

“Being Present”
Yom Kippur 5767 - October 2, 2006
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Are we really here—or are we just taking up space in this room?

The verb “*hayah*” in Hebrew is a hard one to translate. According to the dictionary, there are three distinct meanings. First it can refer to a thing or to an event that occurs or comes to pass. There’s the familiar verse, very early in the Bible, that goes, “*Vayehi erev, vayehi boker, yom echad*”—“And there was evening, and there was morning, one day.” Evening *happened*; morning *happened*: pure and simple.

Hayah can also mean, “to become,” or “to come into being.” Again, we turn to Genesis: “*Vayomer Elohim: yehi or!*” “And God said, Let there be light!”— meaning, “let light come into being,” or “let light appear.” At the end of the Aleinu prayer, quoting Isaiah, we pray that one day, “*v’haya adonai l’melech ...*” “the Lord will *become* the ruler of the entire world.”

The third meaning, which is similar to the first two but subtly different is, “to be” in the sense of “to exist” or “to be present.” A frequent phrase in the Bible is “*Vayehi ish,*” meaning, “Once, there was a man.” Not in the sense that a person *happened* to be there, or that a certain boy *became* a man, but in the sense that, “A certain man existed, and here is his story.”

A good example of this usage is in Exodus [24:12]: “*Vayomer Adonai el Moshe: aleh elai ha-harah veheyeh sham.*” “God said to Moses: Come up to me on the top of the mountain, and be there.” Now, at first glance, and maybe even at second glance, this phrase, “*and be there*” seems redundant. If Moses indeed were to go up to the top of the mountain to be with God, then he would *be* there, right? Why then does the Torah have to add, “*and be there*”?

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotsk, the great Kotsker Rebbe, [quoted in *Putting God on the Guest List*, by Jeffrey K. Salkin, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, (1996) p. xix] explained it this way: Sometimes, it is possible to expend great effort in climbing a mountain ... but still not *be there*. Sometimes, we can be on the top of the mountain and not be *fully present*.



Does that sound familiar? Sometimes, we can be with people, and yet our minds are someplace else. Sometimes, we can be eating dinner with our children and still be back in the office. Sometimes, we can live with a spouse for many, many years and hardly communicate. Sometimes, we can walk right past homeless people and not see them. Sometimes, it seems as though we are sleepwalking through much of life, not fully awake to the miracles around us—the most significant of which are the people in our lives whom we love.

Many years ago, I took my daughter, Leora, to her first day of kindergarten. I brought her to class, I said goodbye, and I left. I then had this odd sensation, as I was walking to my car: I know it sounds silly, but I visualized her walking down the aisle at her wedding. Now, you know, I do officiate at weddings, so it isn't such a far-fetched image to have: you could say that it's a professional hazard of being a rabbi. (I told my wife about it; she was not amused.) I didn't give it much thought, and then promptly forgot all about it.

Around the same time, I was conducting a wedding not too far from here, at Ridge Hill. We were upstairs in the house there. We had just signed the ketubah, and the bride was getting ready before joining the rest of the bridal party downstairs and heading out to the *huppah*, which was set out on the grass outside. The bride's mother and I were schmoozing before the ceremony. It was a special moment.

At a certain point, the two of us turned to gaze at the bride, who was standing in front of a mirror, fixing her hair and her veil. The bride's mother turned and looked at me. "You know," she said, "I can remember the day I took her to kindergarten for the first time. It seems like it was only yesterday."

Sometimes, reflecting on the future or on the past can strengthen one's appreciation of the present and one's ability to be in the moment. Reflecting on those two beautiful transitional moments, provides us with several insights. Yes, time passes awfully quickly. But there's another message here: *Most of life does not consist of peak experiences*. Most of life, we're not, on the one hand, taking our children to kindergarten or, on the other, standing under the huppah at their wedding. Most of life consists of all those moments in-between.

Most of Yom Kippur is not Kol Nidrei, with its forbidding gravity, or the blowing of the shofar after Neilah, with that wonderful feeling of release. Most of Yom Kippur consists of those long hours in between.

Our challenge is to try to be awake and present not only during the wonderful peak experiences of life but during all those moments in-between. This is not always easy to do.

For one thing, it's easy to lament the past.

