

“Let’s Start Over, Together, Here, Now”
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[Count the words]: This (1) — is (2) — a (3) — very (4) — short (5) — sermon (6).

We live in an age of sound bites. We communicate in smaller and smaller bits of information. The latest manifestation of this is, of course, Twitter, which requires you to package your message in just one hundred and forty characters. (Whew, I just made it with that sentence.) Text messages with abbreviations like FWIW (for what it’s worth), LOL (laugh out loud) and PRW (parents are watching), seek to compress our thoughts into smaller and smaller packages.

Here is another craze: writing six word memoirs. *Smith*, an on-line magazine, came out with a book of them last year. It’s entitled, “Not Quite What I Was Planning.” Here are a few of the entries:

“She kissed me and said “Yes!”

“My reach always exceeded my grasp.”

“Thought I would have more impact.”

“Never really finished anything, except cake.”

Stephen Colbert’s entry was: “Well, I thought it was funny.”

Now, you can actually get across some deep messages in only six words. It’s even easier in Hebrew. For rabbinic wisdom, what beats: *Im Ein Ani Li, Mi Li?* (If I am not for myself, who will be for me?) And the classic expression of Jewish faith is, of course, the *Shema: Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*.

In this spirit, some colleagues of mine were talking about taking it to the next step: delivering six word sermons. Here’s one for the High Holidays:

(Count words.) “Friends, shape up. Now. Or else!”



(Count words.) That is not quite my style.

Why is there this passion for brevity?

Well, it's fun. Who doesn't like a clever haiku poem every now and then?

It could be that with the explosion of social networking, there's less time—or *perceived* to be less time—for any one message, so each one has to count for more.

It could also be that people don't want to waste time with unnecessary talk because they realize that time is short.

After all, the one thing all of us know about an otherwise unpredictable future is that our lives will one day end.

In Mitch Albom's latest book, he tells the story about the minister who was visiting a country church, and who began his fire and brimstone sermon with the stern statement: "Everyone in this parish is going to die!"

The minister looked around. Everybody looked pretty miserable except for one man in the front pew, who was smiling. "Why are you so amused?" he asked. The man shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not from this parish," he said. (*Have a Little Faith: A True Story*, by Mitch Albom, p. 231.)

Deep down inside, we know, we all belong to the same parish.

The knowledge that we are eventually going to die and that our time is short can have a powerful impact on how we live our lives. But it's hard to live with that in our heads and in our hearts. How do we make that knowledge part of our lives in a way that's **positive** and **not morbid**—when all of us are inclined to be like that man in the front pew?

Here's one way that they do it in Southeast Asia.

There is a Buddhist temple in Thailand that offers you the chance to die, rise up again newborn and make a fresh start in life.

There are nine big, pink coffins in the grand hall of the temple. Every day, hundreds of people take turns climbing in for a few moments as monks chant a dirge. Then, at a signal, the visitors leave the temple cleansed—they believe—of the past.

The way it works is this: On the monk's command, you get into the coffin, you close your eyes, you put on a shroud, you lie down, you get up on your feet, you take off the shroud, you say a quick prayer and then you get out, ready to start a new life. (See "For a Fee, a Thai Temple Offers a Head Start on Rebirth," by Seth Mydans, *New York Times*, September 27, 2008.)

Some people just do this once. Others do it five or six times. After all, it only costs approximately five dollars. But don't laugh. We do the same thing ourselves. We're doing it now. On Yom Kippur, we simulate our own deaths, and then, at the end of the day, get up and start all over again.

We begin by eating an unceremonious pre-fast meal. All of us made sure to do that, didn't we? Rabbi Yitz Greenberg calls it the last meal of a condemned person. No Kiddush, no sense of Yom Tov, no sense of festivity. Just food—the choice was ours. Then, we dress in white and go to shul. The kittels that some of us are wearing are like shrouds. We sit and pray and reflect and meditate. We don't eat or drink or entertain ourselves or do any of the other things that ordinary *living* people do. We are, in Yitz Greenberg's words, "giving [ourselves] over to the realm of death." The signs of mourning are all around us: as in a house of mourning, we don't wear leather shoes, and we refrain from washing, perfuming, intimate relations. As the day wears on, we look worse and worse. Some of us start to look like ghosts. Then, at the end of the day, we say the *Shema*—which, not coincidentally, is the deathbed confessional—and, almost immediately, we hear the blast of the shofar, which reminds us of the horn that heralds the Messianic era.

