The Life of the Present
Yom Kippur Yizkor, 5783

When I have been called upon to explain the meaning and customs of Yom Kippur to people who have never before experienced the holiday, they are often taken aback by the strictness of the practices that make up the Day of Atonement. No food *at all*?! No bathing?! It seems like everything we normally consider a “basic need” is off the table for twenty-five hours.

But the thing I most appreciate about this holiday is the way that the careful, intricate spiritual framework of ritual and *minhag* (custom) supports us. For this one day every year, we give up all the trappings of our daily life: cooking our food, cleansing our bodies, doing our work, all of those material needs which not only occupy our time, but take up space in our minds. How often have you felt the buzzing of a million different thoughts, the endless to-do lists, filling your mind without really the chance to grab onto or hold any one of them.

On this day, however, we are asked to set it all aside. We are invited to gather together, not to do or to accomplish anything, but rather simply to be and to focus on the inner work which too often is overshadowed by our

busy lives. I have long appreciated the almost meditative quality of these services, the repeated nusach and tunes, the familiar words highlighted by singular melodies, that allow me to simply be here and to be present with myself, to assess where I am today, to understand completely who I want to be in this world, and to imagine a path toward living as that fully realized version of myself in the year ahead.

As I was preparing my mind for today over the last many months, I saw two separate articles that struck a chord with me because they tapped into the need for being consciously present in our lives. They were both published in the *New York Times* within a week of each other, and were written by different authors with very different experiences, yet both spoke powerfully about the ways in which our experiences in the world can and should push us to be more mindful about how we spend our time each and every day.

The first article, called “Every Moment Can’t Be a 10 Out of 10,” was written by Sarah Wildman, a staff editor & writer on the Opinion page. In it, Wildman details, in sometimes agonizing specifics, the experience of being a mother to a teenager who has gone through multiple surgeries and treatments for brain and liver cancer.

Though harrowing, her main takeaway was that these trials forced her to reorganize her life, and the life of her family, around a practice of radical presentness. Ordinary wins, like heading to school, getting to go on a field trip, sitting quietly with a friend, became sacred occasions, worthy of both noting and celebrating. No longer was planning for next week, or next year, the driving force in their lives, but simply savoring any win they could get, because they could never know when a new health scare or a trip to the hospital might overwhelm their day and their minds. She talks about how a day that might realistically be a three or four out of ten might feel like a cause for rejoicing after a string of days that might have been worse than they had previously thought possible. But even so, being present helped them as a family deal with each issue, process their pain, sort out their own emotions and needs, and have faith that better days would come, just as they had in the past.

The second article, also from the *New York Times* back in September was authored by The Rev. Tish Harrison Warren, an ordained Anglican Priest. It was entitled, “Our Memory Is Flawed. Fortunately, God’s Isn’t,” and it details her struggles caring for her mother with dementia. While there were

many trials for the author, the hardest thing, she writes, was that they would have an amazing day together where her mom would be lively and excited, but not be able to recall the experience or her daughter's presence a day, or sometimes just an hour, later.

While initially she found these repeated experiences heartbreaking, like an erasure of something wonderful and pure that they had shared together, Warren ultimately comes to understand that those moments still have meaning and value because she cherished them, even if her mother could not carry their memory forward. And with that realization, the she simultaneously uncovers a profound truth that each of us live with in our own ways, as she explains:

> *The nets of memory are all riddled with holes, and most of our days will pass right through them. But though they won't be caught, those days will still be lived. They still matter. What my mom reminds me of amid all her forgotten moments is that the only moment we can catch is the one we are in right now. But this moment, however grievous or joyful or ordinary, comes with an invitation to notice it.*

That gracious invitation to notice our present moment is always available to us. Right here, as we are gathered together, connecting with ancient words amid the opening days of the brand new year of 5783, we have the chance to stop, to notice all that we are thinking and feeling, and to allow ourselves to notice, and maybe to appreciate, this moment.

The idea that being present is a critical spiritual practice is in fact nothing new in Jewish tradition. What, in essence, are our formalized, scripted, and time-bound words of prayer but opportunities to pause, notice, and sanctify the moment in which we currently reside? Whether we are lighting candles to start Shabbat or blessing our meal or saying Shehechiyanu over the naming of a child, our Tradition pushes us to infuse as many moments as possible with sacred intention and focus.

