

TURNING 70 — AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED

A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah

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Congregation Brith Shalom

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My friends, it has been almost exactly four years since Hurricane Harvey ravaged our community and my congregation down the street. Buried under several feet of water and with nowhere else to go, Congregation Beth Yeshurun turned to you and was welcomed with a generosity of love and spirit which I have never forgotten.

In that spirit, I was honored by the invitation to come here today, still grateful for all the ways your synagogue leadership and my beloved colleague and friend, Rabbi Teller, welcomed me and my congregants for the many Shabbatot and Yamim Tovim we shared until Beth Yeshurun could be rebuilt.

For my dear Ranon, I pray that the new year will bring him sipuk nefesh, a comforting of his soul, along with s'mehot and b'rakhot, joy and blessings, for him, for his wonderful and partner, Vicki, and for their beautiful, beautiful family. Ken yehi ratzon.

Some three weeks ago, I celebrated my 70th birthday. I say “celebrated” because, in the words of the Shehechyanu, I am genuinely grateful to God for keeping me alive and enabling me to reach this milestone event in my life.

I received a number of cards that were poetic and sincere — you know the kind: you’ve reached the age of wisdom, may you embark on new challenges, soar new heights. Very nice.

But many of the cards were humorous attempts to cheer me up:

- In a hostage situation, you are likely to be released first.
- People won’t call you after 8 p.m.; they’re afraid they’ll wake you.
- Your secrets are safe with friends because they can’t remember them either.

I’m laughing so hard. Thankfully, I don’t need cheering up. I’m mindful of what Justice Earl Warren once said: “Be grateful about getting older. Many people don’t have the privilege.” And I am indeed grateful.

But as someone begins his seventh decade, there is a realization that most of one’s life has already been lived – and where are you?

And that's what I've been thinking about these last several weeks. What have I learned? How have I changed? How am I different from the young man raised by my parents here in Houston? Have the values they instilled me remained strong and clear, or have they changed as I have encountered life more fully?

How am I a different husband to my wife than I was when we married 48 years ago? I feel the same, like nothing's changed, and yet I know intuitively that many things about me have. You cannot be married nearly five decades and raised two children into young adulthood without being affected.

And how have I changed from the young rabbi I was when I entered my first pulpit 41 years ago on Long Island, N.Y., to the rabbi I am today? In those four decades, I have seen much and learned much more. And because this is Rosh Hashanah, I find myself in an unusually-reflective mood, particularly this year.

As I stand on this bimah today, the question is what *have* I learned?

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I have learned, first of all, how much pain there is in this world, much more pain than I was aware of when I first started out.

If I had an x ray machine, the kind that can see into the soul, and not just into the body, and if I could walk up and down the aisles of this room with it, and look inside, I would see that there is a lot more pain in this room than shows on the outside. I would see that there is pain of some kind at almost every seat.

One person sitting here has a broken leg or arm that you can see. Another person sitting here has a broken heart that is less visible.

People around you may still be recovering from a divorce, suffering from anxiety or coping with a marriage that has grown cold. They all look normal, but they're hurting.

There is more pain in the world than I ever realized when I started out.

We, their friends and family, rush to fill needs when we see them – but what happens if we can't see them? How to respond then isn't so clear.

Several months ago, I visited a member who was struggling against cancer. Each time I visited her in the hospital, the room was full of friends holding her hand, adjusting her pillow, and offering their help with meals, carpools and the like.

One day I received a visit from her husband. He sat in my office crying. I thought for sure it was about all that his wife was going through. “I do worry about her every day,” he said, “but she’s not why I’m here.”

And he explained that the people who run in and out of his wife’s room walk past him day after day, and no one asks how he is. Does he need anything? How is he holding up under the stress of watching his wife suffer and having to go home each night and reassure their children?

“With all the people in the room, I feel completely alone,” he told me through his tears. “Just because I don’t have cancer myself doesn’t mean I’m not sick. I am, Rabbi — sick at heart.”

He’s right.

It’s hard for us to know who’s hurting if there’s no cast on a leg or a shunt in an arm — which means we have to look more carefully in people’s eyes and faces so we can study their expressions and recognize the inner pain they might be trying to hold within but which is unavoidably seeping through.

