

*South Main – Yom Kippur Morning
September 30, 2017 – 10 Tishrei 5778
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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Friends of many years, congregants who I wish to know even better, this has truly been a season of reflection. At the end of July I suffered a stroke---just days before my family of 8 adults and 7 children between the ages of 7 and 10, was preparing to travel to Israel---which we did.

Suddenly ---this past summer---- I faced my mortality, encountered my vulnerability and became aware of the transitory nature of my life--- or perhaps, I should say our lives.

How quickly the mellow green of spring leaves evolves into the fragile brown leaves of fall.

Thus, on this Yom Kippur, I would like to share thoughts on time---thoughts that affect us no matter what our age--- whether 9 or 90. And although you may have heard certain stories before, I believe they are worth repeating.

They begin with Mr. Martin.

Mr. Martin was a peddler on S. Main Ave in Albany, New York and one day, more than 50 years ago, he sold time.

Here is the story.

Every spring Mr. Martin, a burlap bag slung over one shoulder, would knock on doors in Albany and collect items that no one wanted: a chipped china plate, a Shetland sweater with moth holes, a child's red fire engine missing the front wheels.

My father had heard of Mr. Martin but had never met him, until on a day replete with forsythia and pussy willows, Dad came home early from the temple where he was rabbi. And on S. Main Ave. he passed a squat man with wisps of white hair and a twinkle in his eye. A stranger in the area. For whatever the reason, call it intuition, my father asked: "By any chance are you Mr. Martin?" When the man nodded my father replied, "My wife speaks of you. Could I see what you have collected today?"

Mr. Martin dumped his bag onto our next door neighbor Rev. Klee's front lawn. [S. Main Ave. was a very clerical street!] My father scanned the non-collectible collectibles and spotted a gold Elgin watch, the kind that dangles from a watch fob.

"Sir," my father said, "that is a wonderful watch. I would like to buy it."

Mr. Martin hesitated. "Well, I was going to keep it for myself but you can have it for \$3."

So my father bought the watch, continued home and said to my mother, "Dear, I finally met Mr. Martin and look what I bought", and he showed her the watch.

My mother laughed. "Sam, that was your watch. I gave it to Mr. Martin because you kept it under a pile of shirts and never wore it. Sam, you bought your own watch!"

My father also laughed, then said to my mother, "Dear, you can give away anything I have, but never, never give away time."

My father, Samuel Wolk, died a year later at the age of 58 .

Nothing is more precious than the time we are granted. When we are young we believe we will live forever, but life is fragile. Never waste or give away time.

In the cartoon "Peanuts", Lucy encounters Charlie Brown. With irritation in her voice she says "Charlie, you sit around and do nothing. What a waste of a life. How long do you think you will live?"

Charlie, leaning against a tree, replies, "Don't worry, Lucy, God put me on this earth to do many things. So far I haven't done any so I will probably live forever."

But we don't live forever. And time passes by so quickly. So quickly.

The words of Crowfoot, Orator of the Blackfoot nation:

What is life?

It is the flash of a firefly in the night.

It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.

It is the shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Some years ago I noticed a poster on the side of a building. It read: "This life is a test. It is only a test. If it had been an actual life you would have received further instructions on where to go and what to do."

But this life is not a test. It is all we have. To live richly.

Never give away time.

So how should we live our lives?

While in Israel this summer I visited the Western Wall. Masses of people were standing in front of the huge stones that comprise the last wall of what was the Temple Mount. There were men in pink and green T-shirts and Hasidic Jews with long side curls in the midst of prayer. As is the tradition, out-stretched arms placed a

note in the crack between the walls. Written on a small slip of paper they were supplications asking God to answer their needs.

Each one of our family wrote a note and inserted that note in the Western Wall---- with one exception: Sarah, our granddaughter age 9. When asked why she did not want to write a note and make a request she replied, "Why should I? I have a really happy life."

Never give away time but, equally as important, realize all that is good in your life instead of dwelling on what we do not have. Too often we live with only our regrets instead of giving thanks for all the gifts we possess.

Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook and author, lost her young husband while they were vacationing in Mexico. At the end of the period of shloshim, the first thirty days of mourning she wrote:

"A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one line prayer she ever read is---- Let me not die while I am still alive."

The Reverend William Sloane Coffin expressed this thought in a slightly different way: "Clearly, the trick in life is to die young as late as possible"

There is always an option B, a way to live your life fully no matter what the circumstances. "Let me not die while I am still alive."

Make each day a blessed day.

Treasure memories but don't dwell in memory. Anticipate the future, but live for today. And if today does not turn out as you may wish, if option A is not to be yours, then Sandberg says choose option B and by adjusting your perspective appreciate that which is available.

In Samuel Beckett's classic *Waiting For Godot* the characters Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for an undefined character named Godot. After many hours spent waiting Estragon says to Vladimir,

"Let's go"

Vladimir replies, "We can't"

Estragon asks : "Why not?"

Vladimir : " We're waiting for Godot"

And Estragon, with a deep sigh: "Ah, yes. We're waiting for Godot."

And so they wait and wait and wait and then never get on with their lives. To remain rooted to one spot, waiting and waiting to go forward into the unknown future, leads nowhere and only gives away time.

No one can design another's life. We cannot tell children how they should live. We cannot tell a partner or friend how to live. We can only tell ourselves. Thus we follow the teaching of Hillel who taught:

"If I am not for myself who will be?
If I am for myself alone what am I?
If not now when?"

Do that which fulfills you but, at the same time, touch others, for we are not alone in our world and our life is not measured by our number of years but how we lived those years.

On a recent trip to Rome I viewed the sculpture of Moses fashioned by Michelangelo and commissioned in the 16th century by Pope Julius. The statue stands recessed in deep shadows in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli. Because of the darkness around the statue it is not easily seen and crowds gather in semi darkness. Joining the visitors I noticed off to the side a metal coin box. I inserted a coin and suddenly Moses shone in full brilliance, to the delight of those around me. But after 30 seconds the light went out. I inserted another coin, and another. Over and over Moses shone for 30 seconds then disappeared into the darkness.

Then it was time to leave and a despondent group of visitors watched me depart. No more coins. No more light. No more Moses!

As my parting words I was tempted to say: "Drop your own coins in the box. I can't continue to light up the statue of Moses." But I was quiet.

No one can light up our life for us. We need to illumine our own world and the world around us. 3000 years ago the real Moses, in his final words, spoke to the children of Israel on a mountain called Nebo and this is what he said: "I set before you this day life-and-death, choose life that you may live." May each one of us choose the light of life--- For 30 seconds, then over and over again. Choose life in all its fullness.

Mr. Martin was only a peddler. He went from house to house on S. Main Ave. in Albany New York more than half a century ago. And one day, a spring day, he was given a watch. My father's watch. To be more precise, he thought he had been given time.

Over the years, and especially this past year, I learned that time is only lent to us. I have also learned that we should never squander the time bequeathed to us.

So, as you enter a New Year, please, whatever you do, never give away time. Cling tightly to this blessing. Use your years well. Never let them go.