

## **The Blessing of Less Time**

**Kol Nidre 5776**

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Hiding in the Garden seemed a bit ridiculous. Did he really think that God would not find him if he hid beneath the leaves and brush? Probably not. After disobeying God, Adam realized two things:

First he realized that he had allowed himself to be led astray. Eve was always enticing and could get him to do whatever she wanted. But he should have been able to say no.

And second, when it comes to playing hide-and-seek with God, there is no such thing as a good hiding place. Hence, he knew from that moment that he would be found, that God would be unhappy and even...disappointed.

What Adam did not know, however, was that his actions came with consequences. He didn't know that in this newly created world, there was such a thing as responsibility or punishment. But he was about to find this out...the hard way. You see, even before God spoke to him, things had started to change for Adam. Adam knew that he could not hide from God, but the fact that he was hiding was a sign to Adam of feelings and emotions which he had never experienced before. All of a sudden, he felt shame. He was ashamed that he was naked, ashamed that he had allowed himself to be enticed, ashamed that he disobeyed.

The punishment assigned to Adam, is often read as if Adam, and all those who would follow, would be eternally damned. Adam and Eve were banished from the idyllic Garden in which imperfection and disobedience could not reside. Adam and all of humanity would be required to work for their sustenance. Unable to rely on "easy pickins", as in the Garden, he and all who would follow would be required to work hard, to sweat just for daily bread. Moreover, this new world would be unforgiving and unfriendly, a world of

thorns and thistles which would sting him at every step. And know, as well, God informed Adam that you won't live forever:

You are but dust and to dust shall you return. (Gen. 3:19)

Adam shuddered, although to be honest, did not understand the meaning of the words which God spoke: What would it be like to work hard and sweat? What would it be like to struggle just to eat? And what exactly did it mean when God said, "To dust shall you return"? Spoken in a deep, resonant and powerful voice, it certainly sounded awful. Adam packed up (which wasn't hard since he owned no clothes). He and Eve left the Garden, apprehensive, frightened, ashamed.

Had I been there, I would have tried to console him. That booming voice was, of course, awful and frightening. Adam probably thought that, just hearing that voice would kill him. Indeed, according to certain traditions, that is exactly what happened at Mount Sinai. Some say that when the Children of Israel heard the first words of the Ten Commandments, hearing God's voice actually killed them and God needed to resurrect them all lest there be no Jewish People to follow Moses afterwards.

But Adam had begun to understand how his indiscretion had brought upon himself, and upon all of humankind a death sentence. I envision him crying uncontrollably. Had I been standing next to Adam, I would have put my arm around him and said something like this:

What God told you is that you are going to die. Not now. Not even soon. In fact you are going to live for a long time, according to reliable reports in the Torah, for 930 years.

But just as important it is to live a very long life, it is important to know that you will die! (Adam, stop crying. Please). I know that the thought of dying is scary, but really, what God told you is, in fact, quite wonderful. You see, if a person doesn't know that he/she will die, that person has much less motivation to push forward, to strive, to accomplish or succeed because they can always say that they will do it later. Without death, there is no urgency in life. Without death, one could say indefinitely, I'll just do it later. Great inventions, great discoveries, tremendous feats

of strength, powerful endurance or artistic creativity may never reach fruition, never reach full expression because there would be no sense of urgency, no motivation to get anything done.

But my point is this: We are the only beings in all of creation who know and understand that we will die. And, although that fact may be scary, it is also the fact that time is limited that motivates us to live lives of productivity, of creativity, of accomplishment. I guess what I am saying is that, in an ironic way, death is a gift. But this realization comes, as well, with responsibilities. That responsibility is to make something important out of your life and to live life with a sense of urgency. (Adam stopped crying). The questions, Adam, for you and for every person yet to come into this world, are: What can I accomplish? and “Will we have enough time”?