There is even a name for this intensity of spiritual presentness that our rabbis and teacher have, for generations, encouraged us to cultivate: כוונה (*kavannah*). In fact, the Mishnah, in Tractate Brachot (5:1), adjures us:

אֵין עוֹמְדִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל אֶלָּא מִתּוֹךְ כֹּבֶד רֹאשׁ. חֲסִידִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ שׁוֹהִים שָׁעָה אַחַת וּמִתְפַּלְּלִים, כְּדֵי ***שֶׁיְּכַוְּנוּ*** אֶת לִבָּם לַמָּקוֹם.

[One] should not stand up to pray unless they are in a serious frame of mind. The original pious ones used to wait/meditate one hour and then pray, in order to focus the intention of their hearts towards the Omnipresent.

The Babylonian Talmud (Brachot 13a), commenting on this practice reaffirms the necessity to have mindful intention in one's spiritual life:

We learned in the mishna that one must focus their heart while reading the portion of Shema from the Torah in order to fulfill their obligation. From here, the Gemara seeks to conclude: ***Learn from this that all mitzvot require focused intent****; when one performs a mitzvah, they must intend to fulfill their obligation. If they lack that intention, they do not fulfill their obligation.*

What an incredibly bold statement! For all of the effort our rabbis spend on categorizing the mitzvot and waxing poetic about their practical and spiritual importance, they also state outright that simply acting in the world, even acting in wonderful, helpful, and powerful ways can be measurably incomplete if not done thoughtfully, with intention and focus, and with a connection to some greater part of your own mind and soul. So much

emphasis was placed on keeping our mind focused on the spiritual tasks at hand throughout our days that the great sage Rabbi Isaac Luria, founder of Jewish mysticism, said that, "*kavanah* is like wings upon which prayer soars heavenward and is accepted…the moment one succeeds in having *kavanah*, they open the gate for all of their prayers to ascend."[1]

But how are we to remain present in a world that drags our attention away? One answer might be found here today: simply be. Take the time to clear your mind of the clutter of daily tasks, regrets, self-recriminations, and worries. Accept and note however you are at this moment.

Maybe you are deeply enjoying services so far; I certainly hope you are.

Maybe you are thinking about the work you still have left to do this week. It's ok for outside thoughts to spring up. Just accept that you are here now, and not at work, and that your work can, and will, wait for you until this moment is over.

[1] Peninei Halakhah, Prayer 1:8, "Fundamentals of the Laws of Prayer / Kavanah and Those Who Find It Difficult to Concentrate"

Maybe you have aches or pains. Maybe you are sad or lonely. Maybe you are feeling lost. It is important, as we gather here today, for you to realize that even so, you are not in this on your own, nor are you the only one to ever feel this way.

Even Moshe Rabbeinu, our great teacher and a Torah hero, leader of the Jewish People from slavery to a land of their own, was not immune to feeling overwhelmed, out of place, or alone. There are numerous passages throughout the narrative of the Torah when he finds himself at odds with the people, struggling with his leadership, or just exhausted. Rather than looking at him as a flawed and unhelpful example of spiritual leadership, however, our tradition holds him up as a model.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater, in his book *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice*, explains that through the lived example of Moses, he teaches us that it is not only, or even primarily, our successes that define a meaningful life, but how we choose to make meaning of it every day:

> *No one can expect to attain the promised land in [their] lifetime. That seems to be the message of the Torah. Life is a long journey that*

> *ultimately is completed only in death. The goal of the journey, the final fulfillment of aspiration, may never be achieved. Therefore, if satisfaction is to come in life, it must be in the course of living, in the choosing of life.*

By “the choosing of life” here, Rabbi Slater is referring to the active, conscious, daily effort to squeeze as much meaning as possible out of every moment. We cannot always succeed, but the mere effort of trying to be more attuned to what is actually happening in our daily lives can provide surprising and beautiful moments that we would otherwise miss.

“Life is a long journey that ultimately is completed only in death.” What if we were less concerned about the end of the race, and more concerned with how we took each step? What if we stopped castigating ourselves for how we stumbled and fell, and instead took heart in how we stood again and moved forward in better ways? What if the past didn’t haunt us, but instead taught us important truths? What if the future didn’t frighten us, but instead inspired us to hope and work for a better today?

