

## Yizkor 5784

### The Sermon I Want to Give Before It's Too Late

An older rabbi gathered a group of friends, some old and some new. At the tail end of his career, he was blessed to have spent over 30 years with the same wonderful congregation. Now, he was gathering this group of friends to ask a question. Because this Yom Kippur would be the last sermon he would ever give.

His friends Dan and Amy had high school students now entering college. Jackie and Diane were a middle-aged couple whose kids had grown up with his; now, with their own grandchildren. And then there was Shirley, an older widow in the congregation, who had been with him since the start.

Bottle of red. Then a bottle of white. And then, after a few glasses, the question for which the rabbi had called them all together: With only one sermon left to give, what sermon did they wish they could've heard many years ago, that might have changed the course of their lives for the better?

What sermon, asked the rabbi, could he give not for them, but for someone else sitting there that morning? No inhibitions. No remorse. What sermon should he give, before it was too late?

Dan and Amy, our younger couple, spoke first. "Rabbi," said Amy, because let's get real...in this relationship, Amy always spoke first, "our kids are about to go off to college. *Uf Gozal*. They are about to fly the coupe.

But Rabbi, you will remember that it felt like only yesterday that we were a young couple with babies at home. And the shame of it all is that we were so busy worrying about the stress of parenting to realize time was slowly slipping away. James Taylor once sang that the secret of life is to enjoy the passage of time. Well, Rabbi, I must confess to you that throughout our years of parenthood, I don't think we enjoyed the passage of time at all. We rushed it. And now, we feel so frustrated that no one ever told us to stop and live in the moment.

Rabbi, a friend in our congregation once told me that by the time your child turns 18, you will have spent 90% of the time you will ever spend with them. And then, it's gone. And that is surely what happened to us.

Rabbi, here is how we spent our 90%: we spent our time wondering about whether to get our child tested for attention deficit, only to realize that it was we as parents who had attention deficit when it came to giving our children what they truly needed: our presence. We got so angry at their over technology use that we failed to see how much time we spent retreating into technology ourselves: they were only following our example. Rabbi, we spent so much time frustrated about who didn't invite our children to a bar mitzvah and family drama that we became bitter, and missed the beautiful moment our child was on the bimah.

And so, rabbi, although it is too late for us, I would ask that you please give that sermon before it is too late for someone else. You once spoke about time as the one commodity that we always run out of before we are ready. Remind parents that it felt like only yesterday that my child ran into our bed at 6 AM to wake us up. And we were furious. On a Sunday. Seriously? Now, those days are gone, and soon our children won't be running into our bed, but someone else's at college. I know they won't want to hear it, rabbi, parenting is hard: but Rabbi, if you give that sermon, you will change someone's life before it is too late."

The rabbi nodded. He thanked Dan and Amy, although he was confident that they had been just a little hard on themselves, as they were doing the best they could.

The rabbi then turned to his second set of dear friends, Jackie and Diane. Jackie and Diane were long time members of the shul, not particularly regular attendees, but had deep ties and close friends in the community that kept them close.

"Rabbi," they said. "Our children are now grown. And as we watch them make choices for their family about their Judaism, we continue to struggle. We imagined what our kids would grow up to be, we see who they have become, and we can't escape the feeling that we have run out of time to make a difference.

Rabbi, we gave the world to our kids. But now, as grown adults, we realize so much of what they really needed was not out there, but in here: not the world, but right here at home. We spent time giving them the magic of Disney, but never the magic of Shabbat. We gave them the freedom of choice that came from living in America, but never taught them the limitations of freedom they would have learned had we kept Pesach. We gave them the mountains of North Georgia, but we failed to instill in them the mountains of Sinai.

Rabbi, you know that the two of us have built a good life together. We love our children. But Rabbi, it kills us that when we are gone, we don't know if they will carry on. We really thought they would just figure it out like we did. We logged countless hours in the car schlepping from baseball practice to Hebrew school. Only now do we realize what we missed: We knew they were learning the aleph-bet from their teachers. We forgot what was most important was the Aleph-Bet that they never learned from us.

