

Rosh Hashanah 5779 – Slow Down and Live

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Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

It has been more than 30 years since the fictional heartthrob Ferris Bueller first uttered those words during his famous “day off,” but the challenge has only gotten worse.

Then it was the computer, instant coffee, the microwave – technological innovations that create an expectation of instant gratification. But that was linear – if it used to take 90 minutes to bake a potato, the microwave could do it in four. Today, the challenge is dynamic. The computers are in our pockets, summoning us during meetings, in restaurants, at the dinner table, during conversation with our spouses, even here in the sanctuary. It's not just the speed, but the distraction. We call it multi-tasking, but that's a fallacy. “Multi-tasking” is really switching quickly from one activity to another, such that our attention is rarely on one thing for more than a fleeting moment. The research suggests that it is incredibly inefficient. Our brains process best when we are relaxed; when we move too fast, we miss things.

Isaiah said it more than 3000 years ago when he preached to the people of Judah: “Surely you hear,” he said, “but do not understand; as surely you see, but do not really know.” The people of his time heard the words of Torah and ethical living but it didn't sink in, just as they witnessed God's miracles but did not feel pushed to truly acknowledge or appreciate God.

I think of Isaiah's message in services. We listen to the words, but do we really hear? Are we truly present, or are we too distracted and distractable? Some of you were at my installation last December, when I was outed by my children for occasionally taking out my phone at the dinner table, accepting a call, or otherwise being distracted or not paying attention. Sometimes, in our efforts to do everything, we just go too fast.

I heard a story about a woman who was pulled over for driving too fast - doing 60 in a 35. The officer asked for her license and she didn't have it. “So why were you driving so fast?” She explained: “Well, I just robbed a bank.”

“Really?” he asked. “And where is all the loot?”

“It's there in the trunk,” she said. “Right next to the bodies. And I cannot lie; you should be careful because my weapons are in the trunk as well.”

The officer called for backup, and within about 20 seconds, there were six more cars, sirens blaring and lights flashing. They demanded that she get out of the vehicle and pop open her trunk. She did, they looked ... and there was nothing there.

The captain came up and the driver quickly handed him her license. “How can I help you officer?” she asked. And the Captain tried to figure it all out. “I don’t understand,” he said. “My officer told me you had no license, and you had stolen money, dead bodies, and guns stuffed in your trunk; and when I looked there was nothing.”

“Oh really?” she said, “I’ll bet that liar told you I was speeding too!”

But we really are speeding. We expect to be moved, we want spirituality, meaningful prayers that hits us right here; and we want it now. My message is simple: we can have it. We can get it. Some of the tools have been tried and tested for thousands of years. But they don’t work by themselves. We have to listen, and we have to hear. We have to be present, mindful. We have to practice. We have to slow it down.

So I want to invite you to do something incredibly radical. Take off your watch. I’ve already timed the sermon, and your ticket tells you what time the service will end. Let’s try to slow down, to enter the moment, to engage – with the liturgy, the music, with the purpose of the day, with our inner selves. If you are willing, try closing your eyes. We’re going to sit in silence and just breathe. Concentrate on the breath. Hear the breath. Appreciate the wonder of breathing. And when you are ready, you can open your eyes.

So, that was different. I hope some of you liked it; I assume others were uncomfortable. We are so used to going so fast. And when this service is over – or maybe even before it’s over – we have other things to do. But we have to take the time to appreciate the moment.

A few years ago, Time Magazine had a cover on “The Mindful Revolution,” which cited Jon Kabat-Zinn, an MIT-trained scientist and professor at the University of Massachusetts. His work is incredibly accessible, so I picked up his audio book from the library on *Mindfulness for Beginners*. Jon Kabat-Zinn explained that mindfulness means “paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, as if your life depended on it, non-judgmentally.”