Martin Buber tells the following story: The day after Rabbi Hayyim of Zans married off his son to the daughter of Rabbi Eliezer, he visited him. "Now that we're related," he said, I feel close to you and I can tell you what's eating at my heart. Look! I've grown old. My hair and beard have grown white, and I *still* haven't fully atoned for my sins." "My friend," replied Rabbi Eliezer, "you are thinking only of yourself. How about forgetting yourself and thinking of the world?"

Living in the past, obsessing over the past, lamenting what already happened or what hasn't happened yet, is very tempting. It allows us to avoid the challenges of the present. We can blame other people for the mess we're in, we can gripe about this or that—and the time will keep on passing. I'm reminded of that song, "Fly Like an Eagle," by the Steve Miller Band: "Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin', into the future."

On the other hand, it's also easy to focus on the future to the detriment of the present. Many of us are planners. We didn't get to where we are by just letting things happen; we make plans and we execute them. It can be frustrating, sometimes, to consciously refrain from looking ahead.

The *Shulchan Arukh* tells us that when someone is dying, we are forbidden to hammer a coffin together in the next room. It might be convenient to do that. We might be anxious that if we don't do it, it won't be finished in time. But we can't do it. Now why is this? You could argue that it is because the sound of the coffin being put together could cause the dying person to lose hope, and hasten his or her demise. It could also be that it will distract the members of the family and the friends of the ill person, and make it difficult for them to be fully present during their loved one's final moments of life. Either way, it's focusing on the future in a way that's detrimental to the present.

We show a film here to parents who are about to celebrate a child's bar or bat mitzvah ["The Good Deed"]. I never tire of that film. In it, a family is getting ready to go to synagogue on the morning of the youngest child's bar mitzvah. As I'm sure happens in every family's home, there is hustle and bustle: the mom is running around checking off lists, the father is reminding everyone that they have

to get going, the older brothers are horsing around. At a certain point, the bar mitzvah boy disappears. It takes awhile for people to realize that he's not around and to figure out where he is. Even though everyone is in the home together, because there's so much running around, people are hardly *there*.

A few years ago, scholars surveyed teenagers four years after their bar or bat mitzvah. [See "Four Up," available at www.jtsa.edu] They asked them, what was most memorable thing about the experience? Their answers were actually quite astonishing. Some people most remembered their gifts—but only about 1%. Some remembered the party—but only about 14%. 29%, almost one-third of all those surveyed, found the most memorable thing about their bar or bat mitzvah *the preparation*. It was those weeks and weeks of studying their haftarah, of reviewing a Torah reading, of preparing a dvar torah that was most meaningful—even more so than the ceremony or the party.

We invite families celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah to join us for morning minyan on the Monday before their simcha. One of the reasons I love that experience is that in its ordinariness it is extraordinary. Unpretentious, informal, no fancy clothes, no anxiety over who will sit where,—just an opportunity for the family to join our minyanners in worship and to appreciate the magic and the miracle of a human being becoming an adult. I'd like to think that by gathering five days before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, it helps to slow things down, and helps families appreciate not only the day of the simcha, but those special days right before it as well.

We will shortly recite Yizkor prayers for loved ones who are no longer alive. What better reminder could there be of the need to be fully present as, in the words of Psalm 90, "life quickly passes and flies away."

If there *is* a better reminder, it is Yom Kippur itself. On this day, we wear white. We don't eat or drink. In essence, we simulate our own deaths. And then, miraculously, just when we think we can't last another hour without a cup of water, we are spared. We merit the privilege of breaking our fast and beginning anew. This long day is designed to remind us of our mortality—and to inspire us to draw the proper conclusions.

Life is a series of small moments. We owe it ourselves, to others, and to God to be fully present during as many of those as we can.

There's another place in the Bible where that relatively rare grammatical form, the verb *hayah* in the imperative singular form, is used. When God is speaking to Abraham, he says to him, "*V'heyeh brachah!*" "*Be a blessing.*"

What does it mean to *be* a blessing? We might know what it means to *give* a blessing or to *receive* a blessing, but what does it mean to *be* a blessing?

To be a blessing means to act in such a way that the lives of others are enriched by our presence and conduct. The only way to achieve that is to be present. When others speak, we must try to listen. When others are in need, we must try to respond. We can be a blessing, but first we must *be*.

Let's climb mountains together, let's gaze at sunsets—and let's also sit at home on rainy days, playing Scrabble or Monopoly. Let's go out for dinner—and let's also eat leftovers at home. Whatever we do, let's try to be fully present to those around us.

Wherever we are, let's not just happen to be there.

Let us be fully present. Let's *be* a blessing.

Amen.