As we begin to look into a new year, it is our mandate, our responsibility to identify the weighty themes and responsibilities before us both personally and collectively. There are any number of issues that require our hands, our energies, our commitment and our sense of urgency. This evening, on the eve of Yom Kippur, I focus on three challenges facing the American Jewish Community which require our attention our collective efforts and our urgent actions:

### **The urgent Need to Support and prepare our Jewish Students for College**

I spoke briefly about this on Rosh HaShana, but the message is worth repeating. As parents we all like to believe that our children are ready for college upon completion of High School. We have tried to prepare them in a number of ways. Our children attend intensive, academically high quality schools. We encourage them to take advanced/AP classes. Our children enroll in a variety of activities which “look good” on their resumes which they will submit with their college applications. With all of this, therefore, how can I question whether our children are prepared for college? I question it because, although well-prepared to succeed in a rigorous academic setting, our student and others speak with me and tell me, over and over again, that our students feel unprepared for the onslaught of attacks, accusations and frightening confrontations they which many face from the anti-Zionist, anti-Israel and pro-Palestinians groups on campus.

On Rosh HaShana I shared with you several reports of anti-Israel activities which devolved into anti-Semitic attacks, from three universities in California. I mentioned as well as an account of an incident at a program on “Black-Jewish Relations” at an east coast, Ivy League college. At the program, a speaker brought to tears a number of student when he informed those in attendance that Jews were those primarily responsible for slavery in the US. And, through her tears of remorse one student managed to “confess” that, yes, my people were responsible and I am so sorry for it!

A group of parents, brought together by a Hillel Rabbi, watched this exchange captured on video and posted on YouTube. One parent directed a question to the Rabbi: What can parents do to help this unconscionable situation. How dare this person accuse our students of such crimes?! And, without missing a beat, the Rabbi said: If you want to help, stop sending us ignorant students!

This year, I can think of no situation in this country more important, more dangerous, that needs to be addressed directly with greater urgency than supporting, educating, and teaching our students the Jewish narrative prior to college. The speaker in the video, a respected professor at a prestigious college, brought students to tears simply by misrepresenting and distorting facts in order to support his theses: that the Jews were guilty of spearheading the slave-trade in Africa and in the US. And if you would like to know where you can find this sort of information, you can simply go to the websites of such luminaries as David Duke (of KKK fame) and Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam.

Our students must arrive at college with more than a resume filled with AP classes and extra-curricular activities. Before college, our students must have some notion about American Jewish history, Zionism, and Israel. Our students must be prepared to respond when Jews are demonized, when Israel is devalued and denigrated for its “occupation” or

for its treatment of Palestinians. This preparation is not intended to be a whitewashing of mistakes and poor decisions made by Jews and/or by Israel. There is no shortage of instance of Jews and Israel acting poorly.

But our students must also know that those are exceptions. That those instance do not represent the meaning of being Jewish, the values which we cherish or decisions that make us proud. But our students need to know that our ties to the Land extend back for more than three thousand years. Our students must know how Jews arrived in Palestine and about the relationship between the murder of six million Jews in Europe and the founding of the Jewish State. They must be able to explain what it means to say that our People has returned to its ancestral home. And they must be able to express pride in the fact that, over the course of only 67 years, Israel has become a beacon of hope, a shining star for democracy and human rights in a world of tyrants, while living in a hostile and violent neighborhood. Israel is not perfect, but neither is Israel evil. Our students must understand this and know how to respond when confronted. And, at this moment, I can think of nothing urgent than this. What urgent action can we take: Send you kids to JLink, our Hebrew High School Program, where Israel studies are a central pieces of the curricullum. Take your children to Israel related programs here. Send you children to visit Israel.

### **The Urgent Call to Create Community**

Do you remember the movie “Field of Dreams”, with the tag line: If you build it they will come? Since the end of WWII, the American Jewish Community did just that. We built synagogues and they came. They moved to the suburbs and joined the local Conservative synagogue. And we kept building.

All of a sudden, however, they stopped coming and we received the Pew Report. The Pew Report of a few years ago provided statistical proof of what we were already witnessing: the disappearance of Jews from the pews. For those not paying attention to the American

Jewish Community, the Pew Report came out of the blue, as a breaking news story: Jews had gone to sleep one night and, in the morning awoke as disaffected, disconnected and disinterested in Jewish Life.

