

Rosh HaShanah Morning – Alternative Service
September 14, 2105 / 1 Tishrei 5776

“Let me tell you something....” This phrase prefaced every conversation with a certain someone and sometimes every sentence within the conversation. “Let me tell you something....” She meant well, but I knew from experience that trying to concentrate on the words between the “Let me tell you somethings” would be arduous, that I would zone out and not be in the moment as “Let me tell you somethings” peppered the rest of the chat, which usually was more of a monologue than a conversation. “Let me tell you something” was a mantra that set my eyeballs spinning like a hypnotized comic strip character’s. “Let me tell you something,” I thought to myself. “I hear the sounds you’re uttering but I haven’t a clue what you’re saying because I’m too fixated on when the next ‘Let me tell you something’ will escape from your lips’!”

People like to talk, and sometimes we actually have something worthwhile to say. On this sacred day, when we reflect on the past as we take our first tentative steps into the new year, we think about the Jewish pearls of wisdom that have come down to us and ponder what lessons we would like to share with those about whom we care deeply.

In honor of its 40th anniversary a few months ago, Moment Magazine published a feature entitled, “What Life Experience, Advice or Piece of Wisdom Do You Think Is Most Important To Pass On To The Next Generation?”

The practice of leaving a spiritual legacy for the next generation has been a Jewish custom since ancient times. The *TaNaKh* (Hebrew Bible) preserves in writing many such oral declarations made by our ancestors. The voices of Jacob, Moses, Joshua and David echo in our sacred

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writings. In Genesis chapter 49, Jacob tells his children: "Come together that I may tell you what your future will look like in days to come." Moses' address to the Israelites was a tad longer. It comprises most of the Book of Deuteronomy and concludes with the words: "Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching. For this is not a trifling thing for you: it is your very life; through it you shall long endure on the land that you are to possess upon crossing the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). David shares an instruction with his son Solomon: "Be strong and show yourself a man. Keep the charge of Adonai your God, walking in God's ways and following God's laws, commandments, rules, and admonitions as recorded in the Teaching of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn" (1 Kings 2:2-3).

The custom of Jewish parents writing spiritually inspired and religiously focused letters to their children continued in post-Biblical times. The goal was to sum up all that they had learned in life and express what they wanted most for them and from them. They believed that the wisdom they acquired during their own life was an integral part of their legacy as much as, or perhaps more than, material possessions.

Consider the words of a German Jew, Eleazar ben Samuel Ha-Levi of Mayence, who in 1357 penned these words for his children:

These are the things which my sons and daughters shall do at my request. They shall go to the house of prayer morning and evening and shall pay special regard to the *t'fillah* Tand the *Sh'ma*. As soon as the service is over, they shall occupy themselves a little with

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the Torah, the Psalms, or with works of charity. Their business must be conducted honestly. They must be gentle in their manners and prompt to accede to every honorable request. They must not talk more than is necessary. If they can by any means achieve it, my sons and daughters should live in communities, not isolated from other Jews, so that their sons and daughters may learn the ways of Judaism. Even if compelled to solicit from others the money to pay a teacher, they must not let the young of both sexes go without instruction in the Torah.

Fast forward to 2015. For their feature article, “What Life Experience, Advice or Piece of Wisdom Do You Think Is Most Important To Pass On To The Next Generation?”, Moment Magazine interviewed renowned Jews including Theodor Bikel, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Senator Carl Levin, Judith Viorst and Elie Wiesel.

Here’s what some of them had to say.

Theodore Bikel, actor, folksinger, and star of Jewish stage and screen (he performed as Tevye in an early production of *Fiddler on the Roof*), wrote:

I love the notion of going through life and saying, “This is beautiful,” seeing a flower or landscape and really taking in the beauty of the world. You need to think, you need to read, you need to take in a song or a beautiful landscape and come away saying, “This was a worthwhile day, a worthwhile hour, a worthwhile minute.” That is what we live for basically, those few worthwhile minutes of our lives that give us contentment and purpose.

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These are the words Jewish scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, known for his translation of the Talmud into Modern Hebrew:

Keeping quiet is a great art that should be cultivated. If you are a spouse or a parent it is a big temptation to pretend you are wiser than you are. It is very hard if you are in authority to say that you don't know. In Jewish thought of the Middle Ages, there was an idea that the highest level of wisdom is to say, "I don't know."

