

MOMENTS MATTER
As delivered on Rosh HaShanah 5775
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Last fall, you all celebrated with us—right here, almost as crowded—as we welcomed our beloved, and much hoped for, son into the world and into this community. You filled this space, and our lives, with blessings and well-wishes, advice and love. Just over a month later, you mourned with us the loss of my beloved grandmother. Like many of you, as I sit here today and hear the liturgy, as I reflect on where I was and where I am going, there is no doubt in my mind that those are the days that-today and always—will anchor this year for me.

So, I want to start this morning, on this New Year, with a moment of gratitude for this space and this community. From me, and from Ben and Kobi—thank you for making those moments matter. Thank you for making them sacred.

We all have those moments, the ones that anchor our years. “The day my child was born.” “When I finally opened my own business.” “The day I came out to my family.” “The day I got up the courage to leave.”

We mark milestones—weddings, bnai mitzvah, brit milah and baby naming. We call these our *shechichyanu* moments, the ones that are so lifechanging that they demand a marking, a ritual, a time to literally stop and count our blessings.

There are also milestones that unmoor us, and they act in much the same way. “The day my mother died.” “The day he told me he’d fallen in love with someone else.” “The day I lost my job.” These moments too, the funerals and the shiva calls, the custody hearings and the endless job interviews, demand a stopping of time, a reflection. We don’t always know what the meaning will be, but we know these moments will have—need to have—meaning.

James, an old man, was cleaning up some papers in his attic. He came across his son’s journal, long forgotten in a pile of pictures. He moved the book and it opened to a marked page – June 4. His son was six years old at the time. James glanced at the journal and quickly put it down. He walked downstairs to his own

library. He took his own journal where he always wrote about the things he did. On June 4, the year his son was 6 years old, James wrote, "Wasted the whole day fishing with Jimmy. Didn't catch a thing."

With a deep sigh and a shaking hand, he took Jimmy's journal and found the boy's entry for the same day, June 4. Large, scrawling letters, pressed deeply into the paper read: "Went fishing with my dad. Best day of my life."

Sitting here today, we all know we are not James. We don't want to be. We know, deep down inside, that a day spent with our loved ones, no distractions, face to face is a day that we would treasure. Only, our car breaks down on the way, and Jimmy has to go to the bathroom again, and I have so much else I need to get done, and can't he just hurry up and catch something so we can home again??

When I was 16, this New York City gal spent her summer in the mountains of the American Southwest. 12 teenagers (mostly Jewish, mostly urban—you imagine it). 2 counselors. Backcountry camping. And in addition to the finer points of pack in, pack out, leave no trace camping, I learned another lesson.

Each day ended, of course, around a (careful and safe) campfire. Going around the circle, each of us would reflect. Our questions, each day:

Highlight?

Lowlight?

Hero of the day?

Even at the time, it seemed a bit of a cliché. How many times could we wax poetic about the majesty of the Colorado Rockies, whine about how heavy our pack was, or gush about the person we liked best in the little clique we'd formed, even among just 12 of us.

Yet, I offer them to you today, on the cusp of a New Year. Because how we answer them—and how we don't—is a way to think about who we are, and who we want to be. Those silly, repetitive question were meant to teach me at 16, and decades later, what it means to step outside the noise and the mess

and the chaos and the muck of an everyday life—and think about how to make it more.

We say: This year, I really need to get down to Florida to see my mother more often. She's not getting any younger.

We say: This year, I really need to make an effort to see my college friends. We're not getting any younger.

We say: This year, I really need to make an effort to spend the night in the shelter. I keep saying I will.

And then we say: Where am I going to find the time?

We go into these years, each year, with the best of intentions. We know that no one ever comes to the end of his or her life wishing they had spent more time at the office, more time commuting, more time answering emails. But, then life happens and we don't always make the choices we set out to make.

There is a cartoon that someone sent to me once. It features God, sitting on Mt. Sinai, with a sign above the head. "Open 24/6." Shabbat has always been a radical notion, a pushing back on the march of time, a countercultural response to the value of work over rest. On Shabbat, we are told, God *shavat va-yinafash*, God rested and was re-souled. We need re-souling too. We need to hit pause, to stop hearing the rush and the noise and the demands that fill our minutes and our hours.

Shabbat is that little taste of eternity, a consciousness that the moments of a day, a week, a year are the moments that constitute our life and our legacy. So, use it. Embrace it. Savor it. Have a Shabbos dinner. Take a Shabbos walk. Spend a day, an hour, 30 minutes looking someone's face and not your touchscreen. Take a moment to offer a blessing for the food you are about to eat. Take time to transform the mundane into the sacred, before you have to go back again.