To some, the crisis of disaffected and disinterested Jews required radical changes. And, those changes, for some, were important, necessary and, for a few, have yielded new, innovative and creative paradigms of Jewish Life. For me, for us, however, the Pew Report did not signal the beginning of the end. Over and over in the Pew's statistics, the message which reverberated throughout was the need to belong, the need for community. The statistics showing the decline in overall synagogue membership was not a reflection of a belief that synagogues are no longer necessary. Those statistics reflect the fact that synagogues have not been doing their jobs in creating a compelling reason to join, a reason to affiliate with the Jewish Community. The large majority of young Jews are not saying, I will never join. They are saying, I need a good reason to join. I need to know that my affiliation will add depth and meaning to our lives.

Over the last several years, our synagogue has become more focused on creating an environment which is welcoming, accessible and comfortable. In response to the situation described in the Pew report, we have redefined our congregation to be a home in which one can find friendship, support and inspiration. Our goal, however, has remained the same: to create a vibrant and active community for a new generation of Jews. Many congregations have entered into a variety of new areas of programming in an attempt to attract new people to join. Those efforts have yielded little long-term success. And I believe that the limited success can be easily explained. When we veer away from the core purposes and goals of our institution, we forfeit the compelling reasons that we came into existence in the first place. Simply put, the mission is not wrong. We simply do what we do best and do it better than ever before. There are many things that we cannot do, in part, because others do them better.

But we can do what others cannot: we can bring families and individuals together to learn and study, to perform acts of outreach, kindness and *chesed* and *mitzvot*, to experience the depth and beauty of Jewish Life. And that we do well. And that we do each and every day with a sense of urgency because, if we do not do what we know we can do, we have not only let you down, we have let ourselves down.

Who comes into these doors? Who enters our synagogue? You might say, "Anyone who wants to come in". But you would be wrong. In our synagogue we have learned a few things regarding who comes in. What we have learned is this: Those who come in are those who feel invited and welcomed. Of course, anyone might physically enter this building, but if you do not feel as if you have been invited in, most will not bother to enter. They say, and rightfully so, "I don't really want to go somewhere I don't feel welcomed".

A few years ago, we reversed a long-standing policy of this synagogue and changed the constitution of the synagogue to reflect that change of a policy which was common to nearly every Conservative synagogue nationally. And, when we changed our position, we received a fair amount of national press (and with it, a fair amount of criticism). What was the policy change? We invited families in which one spouse is not Jewish, to join as a family. And guess what happened: interfaith families started to join. In the several years that have passed since then, a number of these families have become deeply entrenched in what we do as a congregation, part and parcel of who we are. And I am proud that we have done that. But with that invitation we knew we need to invite more people to join us. And guess what? We invited them and they came!

Over the past couple of years, our synagogue has affirmed policies which had never been addressed here. We have explicitly embraced those who identify with the LGBTQ community. This should have been made explicit long ago, not simply because it was right, but because we see, in retrospect, that our community is richer and stronger as we

embrace every person who would like to enter, by making clear, unambiguous and explicit that we are here to welcome to celebrate with and to support all those who are part of this community.

We have opened our arms and our doors as well to those from the Jewish Community in general, and to those from within our congregation in particular, to individuals with special needs, who live with various physical and/or intellectual challenges. I will not review all that we are doing since Rabbi Israel has shared so much of that in his presentation on the Second Day of Rosh HaShana. If you did not hear that presentation I encourage you to read it. It is available for you on our synagogue's website.

It is gratifying to know that the changes we have instituted and the diversity we have incorporated has been appreciated. But, truth be told, the greatest benefit to us in all of this has been that we have grown spiritually through this process. We have become deeper, richer and more sensitive because we have opened our doors wider than before. We have become bigger through the process of inviting, welcoming and engaging those who, previously, were not considered integral to the Jewish Community or to our congregation. And today we must acknowledge that we were wrong, I was wrong not to support this with greater energy and conviction. But now that we have identified our errors we are motivated with a new sense of urgency to continue to reach out, to welcome and to grow wider and deeper as a community.