We do this re-enactment—really, a pre-enactment—for a reason. As we know, Judaism puts a lot of emphasis on life. Life is precious. Short of hurting other human beings, we do whatever we can to stay alive. But sometimes we drift, not fully appreciating life's blessings and life's potential. Life is more than the number of days, weeks, months or years that we are privileged to live on this earth. *Life is using this opportunity, however long or short it may be, to be a force for good in the world.* If we hold back from pursuing that task, we may be breathing, we may be eating, we may be taking up space, but we're hardly *living* in the full sense of the word. As the rabbis say, good people live long beyond their deaths; sinners are already dead even in this world. (B.Berachot)

None of us, of course, is perfect. We're making mistakes, we're committing sins, right and left. The agenda of Yom Kippur is to point us in the right direction, to remind us to choose life, true life, and to encourage us to go there.

Maybe we don't need this. Maybe we don't need Yom Kippur any more than we need to lie down in a coffin.

I think that we need all the help we can get.

A few weeks ago, I read an interesting story in the paper which, coincidentally, was referenced this morning in the *Boston Globe*. Researchers investigated why people get lost in the woods. They took volunteers and plunked them down in a forest and directed them to try to reach a certain destination. (They didn't have GPS's or compasses with them.) What the researchers found is that most of the time, most people ended up looping back on themselves, often several times. Most people, even experienced hikers, ended up walking in circles. The researchers believe that it's something in the human brain that is unable to process the information necessary to keep us walking in the right direction.

*Only when there was some external beacon—like the sun or the moon—were the volunteers able to walk in a straight line, more or less. But on a cloudy day? No way. (See “Hiking Arorund in Circles? Probably, Researchers Say” by Henry Fountain, *New York Times*)*

That is why we need this day. We are inclined—all of us—to walk in circles. We loop back and make the same mistakes over and over again. We hurt the people we love the same way, again and again. We say the same (stupid) things, we push the same buttons, right? And we do this again and again. We need to ask ourselves: Where is our sun? Where is our moon?

We have a sun, and we have a moon—it's just that too often we don't look up. We need to remind ourselves of the beautiful, refined ethical system we call Judaism, with its passion for truth, kindness, sensitivity, fairness and caring. We need to remind ourselves that the Torah is the light that illumines our path and then follow it. That's what Yom Kippur is for. The liturgy lays it all out before us, with its repeated confessionals, its repeated invocations of the covenant, its repeated reminders that we're no different from anyone else, that *all* human beings are flawed, but that if we focus on turning in the right direction we can overcome whatever we did in the past.

It's true that Yom Kippur does come around every year. We might say—I can skip a year. I'll come back next year and go through this soul-searching then. But, as we all know, that may not be possible.

A few weeks ago, someone sent me a poem by Linda Ellis. You may find it sappy: I found it clarifying. The poem is entitled, “The Dash.” Here is an excerpt:

I read of a man who stood to speak
At the funeral of his friend
He referred to the dates on her tombstone
From the beginning...to the end.
He noted that first came the date of her birth
And spoke of the second with tears
But he said that what mattered most of all
Was **the dash between those years.**
For that dash represents all the time
That she spent alive on earth
And now only those who loved her
Know what that little line is worth.
For it matters not, how much we own
The cars, the house, the cash
What matters is how we live and love
And **how we spend our dash.**

...

We don't know what the future will bring. Given that, let's consider this day a gift, a precious opportunity to remind ourselves of both the brevity of life and of the enormous possibilities that lie before us—if only we choose to pursue them. Let's use the rites and rituals of Yom Kippur to go through that terrifying simulation and arrive cleansed and reborn on the other end.

So, my advice is: We don't need to go to Thailand. We can do what we need to do right here. And right now. Let's save ourselves the airfare and spend the day here together orienting ourselves and redirecting ourselves.

(Counting the words): Let's start over, together, here, now.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah! May all of us be inscribed and sealed in the book of life, health, joy and blessing.

Amen.