Rabbi, that's the hard sermon we want you to give. We remember so clearly when you quoted the Kotzker Rebbe one Shabbat, who said 'that if you want your children to study Torah that you need to do it with them.' Remind them that Shabbat and Purim and Simchat Torah are not kids' programs, but Torah to be experienced together. Rabbi, before they know it, time will run out, and the opportunity for parents to bring their kids the magic of Judaism will be gone. Rabbi, please share that sermon before it's too late."

The rabbi nodded, seeing the pain, but also the sense of catharsis in their eyes. He wished he had the courage to give that sermon when he had been a younger man, but he didn't want to risk offending his community.

That's when lastly, the rabbi turned to Shirley, a widow in his congregation. Wise, kind, and thoughtful. She said "you know rabbi, I want to tell you that life in your 80s can be great. They are now even calling it your Golden Years. I believe that can be true. So long as you have your health. And your spouse. And your grandchildren look up from their phones every once in a while, for just a moment to acknowledge you exist. These years can be golden."

"Rabbi," Shirley said, "for a while, I was given the blessing of these golden years. My family took cruises and celebrated Bnei mitzvah and weddings. But then, with a shock to my kishkes, without anyone telling me, my time began to run out.

Rabbi, never let anyone tell you that there will come a moment, and none of us knows when it will be for us, when your life will change in an instant. There is a Yiddish proverb that remarks that time cannot be recalled, even if it only happened yesterday. One day it was my golden year. The next day, the doctor's office. And another. You remember, rabbi: my dear Harry got sick and died. Caring for him during his illness aged me. And so, it is only now that I realize what I didn't do in my midlife years was look in the mirror and see the opportunity that life presented right in front of my face.

Rabbi, you once gave that sermon about pictures. You told us to spend our whole lives filling up our walls with them, because there would be a day when it would be too late to take new ones. At the time, I didn't give it much thought. But now, I look at the pictures on my shelf and I see who is missing. With so little time I feel that it is all that I have left. Priceless memories in photos. You may have noticed, rabbi, that I spend a lot more time in shul than I used to. I don't understand the Hebrew. But I love it because it gives me a quiet place to reflect. It's hard for me to get to synagogue now. I realize that soon it will become my turn, my body will stop working the way that it should. It's painful to think that soon it will be over. And still, I can't figure out where it went, even when it all feels like it happened only yesterday.

And so, rabbi, would you give that sermon, before it is too late?

I know they won't want to hear it. But can you remind people wherever they are in life, to enjoy the days they have. Even the bad ones. To take lots of pictures, and videos, because those memories will keep you warm in your old age."

The now older rabbi, let's call him Rabbi Dorsch, listened attentively to their stories. He nodded. Then, he watched the tears flow from his dearest friends. There were tears of regret. Tears of sadness. And tears that all mourned the loss of time. With the inescapable feeling that somehow it was too late.

And so, only after they had a good cry, as Yom Kippur approached, Rabbi Dorsch concluded their evening together with a story of hope.

The story he told was one of a man who needed to fix his shoes. And so, he went to a cobbler around sunset. He opened the door, and saw the cobbler hard at work inside, with a candle burning brightly behind. The man asked the cobbler, "is it too late to give you my shoes to

fix?" The cobbler looked at the man and said, "Of course not sir, it is never too late. So long as this candle continues to burn, there will always be time to repair that which is broken."

Thus, Rabbi Dorsch the elder looked at his friends and gave them one final private sermon. "My friends," he said, "time may have passed: A sermon you may say, too late to make a difference.

But I see that there is a candle that continues to burn bright in each of you. So long as your fire burns in this world, this last Yom Kippur, you can still make a tikkun, and fix that which is broken.

Because my friends, there is no such thing as a sermon that is given too late. Not as long as the candle in each of you continues to burn. Not so long as there are good people like you who are always willing to listen, it will never be too late."

***Rabbi Daniel Dorsch***