

This is the Day
Yom Kippur 2018
Rabbi Sarah Graff

Shana Tova.

It always inspires me to look out on Kol Nidre night and see all of you here, this room so full. There's just a feeling in the air that this is holy time.

I've been thinking a lot about time. How we make it holy, and how we don't. And how our lives are defined by not knowing how much time we get to live.

Yom Kippur comes to remind us, no matter what age we are, that one day we are going to die. It could be in 80 years, and it could be tomorrow. So we take this day to ask ourselves:

How do I want to live the days I am given?

There are so many things that fill up our days.
Work, chores, driving. Anger, regret, worry.
And then there are ... our screens.
Our computers, TVs, iPads, and, of course, our phones.

Our electronics enable us to do amazing things. To stay in touch with loved ones all over the world. To work from home. To work from our cars. To look at email or check a sports score or play a game, just about anywhere. The problem is ... we do. And those minutes, and hours, add up.

According to a Nielsen Company Audience Report, in 2015, adults spent, on average, 9 hours and 39 minutes/day on screens. Now maybe a fair amount of that time was work-related. What's disturbing though is that a year later, in 2016, the average was 10 hours and 39 minutes/day. A whole hour more, per day, in 1 year!

What about kids? According to the Center for Disease Control, kids 8-18 years old now spend, on average, an incredible 7 ½ hours in front of a screen, for entertainment, each day. This does not include time on a computer at school or doing homework. 7 ½ hours every day. You know how many full 24-hour days that adds up to, in a year? 114!

“Teach us to number our days” says the Psalmist, “that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” *“Limnot yameinu ken hoda.”*
We need to pray: *“Lichyot yameinu ken hoda.”* “Teach us to **live** our days,”

Whether your time disappears on screens or by other means, I think we all struggle to figure out how to make the most of our days. How to look back at the end of a day and feel like we did something that mattered.

A day is a long time though. More than enough time to do something meaningful and memorable.

Our tradition highlights this point from the very beginning, with the story of creation.

According to the Torah, God creates the world, not in hours, not in years, but in days. “Vayehi erev, vayehi voker, yom echad.” There was evening and there was morning, a first day. A second day. A third day.

And at the end of Creation, what is the first thing God makes holy? Not a place, not a thing, not a person. A day. Shabbat.

As Judaism evolved, the rabbis resisted the direction of Christianity to focus on the end of time, or reward and punishment in a world to come. They insisted we must focus on today.

(sing) Zeh hayom asah Adonai, nagila v’nismecha bo. We sing in Hallel: “This is the day that God has made, let us rejoice in it!”

So how do we live in this mindset? [How do we rejoice in every day?]
How do we make every day Zeh Hayom?

Judaism has many answers. Tonight I want to highlight three.
The first is gratitude.

Judaism commands us to start our day with gratitude. However we wake up - tired, grumpy, groggy - the first words we are supposed to say are “Thank You.” *Modeh ani lefanecha, melech chai v'kayam, shehechezarta bi nishmati b'chemla, rabbah emunatecha.* “Thank You, God, for returning my soul to me with compassion. Great is Your faithfulness.”

We begin the day with words, to summon up our gratitude. Thank You, God, for my working body - blood, breath, my eyes, my brain. Thank You, God, for my pure soul. Thank You for making me free. Thank You for providing for all my needs - shelter, food, safety, love. I would not think these thoughts on my own. It's the ritual of waking up and saying simple blessings, that helps me flip a switch in my brain, from “Ugh, what do I have to do today?” to “What do I get to do today?”

The challenge, of course, is to carry this attitude of gratitude all through the day. To notice the gifts that are in front of us, when we don't have a siddur in our hand, or a prescribed blessing to say.

In this arena, my daughter Eliana is my teacher.
As some of you may remember, when Eliana was about 7 years old, she started saying Best Thing Ever. Before taking her last bite of a dessert that she loved, or saying goodbye to a doll she wanted in a store, she would hold it one more time, and say: Best Thing Ever.

I've spoken about it before, and Eliana spoke about it at her bat mitzvah last May. But we were both amazed to discover, just a few weeks ago, a

journal she had kept in 2nd grade, of Best Thing Evers. It took some effort to read her 7-year-old creative spelling. Journal, for example, was spelled j-i-r-n-l. But the content came through. She gave me permission to share a bit of it now with you.

Best Thing Ever Jirnl

Running in the fields of the San Francisco Zoo.

Tasting the fruits and vegetables from the garden.

Digging for worms.