### **The Urgency of Putting Out Fires**

We first met Abraham as God tells Abraham leave his home of Ur Kasdim to begin a journey. That journey would not simply bring Abraham to a new geographic location. This journey was as much about leaving as about arriving. Abraham is told to leave his home, his family, his birthplace. He is asked to leave everything behind in order to become the Patriarch of a new people. God does not reveal Abraham's destination. Abraham's journey begins when he is ready to leave everything behind. But why would he do it? What motivated Abraham to uproot his life? The Midrash explains part of the answer in a rather strange rabbinic Midrash, by way of analogy.

Abraham's departure can be likened, says the Midrash, to a man who travels from place to place and once, as he is walking, he see a building engulfed in flames and no one is around to help extinguish the fire:

*Is it possible that the building lacks a person to look after it? [At that moment] the owner of the building looks out and says: "I am the owner of the building". Similarly, Abraham looked at the world around him and said: Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide, an owner? The Holy One, Blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the Guide/the owner, the sovereign of the Universe". (Gen. Rab. 39:1).*

The Midrash uses a powerful image. Abraham looks at his world and he sees that everything is on fire. Everything is burning. To Abraham, it seems that the world is about to explode as it is consumed by evil, being destroyed by neglect, by apathy and indifference. And as he looks, he asks: Who is in charge? Where is the *Ba'al HaBayit*? At that point God steps out and says, "I am. I am the owner". So what happens next? The Midrash does not say.

This world is burning. Look around. We see fires everywhere. One could look at the wildfires in California, but those are not the only fires burning. Tis world is engulfed with pain and tragedy, new fires and crises erupt on nearly a daily basis, fires identified by their indiscriminate destruction and the senseless and brutal losses they cause.

Who will care for and help those migrants fleeing from Syria, those caught between the armies of a brutal dictator and an extremist Muslim horde who are known for their unmitigated hatred of all that is not them? I must say, the history of Israel and Syria is not a happy one. At the same time, these are human beings. To turn away from them is to become like them. That is not the only fire to extinguish.

Who will help Hootsies escape Tootsies? Who will help the innocent people fleeing Sudan or Eritria search of a place to live without threat of violence and death? These people walk hundreds of miles through the desert to reach Israel. Why? Because, if they are lucky, the Israelis will arrest them and there they will be safe. There they will have a place to stay. There they will get food.

Who will feed the hungry Jews in our community? Who will help children who have been abandoned or abused? Choose your crisis. Choose the fire you want to extinguish. And to it now for lives are at stake. What could be more urgent?

What can you do? Bring food from you home. We will collect it here and deliver it. Come here to cook with our Cook for a Friend or Response to Hunger Programs. Send money to the Emergency Funds of Federation or the JDC. There are JDC people on the ground in every place a fire is burning. Through its agents, JDC will provide direct aid to those in need.

Abraham sees the world in urgent need of help, repair and leadership. And when God says, yes I am here, Abraham realizes something profound:

The goal was not to put out every fire. Rather, God sees the fires and does nothing, as if to say, Abraham, neither you nor I started these. It is not for us to put all of them out. But, Abraham, you choose which fires to start with.

The goal was to start the work. The goal was to start the journey, to start the process and to do it now. The mission is evident. The job which needs to be done is clear. And the call is urgent. Do it now.

In Pirke Avot we read:

*Lo alecha ham'melacha ligmor v'lo ata ben chorin li'hibatel memeno*

It is not for you to finish the job. Neither are you free to desist from beginning the work.

We will never finish the work. But if we can start it, we have faith that others will continue from where we left off.

Adam and Eve left the Garden. Abraham left his home. And both did so knowing that their time on earth was limited. Both began their journeys knowing that they could only start their work. The job would need to be completed by others. Each knew that they must begin with strength, they know that they must persevere with confidence, they know that

there was no time to waste. And they knew, and we know, we cannot stop while we still have time.

A cobbler sat at his bench late into the night, a large pile of torn shoes before him, waiting for his attention. . A friend walking by noticed a small light in the window of the shop. He crossed the street and knocked on the door to see if the cobbler was alright. When the cobbler answered the door, his friend asked: Why are you still working? The cobbler smiled and responded: Thank you for your concern but I still have work to do. The candle is still burning. There is still a glimmer of light and, if I hurry, I can finish another pair of shoes.

The work is great. The hour is late. Time is short but, if we hurry we might be able to help, to repair to lift one more thing.

