

Don't Wait

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Yom Kippur Morning, 5780

Rabbi Jeff Marx, The Santa Monica Synagogue

There's an art to bidding on Ebay. For years, as some of you may know, I've been bidding on turn-of-the-century cream cheese boxes. Now, when bidding on Ebay, you don't want to rush in too soon and tip your hand that a particular box is a rare one and is worth at least \$10 more than the asking price. So, a few weeks ago, up comes, in all my years of collecting, a box that I don't have. I set my alarm on the computer to go off five minutes before the end of the auction; I go to the site and get ready. I watch the clock tick down until, literally, the last minute, and then: my cell phone rings. I pick it up, tell the caller to hold on, just a second, I have one more thing to do and I'll be right with them, turn back to the screen, and see to my horror, that the clock has run out. The bidding is over! I waited too long and missed the chance of a lifetime to purchase that precious cream cheese box.

We all wait too long. We wait too long to do the things we should; to say the things we should. And we do so, because we think we have all the time in the world. But we don't. "Time is on my side, yes it is," sang Mick Jaeger. No, it's not. Each one of us, it turns out, has an allotted amount of time. One day, the last grain of sand will run out, the last heartbeat will sound, the last breath will be taken and we will have no more time. Whether we are ready or not, one day our life will come to an end. There will be no more days, no more hours; not even minutes. All the things that we collected, all the pictures that we took, will go to others. Our voice, our laugh, that unique look in our eye, will become part of someone else's memory. And while all our pains, frustrations, and resentments will be no more; our plans for the future; our hopes and dreams, the savoring of our accomplishments, the wisdom that came through our failures, will come to an end, as well. Our allotted time will have run out.

And none of us know our expiration date. Will we, tragically, die young before we have a chance to make our way in the world or in the midst of raising a family? Will we die before we enjoy the years of retirement for which we were planning? Will we die before we see our children's children?

We don't have the power to know when our own grains of sand, each one representing a day of our life, will run out, whether it will be sooner or later. Nor do we know how we will die. Will it be suddenly, unexpectedly? Will it come after a period of short decline or a long period of illness? That's what the U'netana Tokef prayer that we recited this morning reminds us: In the year ahead, time is going to run out for some of us who are sitting here, right now, in this room. We cannot foretell how we will die, and when we will die.

But, in spite of this, we behave as if we have all the time in the world; we ignore the grains of sand falling through the glass. "We wait too long to do what must be done today, in a world that gives us only one day at a time, without any assurance of tomorrow. We procrastinate, we wait as though we had an endless supply of time" (Sidney Greenberg).

We wait too long to start taking care of our mortal, aging bodies; to start exercising, stretching, to lose a few pounds or a shed a large amount of weight. "Soon," we say, "I'll do it." "Soon, I'll think about giving up carbs, second helpings, going for a walk in the evening." "Soon I'll think about going for a long-overdue checkup." We wait too long to stop drinking or secret pill taking.

We wait too long to fill our short lives with pleasure; to visit new places, to see new sites, and have new experiences. Just a few years ago, I realized that in all the eulogies I had given over the years, when I shared how a beloved parent or grandparent so enjoyed traveling and seeing the world, that most of them were in their 60s and 70s when they did so. I realized then, that now, at this point in my life, was the time to go and visit the places that were on my list to see “one day.” “One day,” I realized, had arrived.

My eighty-six year-old mother-in-law, following the death of her husband, has in these last few years, traveled to over two dozen cities, ridden a wave-runner in the ocean, been pulled by a ski boat as she sat in a paraglider, steered a Segueway through city streets, rode on air currents in a glider. All these, for the first time. She’s not waiting and neither should we. So I say to you this morning: don’t wait to do what’s most important in your life! Don’t wait to fulfill the things stirring in your heart. Don’t wait to learn something new, take on a new project, learn a new skill.

There are those in our congregation sitting here, right now, whom, if I called on them, would stand up from their seats and say to you: “Don’t wait!” Those who suddenly found out that the lump they had was cancerous, those who suddenly have developed imbalance or vertigo or shortness of breath. “Don’t wait,” they would say to you, “to do the things you always wanted to do.” Don’t wait to try your hand at the book or the script or the song that you always wanted to write. Don’t wait to learn how to make a pie crust or your own pasta, or grow vegetables or learn to paint or sculpt or dance.