And there’s a new kind of pain that I’m seeing more and more of: the pain so many of us are feeling after more than a year-and-a-half of living with Covid. Many of us have gotten through all the ups-and-downs of dealing with this nefarious

disease, but many of us are suffering with symptoms that resemble PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, and it's no joke.

Some people are expressing it by going crazy on airplanes, but more of us are keeping it bottled inside where it consumes us every day, endlessly worrying us, keeping us from a good night's sleep, afraid to go out, trying to make sense of all the conflicting medical reports and warnings.

I know a woman who, before Covid, was a volunteer all over town. With endless energy, she couldn't say no to anyone or any cause. But over the last year and a half, she's become a shadow of herself, quiet, withdrawn. She tells me she doesn't feel well many days, has no energy, is depressed.

Sadly, her own family keeps telling her it's nothing, it's the new Normal, they tell her, perk up and ignore it, get on with your life. But she's sad, desperately sad. Even though we can't see her pain, it's there, revealed in her eyes, the forced smile.

What have I learned at this stage in my life? That we can't always see who's hurting; that we need to extend our arms and expand our hugs to identify people in our lives who are hurting in ways that aren't always so obvious, but are just as real.

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I've learned something else as well: to be more tempered in my judgments of others.

My mother, like so many of yours, taught me something when I was very young: If you haven't got something good to say about somebody, don't say anything.

I've got another rule: Whatever you think you know about somebody else, you only know the half of it.

That has been one of the hardest lessons I've had to learn in my 41 years as a rabbi.

Over the years, I have been told things by well-meaning people about other people that have proven to be completely wrong.

I envy God Who has the ability to look into everyone's heart and see what's really there. We humans lack that capacity but it doesn't keep us from judging others.

It's so easy to believe the worst about people, and to turn gossip into gospel. I call this the "Everyone Knows" Syndrome. If you ever begin a sentence with "everyone knows," then it is almost certainly unreliable if not completely untrue.

We have a better name for it in Judaism; it's called *lashon hara*, and it's when we talk about people regarding things we really know nothing about though we think we do.

On Yom Kippur, we ask God to judge us fairly, but more than that, we ask Him to give us the benefit of the doubt.

But the flip side of the issue is: Are we as forgiving and understanding of others, giving them the full benefit of our many doubts, as we hope and expect God to be with us?

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter used to say that the Almighty created us with two eyes so that *with one* we might observe the virtues of our fellow human being, while *with the other* we might observe our own limitations and shortcomings.

Unfortunately we have reversed the function of our two eyes: The eye meant for detecting faults in ourselves we have trained upon our fellow human being.

Meanwhile, the eye designed for beholding virtue in others we have trained upon ourselves.

Yesterday morning, we read about one man who was not so generous with others—a man of prominence in the ancient Jewish community who should have known better.

It was actually the story of a wonderful woman named Hannah who was unable to conceive and came to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray for a child.

Pouring out her heart, she prayed silently, with only her lips moving.

And do you remember what happened?

The high priest, Eli, saw her in this state and he began berating her, “How long are you going to lie there drunk? Put away your wine and move on.”

And Hannah wiped the tears from her eyes and told Eli the high priest, “I haven’t drunk a drop of wine. I came here to speak to God.”

The Torah doesn’t tell us what Eli said or did, but he must have felt like a fool having so dramatically (and cruelly) misjudged a good woman.

How quick Eli the priest was to judge and to deny Hannah the benefit of the doubt.

Years ago, as a budding rabbinical student, I similarly misjudged another human being. While visiting a congregant at my student pulpit in Ohio, I noticed how he slurred his words and walked with an unsteady gait.

I asked the president of the shul if he was aware that a member of the small congregation apparently had a drinking problem. “Not that I’m aware of,” the president replied, “but we do have a member who suffers from Parkinson’s.”

I felt two feet tall and deeply ashamed.

How much pain and suffering we cause others—and how much embarrassment we can cause ourselves—when we rush to judgment.

How understanding are we of our spouses? Our parents?
Our siblings? Do we *lash* out before we *reach* out?

As one wit put it, “Don’t judge your wife too harshly for her weaknesses. If she didn’t have them, chances are she wouldn’t have married *you*.”