Playing gymnastics with Chava and Orli.

Loving my first summer olympics.

Licking popsicles in Bol Park.

Eating yogurt with Danielle.

Watching So You Think You Can Dance.

Rhyming words - boo hoo shoo moo foo too noo

Knowing how to spell all the names of the people in my class.

My family.

This page was then followed by a drawing of the 5 of us.

Then the next page had a drawing of a hot fudge sundae, spelled "Sunday."

I share this with you, really as an invitation to try it yourself. Perhaps to keep a gratitude journal of your own. Or if you want, to try Best Thing Ever. **To notice a moment of beauty, of joy, of connection, of deliciousness, and to call it out. Best Thing Ever.**

Scott and I do it. Chava and Orli do it. I feel it is one of the most Jewish and meaningful things we do. When I recognize the gift of a moment, whether with a traditional blessing or Best Thing Ever, that is when I feel I am living my day. That's when I can say Zeh Hayom. This is the day.

A second way that Judaism teaches us to live each day is by reaching outward, connecting with others.

The rabbis planted this message right at the beginning of our required morning prayers. Just before Birchot Hashachar, the blessings that I mentioned a few minutes ago, we are to say these words:

Hareni mekabelet alai mitzvat Haborei: V'ahavta l're'echa kamocho.
I hereby accept upon myself the commandment of my Creator: Love your neighbor as yourself.

We often think of this text from the Torah as a lesson about how to **treat** our neighbors. I read it though as a command to connect with our neighbors, with our fellow human beings wherever they are, and to be willing to see ourselves in them.

I have two people I want to lift up as examples of reaching beyond themselves and connecting. One is my brother. The other is a baseball player - Anthony Rizzo, first baseman on the Chicago Cubs. (Did you really think I'd forgotten the Cubs?)

Anthony Rizzo was drafted by the Boston Red Sox, right out of high school, at age 17. He had a bright future in front of him in major league baseball. And then, out of nowhere, at age 18, he was diagnosed with Hodgkins Lymphoma. He was shocked. His family was shocked. Everything they had pictured for his life changed in an instant. He went through 6 months of chemo, another 6 months of recovery, and, amazingly, he returned to baseball. He worked his way up through the minors in Boston and San Diego. And then, in 2012, Theo Epstein, the very guy who had drafted him for Boston five years earlier, sought him out to be a lead player in the rebuilding of the Chicago Cubs.

Why did Epstein seek out Rizzo? He knew Rizzo was a fighter, a survivor, a guy with some perspective on life. But there was also another reason, and Epstein has been explicit about it. He was looking for a role model (for

the team) of someone who cared about others. Rizzo is very much that person.

When Rizzo returned from cancer treatment, he created a foundation to support cancer research and to support kids and families going through treatment. And, he started visiting kids, kids with cancer, every week. Can you imagine being a kid stuck in a hospital, getting chemo, and then Anthony Rizzo, World Series Champion, shows up, in his uniform, offering to play cards or share chemo stories, before heading over to Wrigley Field? We actually know a little girl in Chicago that Rizzo visited in the hospital, and it meant the world to her, and to her family. There was no media there. It was just a guy who gets it, trying to reach out beyond himself. V'ahavta l're'echa kamocho. Love your fellow human being as you love yourself.

My second story is of a different kind of reaching out. My brother Noah didn't set out to help others in this experiment. He simply felt he wanted to make his days more interesting. So he decided to try to meet one new person every day, and talk with them. It had to be someone he had never talked to before. And the idea was, he would talk with them; get their name; if possible, get a selfie photo with them; and later, write down his reflections on the encounter.

He started this on May 19. Today is day 124, and he hasn't missed a day yet. How, you might ask, does he find a new person to talk to every day? Well, it helps that he talks to quite a few people through his work. But that only accounts for some of the conversations. He'll go into Starbucks and talk to the barrista. Or go for a walk and look for a homeless person to talk to. On a few occasions, he's resorted to calling Customer Service late at night and getting to know the person in the call center, on the other end of the line. "It makes it more special when I have to work for it," he says.

My kids are trying to make sense of this quest of Uncle Noah's. "Why are you doing this?" They asked, after going along on one of his Starbucks

expeditions. “It makes me more active in my day,” he explained. “It’s so easy just to go to work, come home, watch TV, or do your activity, but never really stop and pay attention. Often all it takes is 5 minutes, but it changes my day, and maybe it changes someone else’s day too.”