Yet, there is much that detains us. Our ego gets in the way, laziness blocks us, sheer inertia and habit thwarts us; fear of failure prevents us. There is a great rabbinic story, that as soon as soon as the Israelites fled Egypt, they found themselves trapped between the Red Sea in front of them and behind them, the Egyptian chariots thundering down the hills. They cried out to Moses: “What have you done to us?!” Moses, in turn, cried out to God, and God replied: “Why are you wasting your time crying out to Me and being stuck where you are? Tell the Israelites to go forward, to get moving, and you, Moses, do something with that rod in your hand. Lift it up and split the waters.” Don’t wait. Don’t let our excuses paralyze us from moving forward with life.

Do you know what are the saddest words I’ve ever heard? They have come from those who are seriously ill or are near their last breath, and they have said to me: “Rabbi, I wish I had” Let us not on our death bed be filled with a list of what we wished we had done. Do it now. Because time will run out. Yes, there’s always more to do but at least let our glass be filled well over half-way with the things that we did, with the life we enjoyed.

As important as it is not to wait to embrace the gifts that life has to offer, as important as it is to fulfill our unique potential, it is also as important not be late in the lives of others. The Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, told the story that when he was a child, he heard, on Rosh Hashana morning, the terrible story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son. The knife was in Abraham’s hand, and as he prepared to swing it down the angel called out, with perhaps one-half second to spare: “Abraham! Abraham!” Heschel ran to his grandfather after hearing this story, and he said: “Zayde: What would have happened if the angel was too late?” And his grandfather replied that it is the nature of angels that they are never late. But then, his grandfather paused, and softly said: “But humans, humans are often late.”

Too often are we late in the lives of others. We wait too long to apologize, to say that we are sorry. We wait too long to forgive. We wait too long to reconcile. We wait too long to say the words of appreciation that we should. We wait too long – and time is running out – to get

together with friends, to say thank you to those with whom we work, to praise another, to express our gratitude to those who have helped, guided, sustained, and uplifted us.

We wait too long to express our love to those we love and to resolve our issues with them. A few months ago, I related to a friend, over lunch, a difficult time I was having with one of my children. And my friend, a little older and a little wiser than me, reached over, and, in essence, grabbed me, and vehemently said: “Don’t wait! Call them. Call them now. Don’t wait.” Those words shook me to my core. And so, I called, I didn’t wait, and I shared with my child, the words I needed to share.

Don’t wait. Don’t wait to spend real time with your children, being parents to them, for the years fly swiftly. Don’t wait to tell your children that you love them and how proud you are of them. Don’t wait to tell your loved ones that you love them, how important they are to you, and what a difference they have made in your life.

And don’t wait to make a difference in the lives of our community, our nation, and this planet. Don’t wait to help others, procrastinating until the opportunity is lost. Don’t wait to show kindness; to check in on the sick, to comfort those who mourn by visiting, calling, or sending a note. Don’t wait to offer hope to those who are cast down or troubled. Don’t wait to give your love to the person standing at the corner by the light. Don’t wait to send back the solicitation you receive with a check to help alleviate hunger or research cures for disease. Don’t wait when a disaster strikes to go on-line and make a donation. Don’t wait to help clean up the environment. Don’t wait to get involved in electing our officials. Don’t wait to work for peace.

Don’t wait! Don’t wait until it is too late, until time runs out, until the chance to make a difference has past. That’s the meaning of our Neilah service at the end of Yom Kippur. Neilah, which means, “the closing of the gates.” Not all opportunities stay open before us. There is not all the time in the world ahead of us. As our reading for Yom Kippur says: one by one, the gates close before us or behind us, until they are all closed and our life is over.

May, in this new year ahead, we keep before us the sobering reminder that time is running out; may we respond to the needs of others around us, may we enjoy while we can, the pleasures of this world. May we step forward, may we embrace, now, all that life has to offer.