Do we rush to judgment about our children? Are we too quick to judge their friends, their decisions and way of life?

And how quick are we to take sides when couples we love are going through difficult times, with friends of the man and friends of the woman each willing to believe and too often happy to carelessly spread the worst about the other.

How quick we are to feel and think and assume the worst about others, to so uncritically accept what we hear and spread it along, and to judge people by their *worst faults*, when we expect others to judge us by our *best intentions*.

My friends, on these Days of Atonement, we plead with God to judge us with understanding and empathy.

Are we prepared to judge others with the same generosity of spirit?

At this stage of my life, what have I learned? One of the most important things I can: to accept the wisdom of my faith to try my very best to see others with my *heart* as well as with my eyes, to stand *before* God and not *be* God.

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And finally, I've become ever more aware of the preciousness of life, and its frailty.

When we start out in life, we think we will live forever. Time has no meaning to the young. Especially today, many of our children seem to be in no hurry to start their careers or leave the nest.

But as we grow older and look back as much as we look ahead, a new reality sets in, an awareness that life is too precious to be wasted and that every day is a blessing.

I believe that one of the finest sermons I have ever read was one delivered by Rabbi Kenneth Berger, delivered some 10 years ago after the death of the Challenger astronauts.

Rabbi Berger was shocked to learn that the astronauts most likely remained alive after the space shuttle exploded and began its fall to earth. And he wondered what might have gone through the astronauts' minds during those last five minutes of their lives.

And on Yom Kippur that year, he asked his congregation, what would you think if you only had five minutes to live? He offered three suggestions, each beginning with the words "if only":

The first, “If only I'd known, when I said my last good-bye to the people I love, that it would be my last good-bye.” We are so rushed in the morning, we run out the door without leaving a goodbye kiss; we postpone words of affection, of apology, of healing assuming our days are without end – and so are the days of our loved ones.

Or perhaps “If only I realized what I'd had, the blessings I'd had while I had them.”

Rabbi Berger told about his son Jonathan, who at age five experimented by dropping his mother's ring down the drain of the bathroom sink. His father was furious, but Jonathan said, “Don't be so mad, Dad—the ring's gone, but you've still got *me!*”

And Rabbi Berger observed that it is exactly our greatest blessings that can drive us crazy, and get us the angriest: our family, our work, our friends. We have to remember at those times that we are lucky to have them, and appreciate them while we do.

And finally, “if only I had another chance, I'd do it better, I'd love them more intensely.” It's not that we should live with regrets; we cannot live in the past and punish ourselves for what we might have done, could have done, should have done.

But it is to argue that if we still have our spouse or children or siblings, if we still have partners and dear friends, have we fallen into a pattern of behavior where we withhold love instead of giving generously of it?

If we have allowed a relationship to wither, or the calls to our children to grow too far apart; if we have over time resisted the impulse to put our arms around those we love and bring them closer; if somewhere in time, we became harsh or indifferent — if we now have another chance to show we care, let us grab that chance while we still have within us the power and the courage.

Yes, life is so precious – and so fragile. Take that hand and hold it, that kiss and savor it. And let us cherish each day, each moment we have to live – and to love.

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My friends, turning 70 has sobered me. In so many ways, I still feel vital and vibrant, filled still with ideas and energy and a thirst for life.

I feel other things too: a greater empathy for people who are hurting, for those who are sick, for couples whose relationships are faltering, for parents whose children are rebelling.

I cry more easily, and I feel in my heart at 70 things I could never truly feel when I was 30 or even 50. I have seen life and I have lived it, and I am a better person and I hope a better rabbi for it.

And perhaps because life has so sobered me, I rejoice even more when couples stand before and renew their vows, when families that have been torn apart find ways to repair the tear and rebuild lost love. I am deeply moved when painful divorces lead to new opportunities for a second chance at love, and I become very emotional when I see people who are deathly ill miraculously emerge to live despite all predictions and beyond all expectations.

On this Rosh Hashanah, then, join with me in embracing life with open arms – and while acknowledging its frailty and all the brokenness in the world, let us not succumb before it, but strive mightily to transcend it, to bring healing, our hearts, our hands, our souls to the task.

That for so long as we each may live, each day will stand as a testimonial to the eternal spirit God has planted within us all.

Amen.