny he is. About how helpful he is around the house. This guy cleaned out my entire garage, for God's sake. He cooks dinners on random weeknights. He loves to read, to travel, and to take long walks on the beach. He's easy to laugh and joke around. The guy doesn't have a stress in the world! He's happy go lucky, our kids adore him, and he even plays pickle ball! He's pretty much an all-around great guy that anyone would want to hang out with. Like I said, Sari didn't try to hide her affection for this guy; she even spoke about him by name! My kids know exactly who he is...they also refer to him by name. He left a few weeks ago, but they still talk about him all the time. His name is *Sabbatical Adam*. Sometimes they'd just abbreviate it and call him *Sabbadam*...you know 'cause they liked him that much! For those of you who are not following along, and are feeling scandalized right now, my wife did not have an affair. Sabbatical Adam was me, until September 1st. For those of you who attend shul on a more annual rather than weekly basis, and who maybe don't read the Tablet or our multiple weekly emails, I was on sabbatical from the end of June through the beginning of this month. Oh, and my name is Adam. And it's true! I *was* like a different person. Not that I don't enjoy spending every waking moment thinking about Har Shalom, I really do—I'm committed to that. But the sabbatical gave me a much-needed opportunity to step away from the day-to-day responsibilities of this work in order to examine my life, my priorities, and how I have been spending my time.

People are obsessed with time, aren't we. Look at your arm. Many of us are wearing an instrument that tells us down to the second, the progress of the earth's rotation around its axis. And that clock, that band on your arm for many is a status symbol! People collect these things! They spend hundreds, even thousands of dollars on these instruments. What are you wearing? A Rolex? A Movado? An Apple Watch? Personally I am loyal to Skagens from Denmark, because I am in awe of Denmark's efforts to protect Jews during the Holocaust. Did you know that 90% of

Danish Jews survived the Holocaust and that Denmark is the only Western European country that saved most of its Jewish population? So this is like my fifth or sixth Skagen. *But I digress!* We love telling time! Our phones not only place calls, they also tell us the time. Our coffee makers and ovens tell us the time. There's probably a clock in your car. Your television has a clock. There are clocks on towers, clocks on mantles, clocks on computers, clocks as artistic interior decor. We've come a long way since sundials and hour glasses. But one thing that hasn't changed is people's need to know what time it is at any given moment.

Even the Bible, our Torah, is obsessed with time. In his beautiful book *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel argued that the Torah is much more concerned with time, than place. Much more interested in events, in generations, in gatherings that happen at specific times of the year than it is in any physical space or monuments or buildings. The very first word of the Torah, *Bereishit*, imposes a structure of time on the universe. Think about it...*Bereishit*, in the beginning, means that there was nothing meaningful preceding that moment in time. And the first mitzvah in the entire Torah is actually *not* "be fruitful and multiply (that's what most people say)." That's a commandment for all human beings. But the first mitzvah, that is a commandment specifically and exclusively directed to the Jewish people is to create a calendar. To figure out the meaning of time. You can look it up in Exodus chapter 12, or you can take my word for it. For newly liberated slaves, determining their own time, their own schedule, their own special moments, celebrations, commemorations—that was the truest gift of freedom, rather than having someone else's schedule and needs and demands imposed upon us. We refer to the 24 hours of Shabbat as a bride, a queen, with angels as her attendants. There is nothing more holy in Judaism than time. Indeed the very first thing in the entire universe that is called "holy" is not a shrine or a pilgrimage site or a temple or a mountain or an altar...or even a person. The first thing ever to be called holy is time. *Vayivaerch Elohim et yom hash'vi'i vayikadeish oto*, and God blessed the seventh day and called it holy.¹ God blessed time.

Rosh Hashanah and the *Aseret Y'mei T'shuvah*, this time of year that begins today and culminates on Yom Kippur is referred to in the Talmud as an *Eit Ratzon*. *Eit Ratzon* means an *auspicious time*; a season when blessings are bestowed, and yearnings are answered. That's why we read about Sarah and Hagar and Hannah this morning...each one of them had urgent hopes and

¹ Genesis 2:3

desires that were granted at this very time of year, in ages past. This is a propitious time to be reflective; to be contemplative, to be introspective; to give very serious consideration to what we are doing with this precious gift called time.