We have that too. It’s one of the first prayers we learn. “*Shema Yisrael*, Hear, listen, Pay attention Israel.” We cover our eyes to concentrate on the words. God is one; and we are truly present when we and the world and our responsibilities, and the people who are closest to us are in sync. One.” Paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment.” You can’t rush that.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described it as wonder: “Mankind will not perish for want of information,” he wrote; “but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. Awareness of the divine begins with wonder ... or radical amazement.”

That was 1955. Scientists were making amazing discoveries. Heschel appreciated science and progress, but he had a warning for those who thought they could explain everything or control nature. Sometimes you still have to raise up your hands and say “wow! How great are your works Adonai, how very subtle your designs!” This is amazing! Wonder is not something that you master and move on. It is a constant, continuous practice.

With prayer, the fixed liturgy is a starting point. But it is not enough. We can't just utter the words. My parents have been telling me this since at least my bar mitzvah. “Slow down! It's not a race.” And I am finally ready to try.

I am eager to experiment – not to replace our traditional services, but to create other spaces for awareness, where we might combine movement or mindfulness with the texts of our liturgy and the wisdom of our tradition. And that means I have to learn, which is also an opportunity. If you practice meditation, if you are a specialist in movement, if you just want to have a conversation, GIVE ME A CALL after the holiday. And let's talk about how together we might use prayer to foster better awareness and appreciation. *Shema*, Pay attention!

With people too. Mindfulness experts call it generosity – being aware of the needs of others. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called it I and Thou. Understanding. Listening. Giving. Life is lived in relationship. God is found in the connection; when I see you not as an object or a competitor, but as an individual of value. In Buber's words, “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter.”

We know, unfortunately, what happens when relationships take the form of I-It instead of I-Thou, when one person treats another as an object. That is the essence of #MeToo. For too long, society has turned a blind eye to people with power taking advantage, reducing employees, interns, fellows to objects – seeing “It” instead of “you.” In some cases, we seem unaware. We have somehow trained ourselves to believe that what we are saying or what we are seeing is okay. Too often, we fail to appreciate the *tzelem Elohim*, the spark of divinity that exists within every human being. We don't give them the time they deserve.

The Jewish community is not immune. Members of B'nai Israel received an email last week describing the steps we are taking to update our policies and train staff and lay leaders. We work closely with the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, an organization I serve as a board member, to educate, to prevent, and to make sure that victims of abuse, but also others in crisis, or individuals who struggle with identity know that they will be heard, understood, valued, treated by their community as “You,” not “It.”

And not just in the negative. I-Thou also means noticing and appreciating the positive things that people do for us, spending more time with family, cultivating relationships, and performing acts of *hesedi*/kindness. We are working to form a *Hevra Kadisha*, a “sacred society” tasked with preparing the deceased for burial in the appropriate way. Those who have participated in this *hesed shel emet*, an act of true kindness, describe the incredible feeling of being able to serve another person in the ultimate

moment. It's one of those *mitzvot* that makes you slow down and notice the sanctity and divinity in others.

The concept applies on the communal and global levels as well. That's the issue when it comes to our distancing from Israel. We think of Israel as "It." IT is just another country like France and there is no connection. Our new congregational Shlichah, Tamar Sommer, asked me if there is one message I want her to try to impart; and I told her: Teach people to see Israel as "Thou." Teach them that Israel is not "It." Israel is you; Israel is us; there's an intimacy of relationship. "*Yisrael v'Oraita v'Kud'sha B'rikh Hu Had Hu,*" says the Zohar. "Israel, Torah, and God are all One." We have to try to learn more, to see more, to understand, to love.

I-Thou is God. God is generosity. God is love. God is the understanding that there is something beyond me – a Commanding Force, a person in need, the wonders of nature, a national identity. God is all around us, if only we could make the time to notice. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad.*

Our Jewish tradition gives us an awareness toolbox. It's not like my tool box at home that contains only duct tape and WD 40. If it moves and it shouldn't I use the duct tape. If it doesn't move and it should, I pull out the WD 40. Judaism gives us tools in varying sizes and time increments, to better attune us to that world beyond ourselves.