The magazine also included a quote by the late screenwriter and author Nora Ephron:

You should eat delicious things while you can still eat them, go to wonderful places while you still can.

When she wrote these words, I don't know if Ephron was aware of how similar they are to the teaching of Nehemiah, which we read just a few minutes ago in our Haftarah portion. On the surface, both Nora's and Nehemiah's messages seem a bit trivial for Rosh HaShanah. On this first day of the New Year, aren't we supposed to be talking about repentance, prayer and charity? On this day of the sounding of the shofar, shouldn't our minds be focused on the blaring sounds that awaken us from the dull routines of everyday life? As we call out "*Avinu Malkeinu*: Hear our prayers, God," shouldn't we be fixated on something more exalted and profound than apples and honey, round challahs, and festive meals? Theoretically, yes, but who here ate lunch at 10:30 this morning? For sure, Rosh HaShanah has to be more than an exercise in Jewish gastronomy, but Nehemiah was on to something when he said, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy

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to Adonai. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in Adonai is the source of your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

Life is a gift, and when we gather on Rosh HaShanah and share the words of the *machzor*, both the ancient words and the modern interpretations, when we take the time to really understand the significance of this sacred Jewish time, it's like being handed the greatest present of all: an opportunity, again, to begin anew. It's the ultimate do-over. While we can't undo the past, we can write a new future that begins today, right here, right now. Where does the food analogy fit in? Imagine life as a buffet of limitless possibilities, the ultimate smorgasbord. Laid out before us are myriad possibilities. Some of us find comfort in that which is familiar. We gravitate to things that are recognizable, to that which has sustained us well in the past. Our actions and choices in this New Year probably will resemble those of the past. Some of us are more adventuresome. We hone in on that which is exotic and relish new opportunities to stride outside our comfort zones. A year from now we might look back and say: Wow! What a year! Some of us are somewhere in the middle. We don't mind things that are new or different, but we wouldn't think of acting without the input of others, including Yelp! and TripAdvisor. In each scenario, Jewish tradition plays a role. For example, those who are more cautious have the familiar words of the *machzor* and the recognizable melodies to hold onto. Those who are game for adventure can find a lot that is new in this very setting, as well as in the *machzor*. You've probably already checked out the blue washed pages and all the alternative readings. And those somewhere in the middle probably will discover, with a little bit of guidance and a lot of encouragement, that a little of this and a little of that makes a very satisfying experience. Let

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me tell you: Life is a banquet and our task is to partake. As it says in Deuteronomy (8:10):

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise Adonai your God for the good land given you.”

Like our ancestor in Jerusalem in the days of Ezra the scribe, we gather on this first day of the New Year to hear words of Torah and to engage with them in order to make them relevant in our lives. We gather today to recite prayers and to perform rituals cherished by our people in every generation. By doing so we link ourselves to those who ensured a Jewish future for us, and by doing so we strengthen the foundations of Judaism for future generations. As we gather today we recall the Jewish pearls of wisdom lovingly handed down to us by those who nurtured us and inspired in us the need and the desire to be connected to God, to Torah, to the Jewish people and to Israel. We’re here today because being Jewish was important to them and because of them is important to us. We’re here today because they left us a legacy that still resonates with meaning and value. We’re here today because we appreciate the importance of creating Jewish experiences and Jewish memories for our descendants.

I’ve been known in these Alternative Services to give homework assignments. *Mah nishtanah*, to borrow a phrase from a different holiday; why should this year be different? So here’s what we’re going to do. Between now and Yom Kippur, that’s ten days from now, compose your own answer to Moment Magazine’s question, “What Life Experience, Advice or Piece of Wisdom Do I Think Is Most Important To Pass On To The Next Generation?” This task probably won’t be easy, but I think it will be worthwhile. You’ll have to consider to whom to address your remarks, what to include and what to omit, what tone to use and what your ultimate purpose is in sharing these words of wisdom. Before you begin, let me tell you two things. First, if you’d like

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to share your words anonymously with those here, feel free to send them to me before Yom Kippur and I'll include them in our service next week. And second, if your words are sugarcoated with a little bit of New Year's honey, that's okay. They'll probably be received more favorably, go down more smoothly and stick more securely in this New Year.