Moments like these, when we are for coming together, physically and live-streaming, fill me with gratitude and joy. Even as I am overjoyed by the sheer overflowing kindness of this community, I cannot help but think about those who are no longer with us. Friends we have lost, family who have gone from this earth before us. What would they say about the journeys of their lives? Would they tell us about all the things they wished they could have done? Or would they remind us of all of those moments they savored in however many days and years they blessed us with their loving presence?

When I call them to mind, it is never as their whole selves, but the people I love captured in a moment”

My Grammy showing me how to put the fork marks into peanut butter cookies.

My Gramps opening the door to shout, “Say Hello!” as he welcomed us all in for a Thanksgiving dinner.

My friend Andrew and I playing video games until way too late.

My friend Ari's father, Nisan, bringing out Famous Amos cookies while we got ready to drive to Hebrew School.

I can call up each of these moments as though they were happening right now. I can see their faces and hear their voices clearly, and I feel them almost here with me. Almost…

The truth is, we know that those we have lost are not here, but by truly being present in this moment, we can recall not only their face and the sound of their voice, but what they meant to us, what they taught us, the million different ways they enriched our lives. That is the blessing that their memory continues to give us long after they depart the physical world. Their lives can forever shape ours for the better every time we call their memories to our minds.

May the ones who came before us give us strength.

May the example of those who have departed be our guide.

May the love of each and every person with whom we have shared sacred moments hold us, comfort us, teach us, care for us, and inspire us to take hold of our lives in every day.

May each and every one of the memories we carry keep those we love alive in our hearts as a blessing.

Gmar Chatima Tova.

- Two amazing articles in the NY Times in the last 3 weeks, within a week of each other
    - One, by The Rev. Tish Harrison Warren (Anglican Priest), “Our Memory Is Flawed. Fortunately, God’s Isn’t”, 9/18/22
        - Article chronicles her struggle to cope with her mother’s Alzheimer’s
            - Talks about the pain she felt when they would have an amazing day, and her mother would not even be able to recall her being there
            - It was as if her mother’s loss of memory erased the event from happening, even in the mind of the author
            - Conclusion: “The nets of memory are all riddled with holes, and most of our days will pass right through them. But though they won’t be caught, those days will still be lived. They still matter. What my mom reminds me of amid all her forgotten moments is that the only moment we can catch is the one we are in right now. But this moment, however grievous or joyful or ordinary, comes with an invitation to notice it.”
    - Second, by Sarah Wildman (staff editor & writer in Opinion), “Every Moment Can’t Be a 10 Out of 10”, 9/23/22
        - Details the struggles of her family in raising a daughter with multiple bouts of liver and brain cancers
            - Ordinary wins, like heading to school, getting to go on a field trip, sitting quietly with a friend, became sacred occasions, worthy of both noting and celebrating
            - Talks about how miraculous a day that was even a 3 or 4 might feel after so many horrible days at 1
            - “ But before I let myself worry about work or dishes or even future travel, I try to just be. Just be here, I tell myself, like a self-help app, on repeat…It is remarkable. I am weary of [my daughter] having to

be remarkable. It turns out I really don't need life to always be a 10. A nice, solid six would be nice. Tonight I'd even go with a four. We'd be very happy to rest here, at four."

- Rabbi Jonathan Slater, in *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice*:
    - Moses journeys throughout his life and never reaches The Promised Land
    - Yet Moses, and the spiritual quest he leads the people on is still held up as a model of Jewish spiritual connection with both the Divine and the people around him par excellence
    - "No one can expect to attain the promised land in his or her lifetime. That seems to be the message of the Torah. Life is a long journey that ultimately is completed only in death. The goal of the journey, the final fulfillment of aspiration, may never be achieved. Therefore, if satisfaction is to come in life, it must be in the course of living, in the choosing of life."
- **Peninei Halakhah, Prayer 1:8, Fundamentals of the Laws of Prayer / Kavanah and Those Who Find It Difficult to Concentrate**
    - It is said in the name of the Ari HaKadosh that kavanah is like wings upon which prayer soars heavenward and is accepted. When a person prays without kavanah, their prayer lacks the wings with which to fly upwards and it waits until the person prays with kavanah. When they succeed in doing so, all the prayers that he recited without kavanah ascend to Hashem together with the prayer that achieved kavanah. The reason for this is clear: the very fact that the person initially came to pray demonstrates that they want to connect to Hashem, praise God, and ask God for their needs. They simply failed to have kavanah. However, the moment he succeeds in having kavanah, he opens the gate for all his prayers to ascend.