Since then, my girls and I have been experimenting with the idea of 5 minutes. We each brainstormed what we would do, if we were going to take 5 minutes every day to be more of the person we want to be. Eliana said she’d go outside in the grass and dance. Chava said she’d breathe, and eat cookies. To my surprise, Orli, who’s not usually the spiritual one, said she’d say Shema and V’ahavta, and think about what she’s thankful for. And for several days, she actually did it.

I’ve been taking 5 minutes to call someone - who’s sick, or who I haven’t talked to in a long time. Or, just to consciously listen. To Scott. To my kids. To whoever comes my way on a given day. To look up from my phone in the grocery line and maybe have a conversation with the person at the register.

Maybe there’s political action you want to take with 5 minutes. Maybe there’s tzedaka you want to give. Maybe you’re ready to dedicate an hour a day. The idea I want to propose, in the spirit of my brother, in the spirit of Anthony Rizzo, in the spirit of Judaism, is to commit to some act of reaching out every day. Some act of V’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho, of loving our neighbor, everyday.

Zeh Hayom. This is the day that God has made. Let us reach out and live in it.

Finally, the third element to practice every day. Forgiveness.

The other day, I was talking with Bruce Feldstein, our fellow congregant and beloved Jewish chaplain at Stanford Hospital. He told me a poignant

story that gets right to the heart of what we can do in 5 minutes. He was called in to a hospital room to do the vidui, the deathbed confessional, with a man named Max. The pain from Max's cancer had become unbearable and his family had gathered around to say goodbye, before Max took the morphine that would put him into a deep sleep from which he likely would not wake up.

When Bruce got to the room, Max had just taken the morphine, and he had literally 5 minutes left to speak. Bruce asked Max and his family if there were any words they wanted to say - words of gratitude, or regret, wishes or blessings.

Apparently Max and his wife had bickered a lot in their marriage. With 5 minutes left, Max turns to his wife and says, "All those fights, all that stuff, it doesn't matter. I love you. I've always loved you." And Max's wife says the same. "I'm sorry too. I forgive you too. I love you too." The two of them hold each other, crying. Then, one minute remaining, Max turns to his grandson and says, "You know, you don't have to wait for a moment like this to tell someone you love them and forgive them."

And then, he closed his eyes.

This is Judaism's message too.

2000 years ago, Rabbi Eliezer taught his students, "Repent one day before your death." His students asked him, "How one can know the day of one's death?" Rabbi Eliezer answered, "All the more reason to repent today. You don't know if you'll die tomorrow."

Zeh Hayom. This is the day - to apologize, to forgive, to reach out and say the words you want to say. Not, this day [because it's] Yom Kippur. This day - every day. Zeh Hayom.

I want to conclude with one last story.

It's actually from a movie that Scott saw on an airplane and then insisted I watch before writing this sermon. It's called "About Time."

I apologize if I'm spoiling the movie for you. It is 5 years old though.

The story is of a likeable guy named Tim, who, at age 21, learns from his father that the men in their family can travel back in time. They can't change history or become someone else. And they can't go into the future. But they can go back in their own life, to any day of their choosing, and live it differently. Tim's initial goal with his time travel is to get a girlfriend. And he manages to fall in love, get married, and have two children. Eventually he discovers though that time travel can't fix everything.

His father then gives him his advice for how to use their unusual gift.

"Part 1," he says, "Just get on with ordinary life. Live it day by day like anyone else." The movie then flashes to a montage of a day, music playing in the background. We see Tim at his law office - very serious with his colleagues. In court - rather tense with his client. On the subway - annoyed by the person sitting next to him. In a coffee shop - looking at his phone, indifferent to the woman serving him coffee.

Then there is Part 2 of the advice. "Live each day again, almost exactly the same. But this time, let go of all those tensions and worries that stopped you the first time from noticing how sweet life can be." Now we see montage #2. In the office - joking, laughing with his colleagues. In court - hugging his client. On the Subway - enjoying the music of the person sitting next to him. In the coffee shop - noticing the smile of the woman serving him coffee, and smiling back.

This is the end of his father's advice. But Tim has a further lesson that he learns on his own.

He eventually realizes he doesn't need to travel back in time. None of us do. We just need to live each day **as though** we already have. To live

each day as though this one day, out of all the days, is the one that we've chosen to come back to, to enjoy.

This day. Zeh Hayom.

Imagine **this** day, is the day you chose to come back to. To live with gratitude. To reach out beyond yourself and connect. To forgive with love.

Zeh Hayom asah Adonai.

This is the day that God has made. Let us fill it with Best Thing Evers.

Shana Tova