There's an old Chinese proverb: "The Best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is today." I thought a lot about this during my sabbatical...about dreams and goals I had been putting off. Things I've wanted to do, places I've wanted to go for so long but made excuses for not doing. I even had a sabbatical in my last contract that I never got around to taking because things got too busy around here, or I couldn't justify getting away. But then I decided, "this is the time." I may have missed the window to plant that tree 20 years ago, but I can settle for second best and do it today. You know as much as we obsess about time, there's one thing, probably the most important thing about time that we do not and cannot know. And that is: How much of it we have left. There is no clock in the world that can tell you that. A number of years ago there was a movie starring Justin Timberlake and Amanda Seyfried called "In Time." It's a sort of a futuristic, dystopian film where every person in the world had the amount of time left in their lives lit up as a neon countdown on their forearms. But that's just it...it's the stuff of science fiction. There is no real clock that can tell you how long you have to live. That's the thrust of *Unetaneh Tokef*, the cardinal prayer of the High Holidays...Who shall live and who shall die? No one knows the answer, except the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, the Master of the Universe. The Psalmist says: *Limnot yameinu kein hoda*, teach us God to number our days.² But how can we number our days if we don't know how many we have in the first place? I think it means teach us to pay careful attention to the fact that time is our most precious commodity. Our days are not inexhaustible. There are certain things that we need to do now, and not put them off for some time in the future.

One of those things is *t'shuvah*. You know the famous teaching of Rabbi Eliezer, who said "Repent one day before you die."³ Rabbi Eliezer did not have a glowing countdown clock on his arm, and he didn't assume you did either! What he meant was repent every day. Be a forgiving person all the time. Seek reconciliation now. Make things right with relatives and friends and neighbors and coworkers NOW while you have the opportunity. Don't put it off, lest God-forbid

² Proverbs 90:12

³ Avot 2:10

you leave this world with important things unsaid...With brokenness that could have been repaired if you hadn't hesitated to have those conversations.

I made a difficult decision this summer. I was going back home to Cleveland to visit my family. And there is this one relative there that I haven't seen in a number of years. There has been some estrangement in our family; disappointments, misunderstandings, unresolved hurt. My family has mishigas like all of yours! It happened to be the month of Elul, and I decided to send this person a text message to see if they would be open to meeting up for coffee while I was in town. The message was well received, and we made a plan to get together. To tell you the truth I was more than a little anxious. I didn't exactly know what to expect or how I would feel. But let me tell you, it was worth it to sit together over a simple cup of coffee and just reconnect. We did not dredge up all the negativity of the past. And to tell you the truth that cup of coffee didn't make the disappointments disappear or heal all the old wounds. But it felt important from a teshuva perspective. At the end of the conversation we embraced, this person thanked me for reaching out, even said I love you. And like Jacob and Esau who embraced after years of separation, but then still decided to travel in different directions (at the end of Genesis 33), we each got into our cars and drove off. I believe we'll see each other again sometime, and that some of the tension has lifted...I'm glad I went through with it. At this *eit ratzon*, this fortuitous moment who do you need to reach out to now? Who should you try to reconnect with that really shouldn't wait any longer? Maybe it's not teshuva, maybe it's a dream you've wanted to pursue, a fundamental change in your life you've been vacillating about, a goal you've set, maybe last Rosh Hashana and still haven't acted on. Remember, the only thing we don't know about time is how much of it we have left. So what are you waiting for?

One of the most well-known mitzvot in the Torah is "choose life." *U'vacharta ba'chayim*.⁴ Most people understand that this mitzvah means that when a human life is at stake, you've got to move heaven and earth to save that life. But that's only one possible meaning. Choosing life in an even more straightforward way means not to squander the life we have been given. How dare we ever say that we're *killing time*. That's a sin! *Wasting time*? That's the opposite of choosing life. In modern Hebrew the way you say to waste time is *lisrof zman*, which literally means 'to burn time.' To incinerate time. That is so evocative. When you burn something it's gone forever.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19

When you count it, number it, appreciate it, cherish it, you make it last; you make it mean something.

Al tithalel ba'yom machar ki lo teida mah yeled yom. Proverbs says don't boast about what you'll do tomorrow. You have no idea what tomorrow will bring, or even for certain if tomorrow will come. Friends, what do you need to do today in your life that cannot wait any longer? What have you been putting off doing that is really overdue?