The simplest is the blessing. The Hebrew word *brakha* is related to *berekh*, which means knee. A blessing is a way of metaphorically "bending the knee", acknowledging that we are much smaller than most of what we experience. *Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh Halam Hamotzi lehem min ha-aretz;* we praise God for bringing forth bread from the earth, and in that moment, we also acknowledge all the other people in the chain of production. To quote the 2nd-century sage Ben Zoma:

How many different activities did Adam have to do before he was able to obtain bread to eat? He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound the sheaves, he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground them and sifted the flour, he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate. In contrast, I get up and find all these things done for me.

It's just a piece of bread. But it is so much bigger than that.

A blessing takes about 5 seconds. The prayer tool takes longer to use – three times a day for Shacharit, Minha, Ma'ariv. Shacharit, the morning prayer, is designed to wake you, to get you warmed up and ready to face the day. And it works. At B'nai Israel every morning, people trickle in; and something happens when you sit together for 40 minutes, engage with the liturgy, and chat for a few minutes over a cup of coffee or a bagel before going about your day. Minha, in the middle of the day, is extremely short, a few minutes to step back and see and appreciate. The Talmud discusses whether it is even worth it for a laborer in a tree to come down to the ground to *daven Mincha*, or if he should just stay where he is and devote a few minutes to prayer. The evening service is in between, maybe 15 minutes. The workday is finished, it's time to wind down, to go home, to relax and begin preparing for tomorrow.

Even if you don't make it to Minyan, you can still take the time— at key moments in the day – to be mindful of all that is happening *in the moment*.

If blessings give you seconds and prayers offer minutes for awareness, Shabbat is the entire day. “וביום השביעי שבת וינפש” on the seventh day, God rested and ‘re-souled’.” Shabbat is an entire day for slowing down, attuning ourselves to others, and refueling our souls.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg once told a story about a candidate for the local police force who was asked: “If you were alone in a police car and were pursued by a gang of desperate criminals in another car doing sixty miles an hour along a lonely road, what would you do?” Without hesitation, the candidate answered: “seventy.”

Or as the Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev put it to the person he saw running in the marketplace. “Why are you in such a rush in pursuit of your livelihood? How do you know that your livelihood lies before you and you are running after it? Maybe it lies behind you, and you are running away from it!”

It happens to all of us, because that's our mindset. There are always things to do. We trick ourselves into thinking it's even possible to do it all. We get sidetracked; we rush. Maybe we get it from Genesis, which says that after six days of work God rested because the work was complete. Except we know that God's work was *not* complete – it's still not complete. The world is not perfect, evil still reigns, people lack access to basic needs. God didn't rest because the work was complete. God rested because it was time to rest.

And if it was true for God, how much more for us! What a gift – to pause *as if* our work was complete, to unplug for 24 hours so that we can better appreciate the blessings in our lives. Shabbat is our day – to use Jay Michelson's words – for “just being,” for mono-tasking. The other things can wait. The first words of the Psalm for Shabbat: “It is good ... to give thanks to Adonai” for all that I might have missed when I was distracted and moving too fast.

In an email message this week, Rabbi Sharon Anisfeld, Dean of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College in Boston, points us to the end of tomorrow's [today's] Torah reading, as Abraham has lifted the knife and is about to slaughter Isaac. “Abraham lifted his eyes and he saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.” Abraham's life, Isaac's life, Jewish history changed in that moment, as Abraham saw something that he had missed before. And so it is with us.

As we stand on the precipice of a new year, let us slow down enough to see, to love, to live. I pray: O God, may You grant us the patience to focus, that we might better appreciate the wonder in our midst. Give us the courage to reach out, the awareness to better sense the needs of the Other and better recognize the Your in our lives. Help us become attuned on this day and every day, to proclaim in the words of the Psalmist:

Zeh hayom asah Adonai, This is the day, this is the moment that the Lord has made,

Nagila v'nism'ha bo, Let us be happy and rejoice in it.

Shanah Tovah.