A friend recently discovered what most parents dread: lice, in her daughter's hair. Immediately, she said, her head started racing as she went through the mental checklist of everything that would need to be

done: washing sheets and clothes. Notifying school. Finding backup care. And—worst of all: 20 minutes, twice a day—combing her daughter’s hair, slowly and carefully. She was freaking out: where was she going to find the time? Yet, in recounting this episode, she said that actually, the time became a site of quiet, and connection between her and her 6th grade daughter—not always the easiest time for mothers and daughters. And, even more, it also became a moment for simplicity, for peace, for focus—in a world that values none of those things¹.

Where are we going to find the time? We aren’t. We have to make it. That is how we create the highlights. That is how we survive the lowlights. That is how we become a hero. We don’t find sacred time, we create it.

It was a busy morning, about 8:30, when an elderly gentleman in his 80's arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 am.

I saw him looking at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. While taking care of him, I asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry.

The gentleman told me no, that he had a breakfast date with his wife. I commented on how sweet that was, and asked where they were going.

He told me the name of a local nursing home, and added that she was suffering from Alzheimer’s.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a bit late.

He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now.

¹ Private email from Rabbi Danya Rutenberg, September 14, 2014. Shared with permission.

I was surprised, and asked him, 'And you still go every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?'

He smiled as he patted my hand and said,

'I still know who she is.'

With thanks to Rabbi Kaye, when I meet with wedding couples, I begin by asking them to make a timeline of their relationship. Some bring me beautifully illustrated, practically frame-able art. Others pull a scribbled piece of paper out of a pocket, carefully smoothing it out onto my office. The dates, places, and people change—but there is a certain rhythm to this assignment. The day we met. Our first official date. The first kiss. The first I love you. The proposal. The wedding day.

Yet, I always say to couples that the wedding day is not as important as the day after. And that day is not as important as a year after.

Your anniversary might not be as important as the day you sit by your wife's side as chemotherapy drips into her veins.

Sometimes, the moments that we imagine, anticipate the most, and plan for the longest are not the moments that change us. Instead of the grand and the glorious, it is in the muck and mire, in the sacred and in the everyday that life presents us with endless opportunity to create meaning.

We have to pay attention. We have to be present. We have to make time.

I know that it seems trite; your rabbi is standing up here suggesting that you live a good life, a life of meaning. I know that it seems too obvious, maybe too easy, to suggest that a life of meaning is one that we can create, each and every day.

There is a beautiful teaching in a book called *Messilat Yesharim*. It is one of the classics of Mussar, the ancient Jewish “self-improvement” program. In its introduction, the author, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, opens by saying:

Every single thing within this book is already known to everyone reading it. There is absolutely nothing new inside. Instead, the book contains truths which we all know, constantly forget, and therefore are in constant need of reminders of them².

What more reminder do you need than the sound of the shofar? The music of these holy days? Here we are, the Book of Life open before us. Here we sit, with God enthroned on the Throne of Justice. Here we sit, confronting the certainty that some of us will live, and some of us will die, and feeling the urgency to begin living lives that matter, lives that are somehow different from the ones with which we walked into this room.

The Holy Days confront us with one of the great tensions of religious life. Today, we tremble at the words of the Unetaneh Tokef—who shall live and who shall die; the God of judgment looking upon us. Yet, 10 days from now, the words of the Torah ring out: *U'vacharta b'chayim*. Choose life, that you and yours may live. But, is the choice really ours to make? The rabbis of the Mishnah teach:

It was not your will that formed you, not was it your will that gave you birth; it is not your will that makes you live, and it is not your will that brings you death; nor is it your will that some day in the future you will have to give an accounting and a reckoning before the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One³.

We do not control our birth, and we do not control our death. We do not control what happens in the days in between—but we control what it means. We control what we do.

And, the lesson of these holy days? The lesson of God sitting on the Throne of Justice? It's that what we do, how we live our lives—it matters to God.

It matters to God if you go home today and call the brother you haven't spoken to in a year.

² Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, <http://cbatampa.blogspot.com/2014/09/trite.html>

³ Pirke Avot 4:29

It matters to God if you leave today and look for a nearby meeting.

It matters to God if you show up on Mitzvah Day.

It matters to God that you are here today.

Living a life of meaning is not just about us, not about what we want and what we hope. In the 10 days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, tradition teaches, we—each and every one of us—has the power to move God from the throne of justice to the throne of mercy. And if we do that, if God moves—the reverberations echo throughout the world. The rabbis teach that God’s movement begins at the shofar service; when we call ourselves to attention, God listens.

In the days following 9/11, I read a story about a teacher, trying to talk with her young students about such a tragic event. A student asked, but how will they fix it? Rather than answer, the teacher took a page out of a textbook and ripped it into tiny pieces. It was a picture of the world. Can you fix this, she asked? The student began working busily, and later in the day presented her with a rumpled page, held together by what seemed like hundreds of tiny pieces of tape. It was tattered, but it was whole. She looked at him with surprise: How did you do it? He answered: Fixing the world seemed to hard. But on the other side was a person’s face. I fixed the person, and I was able to fix the world.

No more is being asked of us.

And no less.

Shanah tovah.