The author Thomas Cahill wrote that the Jewish people invented the idea of “new and improved.” In other words, Jews were the first to teach that time is actually moving in a positive direction; That things are meant to get better over time. Time is about growth, development, healing. I have this email signature—it's a quote from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, and people often tell me how much it resonates with them. He said, “If we are no better tomorrow than we are today, then why is tomorrow necessary at all.” The whole point of time is that it makes us better. When the great Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in the land of Israel was asked to summarize his theology, his entire belief system in one statement he said: *Ha'kol mit-aleh...* Everything is going up, everything is advancing; life, faith is about being on an upward trajectory. Greater spiritual awareness. Constant self-improvement. And we reflect this in the words we add to every kaddish during this time of year: kaddish shalem, hatzi kaddish, kaddish d'rabbanan, mourners kaddish. The rest of the year we say *l'eyla mikol birchata v'eshirata*, meaning the blessings and songs we recite ascend on high, but today we say *l'eyla u'leyla min kol birchata ve'shirata*, today is about going even higher, *l'eyla u'leyla*, surpassing the limits of what is possible at any other time. Because today is an *eit ratzon*. Today is a unique moment in time. You will never have another today. I hope you will all have many more Rosh Hashanas to come, but you'll never have another Rosh Hashanah of 5784, and there are things that need to happen now, that are truly time-sensitive; relationships, purpose, aspirations, dreams hinge on this moment.

If it wasn't Shabbat today, we would be blowing the shofar to alert everyone to this urgency in time. *Gotta come back tomorrow for that, and I hope you do because hearing the shofar is the central mitzvah of this holiday.* That piercing sound is the ultimate wake up call for anyone who is sleep-walking through life. But pay attention to the words we say right after *tekiah gedolah*: ***Ashrei ha'am yod'ei teruah...*** **Happy** are the people who experience the call of the shofar.

Happy! Not frightened, not trembling, not terrified. **Happy!** For sure some of the sounds of the shofar, like *teruah*, (as I said earlier) are supposed to approximate wailing or crying. But Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz teaches that the shofar is also “sound of victory, [a sound of] of assurance that this year...life will not be merely a repetition [of the past]...that there is a door of hope that this year will truly be a new year.” What a victory that would be! I want to encourage you to take this holy time, this *eit ratzon*, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to do a do a throughout audit of your life and your relationships. What commitments have you made to yourself or to others that you’ve been putting-off or procrastinating? You know it would mean the world to your spouse if you kept that promise you made but haven’t come through-on yet. You told them you would...you promised them you’d take care of it, get help, make that appointment, finish that project...you know what I’m talking about...but you haven’t gotten around to it yet. What are you waiting for? Remember how you promised not to work as hard or to put the phone away at dinner or on outings with the family; how you vowed to spend more time with the kids? But then things got busy, things got in the way, and you still haven’t carved out that time yet. What are you waiting for? I’m almost an empty-nester, let me tell you they grow up fast! I would do anything to get some of that time back with them. So, nu? What are you waiting for? You know you’d be so much healthier, so much happier if you finally addressed head-on what or who you’ve been struggling with. Alice Walker once said “the most common way that people give up their power is by not realizing they had it.” Friends you each have a lot of power, more than you realize, to make significant change in your lives. What you may not have as much of, is the time to do it. Notwithstanding that common expression, no one actually has ‘all the time in the world.’ So I ask you again, what are you waiting for?

Isn’t it funny that the name of this holiday, Rosh Hashana, references a part of the body rather than the beginning of something. We casually translate it as the new year, but literally it means the head of the year, as in that part of your body that’s propped up between your two shoulders. If today is going to be about new beginnings, maybe you need to use your *rosh*, use your head, use your noggin, use your *yiddisher kup* and figure out what you, not other people, but you need to do to take responsibility for your life in this new year. You’ve got the power. And right now you also have the time.

Since he died on July 21, I've been listening to a lot of Tony Bennett. I love Tony Bennett, in fact I always thought he was Jewish, turns Anthony Dominick Bennedetto was actually not Jewish...but there's something about him and his music that just feels so Jewish to me (maybe its memories of my grandparents blasting his music on the record player and dancing cheek to cheek across the living room floor). In one of his ballads called "Don't wait too long," originally released in 1963, he sings:

Fall is a lovely time of the year
When the leaves turn to golden brown
But soon fall is ending, and winter is near
And the leaves start tumbling down, oh

Why must the moments go by in such haste?
Don't wait too long
Winter is coming, we've no time to waste
Don't wait too long

Please use this auspicious holy time of the high holidays, this *eit ratzon*, to commit yourself to what's truly important in your life. We have all been given the gift of this precious time, this day, this moment, this Rosh Hashanah. Use the time wisely and have the courage...claim the power to make 5784 the best year yet in your life. And please, whatever you do, *Don't wait too long*.

L'shana Tova