

**YOM KIPPUR**

**8 OCTOBER 2011**

**The calendar never lies.**

**On my desk at home there is a fairly large “tchatcka holder” on which a family friend embossed the invitation from my Bar Mitzvah. As I glanced at it recently, I realized – with a start – that on our secular calendar, my Bar Mitzvah occurred exactly 50 years ago today.**

**1961 was a dramatic moment in American history – and a wondrous time for me: I recall aspects of it vividly:**

**Watching on television as President John Kennedy challenged Americans in his Inaugural Address: “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” That cold, snowy Washington January morning of 1961 – with our Capitol etched in the background – is seared in my consciousness forever.**

**In May of that year, all the 7<sup>th</sup> graders in our Junior High School were allowed to stop everything – an unusual occurrence, to be sure – and listen on the radio as astronaut Alan Shepard, Jr. was launched into space in his Freedom 7 capsule. 7<sup>th</sup> graders tend to be a fairly noisy bunch . . . but not a sound could be heard – except for the thrust of those powerful Mercury rocket engines and the voices from “mission control.”**

**And then – moving from the more cosmic to the more personal, in October of 1961, it was my Bar Mitzvah: Shabbat B'reisheet – the first Shabbat after the fall**

holidays, when we begin our study of the Torah anew – with the story of creation. It was a crystal-clear fall day in Montclair, New Jersey – the leaves in radiant color - and in many ways, it seems as if it were yesterday -- k'heref ayin -- as in “the blink of an eye” – which is how the Hebrew phrase puts it aptly.

But even in our sophisticated, technologically-oriented culture, a half-century is a significant block of time . . . For me, what is most telling as I reflect back on that big personal moment of 1961 is not that I can still “belt out” some phrases from my Parasha – but rather that the people who assumed such prominence in that event – who, from the perspective of a 13 year-old seemed as if they would go on forever – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles – are gone – not erased from my mind – but indeed gone from this world.

Life happens so fast – and so often, we are so cavalier, casual and glib about it:

In Thornton Wilder’s play Our Town, Emily who has died, returns as a spirit to Grover’s Corners to relive one day, her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. “Oh earth,” she says, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you . . . And she asks: “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?”

My colleague, Rabbi Naomi Levy, talks about 4 “D’s” in our various possible responses to the inevitability of death.

Denial . . .

Delay . . .

Drive . . .

and

Despair

**Denial:** we put our heads in the proverbial sand . . . thinking that time is indeed **unlimited.**

**Delay:** we procrastinate – always postponing the hard work of tackling our most important goals.

**Drive:** Just the opposite: We invest so much energy and emotional and intellectual capital in pursuing our objectives – that we deplete ourselves of enjoyment and life's pleasures . . . and finally

**Despair:** We succumb to the forces of gloom which can overwhelm us.

There is another road – one of balance, integration, one which, in my view, looks at ourselves and the inevitability of death squarely – but enables us to maximize the gift of time which is ours.

In a thought-provoking essay called “The Station,” Robert Hastings notes:

“Sooner or later, we must recognize that there is no station, no single place to arrive at – once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream . . . and it constantly outdistances us.”

And he continues:

“It is not the burden of today that drives us mad. It is the regrets over yesterday and the fear of tomorrow. Regret and fear are the twin thieves (which) rob us of today.”

“So,” Robert Hastings concludes:

“Stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot more often, watch more sunsets, laugh more, cry less. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough.”

Before we get to that station, life must also be filled with Jewish substance.

**A few suggestions for your consideration:**

**Begin with a celebration of Shabbat at some level –**

**Add a new mitzvah to your personal ladder of growth –**

**Expand your Jewish educational horizons –**

**and find a meaningful niche for yourself in our Synagogue and in our Jewish community.**

**Many of us followed the poignant and ultimately heartbreaking story of Elizabeth Edward’s struggle against cancer. Last December, her doctors determined that further treatment would be “unproductive.” The end was clearly imminent. With her family and closest friends surrounding her, Elizabeth Edwards posted the following message on her Facebook page on the day before her death:**

**“You all know that I have been sustained throughout my life by three saving graces – my family, my friends, and a faith in the power of resilience and hope. These graces have carried me through difficult times and they have brought more joy to the good times than I ever could have imagined.**

**She continued:**

**“The days of our lives, for all of us, are numbered. We know that. And, yes, there are certainly times when we aren’t able to muster as much strength and patience as we would like. It’s called being human. But I have found that in the simple act of living with hope, and in the daily effort to have a positive impact in the world, the days I do have are made all the more meaningful and precious. And for that I am grateful.**

**“It isn’t possible to put into words the love and gratitude I feel to everyone who has and continues to support and inspire me every day.**

**To you, I simply say: you know.**

**With love,**

**Elizabeth**

**Friends:**

**Death should teach us about life:**

**how to build and strengthen our relationships – now –**

**how to use our Jewish heritage creatively – now**

**and how in the end – nothing is really guaranteed.**

**Carpe Diem.**

**We have today. Grasp it . . . grasp it as tightly as you can.**