

Choices: A Wasted Day... The Best Day
Kol Nidre 5779
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In the faint light of the attic, an old man bent his great frame and made his way to a stack of boxes that sat near one of the little half-windows. Brushing aside cobwebs, he began to carefully lift out one old photo album after another. Eyes once bright but now dim searched longingly for the source that had drawn him here.

It began with the fond recollection of the love of his life, long gone, and somewhere in these albums was a photo of her he hoped to rediscover. He opened the long buried treasures and soon was lost in a sea of memories. Although his world had not stopped spinning when his wife left it, the past was more alive in his heart than his present aloneness.

Setting aside one of the dusty albums, he pulled from the box a journal from his grown son's childhood. He could not recall ever having seen it before, or that his son had ever kept a journal. "*Why did Elizabeth always save the children's old junk?*" he wondered to himself, shaking his head.

Opening the yellowed pages, he glanced over the writing, and his lips curved in an unconscious smile. Even his eyes brightened as he read the words that spoke clear and sweet to his soul. It was the voice of the little boy who had grown up far too fast in this very house, and whose voice had grown fainter and fainter over the years. In the utter silence of the attic, the words of a six-year-old worked their magic and carried the old man back to a time almost forgotten.

Entry after entry stirred a sentimental hunger in his heart like the longing a gardener feels in the winter for the fragrance of spring flowers. But it was accompanied by the painful memory that his son's simple recollections of those days were far different from his own. But how different?

Reminded that he had kept a daily journal of his business activities over the years, he closed his son's journal and turned to leave, having forgotten the cherished photo that originally triggered his search. He headed down a carpeted stairway that led to the den.

Opening a glass cabinet door, he reached in and pulled out an old business journal. He sat down at his desk and placed the two journals beside each other. His was leather-bound and engraved with his name in gold, while his son's was tattered and the hand-written name "Jimmy" had been nearly scratched from its surface. He ran his finger over the letters, as though he could restore what had been worn away with time and use.

As he opened his journal, the old man's eyes fell upon an inscription that stood out because it was so brief in comparison to other days. In his own neat handwriting were these words:

Wasted the whole day fishing with Jimmy. Didn't catch a thing.

With a deep sigh and a shaking hand, he took Jimmy's journal and found the boy's entry for the same day, June 4th. Large scrawling letters, pressed deeply into the paper, read:

Went fishing with my dad. Best day of my life.

A wasted day..... the best day of my life..... the same day.

On Kol Nidre this holiest night, as we metaphorically open our soul's journal recounting our actions, words and deeds of this past year, how do we recall our days? Wasted or wonderful- filled with meaning and purpose-filled with family and love or a waste of time and unsatisfied? For the father in our story, perhaps he felt it was wasted because he was results-oriented- they didn't catch a fish so it wasn't worthwhile? Whereas for Jimmy- Regardless of not coming home with food for dinner, he came home with an amazing memory and time well spent together. It's striking how different they each experienced the day and recorded it. And amazing to see how a young boy can be so perceptive- and remind us of the need to open our eyes to the unappreciated gifts in our lives

A core theme throughout the high holidays and our Torah is the call to be present in the moment- marked by the word "Hineni- I am here." There are eight times in the Torah where one of our Biblical heroes is called to action-

from Abraham to Moses- and they each answer the call to be present- with the response, “Hineni, Here I am- present and prepared to experience that which is forthcoming.”

Most famous is G-d’s call to Abraham to take his son Isaac up the mountain and Moses at the Burning Bush. We call them Hineni moments- times to be open and aware- present and engaged.

For the next 25 hours of Yom Kippur, we may not all have a life-changing awe-inspiring experience but we should all take the time to recalibrate and do a small course correction- to prioritize family, community and faith- to rededicate ourselves to our highest responsibilities- to resume the good habits that we have let lapse this past year and restore the relationships that have waned. This is the time to remember the person that we aspire to be, our best self, and close the distance between where we want to be and where we are right now. As Rav Kook taught, “Striving for good is goodness itself. Striving for perfection is what perfects. Teshuva never ends but the longing for perfection is what perfects.”

One way to help us move closer to our better selves is by using *vuja de*- the opposite of *déjà vu*. Adam Grant in *The Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* writes that we all too often experience *Déjà vu*, that feeling like we have been here before and know exactly what’s going to happen, repeating the same mistakes over and over again. Kol Nidre is a Hineni moment which provides us a fresh perspective to see how we can transform and be our best self by using *vuja de*. *Vuja De* is the process to re-see things anew. As the French novelist Marcel Proust wrote, “The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes”. Kol Nidre shakes us and says, now’s the time to see things differently.

As we begin our new year, may we pledge to make each day the best day of our life, that there should be no such thing as a wasted day and that we live in the present, aware and open to the beauty that is right in front of us.

The story is told of a new young rabbi hired to serve a small town synagogue in Europe. He was given a tour of the entire shtetl that ended at the town cemetery. Wandering through the grounds, he was reading the headstones and noticed something strange and disturbing, the ages on the stones for the deceased rabbis- his predecessors. 34 years, 28 years and another was just 23 years old.

The new rabbi started to get very concerned and wondered if he had made a horrible decision moving here- this town was cursed, how could all their rabbis have died so young! His tour guide sensed the growing panic as the rabbi was planning an escape route out of town. She reassured him, “Rabbi, let me explain what these stones mean. These dates are not the span of their lives, but they are the number of years that they truly lived their lives. You see, we have a custom in our community that each person keeps a diary and at the end of the day they write down how much of their day was spent living closest to their highest self; concerned with things that truly matter. And then at the end of a person’s life, we add up all those hours and we put that amount on your headstone.”

We may not keep a diary like those in the shtetl from this story but I do know that we have the power to judge the way that we choose to live our lives and spend our days. We know if we wasted time or made the most of it. This year, may we aspire to live a life of meaning, present in the moment and grateful for all the goodness and time that we have. (Story from Rabbi Heidi Cohen and Rabbi Danny Burkeman)

May this year’s fast motivate us to open up our eyes to the potential to be our best self, to make the most of each day and live each day wisely.

G’mar Chatima Tova- May we all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for a happy, healthy, inspiring and sweet year ahead.