

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5777 “The Beauty of this Moment”
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Temple Chaverim

“We should consider each day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.”¹

I have started listening to podcasts recently. I heard this quote in a podcast called “The Moth” which contains stories that ordinary people tell about their lives. Vicki Juditz told her story about how dance helped her find healing after her husband took his own life. When you dance you must “stay in the moment” and “concentrate on the steps.”

What a great metaphor for all of us, for life! Stay in the moment, and concentrate on the steps. Dance teaches us that we can get through the day if we concentrate on the timing so that we do the right step at the right moment.

This summer, during my two weeks of study in Israel, I spent some “time” learning the Jewish Philosophy of Time with a scholar named Micah Goodman.²

We don’t often think much about time beyond the question “what time is it?” The truth is, however, that this is a very good and very profound question: *What is time?*

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche.

² Micah Goodman, Shalom Hartman Institute, Summer 2016, “The Philosophy of Jewish Time the Beauty of THIS moment.” What follows is an explication from that Shiur.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, spoke about it in the abstract. Time is a process, or sequence of events. In Greek, it is called *chronos*.

Many years after Aristotle, the German philosopher, Heidegger, spoke of it differently. He said time is not a process or a sequence at all, time is a specific moment. Not *chronos*, he said, but *kairos*, in Greek.

What about Judaism? What do we say? Is time a sequence of moments, or a moment itself?

Judaism's "philosophy" of time is laid out by King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon wrote:

"A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: A time for being born and a time for dying, A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted; ... A time for weeping and a time for laughing, A time for wailing and a time for dancing." (3:1-4).

Solomon, already known for his great wisdom, wrote this book near the end of his life, after he had lots of time to think about the meaning of existence.

Solomon began his book by looking at the past. What did he say?

"Utter futility! All is futile! What real value is there for a person in all the gains he or she might make beneath the sun. One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever."

The past is meaningless because there is never anything in it that is truly new. Everything that has happened before will happen again.

Spring turns into summer, summer to fall, fall to winter, and winter to spring. And when spring comes, it feels new. The natural cycle gives you the illusion of newness, of rebirth, but it is just that: an illusion. We experience spring as new but we simply forget that what feels new, has happened over and over again the past.

And so, Solomon says: looking to the past for meaning is vane and futile. If the past is utter futility, then perhaps we can find some meaning in the future? In chapter 2 of his book he examines the future. He writes:

“I said to myself, “Come I will treat you to merriment. Taste mirth!” But that too, I found, was futile. Of revelry I said, “It’s mad!” Of merriment I said, “What good is that?”

Once he realized that nothing lasts forever, he asked what is the point of living? Why strive for happiness, joy, wealth, achievement, success ... why, if none of it will last? What’s the point? He concludes:

“What does a person get for all the toil and worry that he or she does under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23)

Looking at chapter one and chapter two of Ecclesiastes, we see that Solomon is telling us that *both* the past *and* the future are futile! Considering the past reminds us that nothing is new and looking to the future tells us that nothing will last, so why bother?

What is it, then, that gives meaning to our lives? Does he have an answer? YES he does and chapter three he tells us:

The present.

You know the song: “To everything, turn, turn, turn...”

“A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.”

If the future is meaningless and the past is futile, what can we do? We can live right now... we can concentrate on the steps and live in this moment.

Meaning is found, not by increasing your perspective, Solomon teaches, not by thinking of the past and the future, but by narrowing your focus, and thinking about right now. This moment is filled with meaning.

There is a time for tearing down and a time for building up, a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering them together, a time for seeking and a time for losing, a time for silence and a time for speaking, a time for war and a time for peace.

The question is not whether something is right or wrong... it is whether it is right or wrong at this moment.

The impact of this teaching is huge: It means that change is possible. The things I did in the past are irrelevant because they were done at a different time, under a different set of circumstances. They may have been right or they may have been wrong, but they do not define who I am right now.

It also means that the future does not determine who we are, what is most decisive is this moment. This moment has the potential to make all the difference. Living at our best means getting the timing right.

The ball player at bat, the doctor in the operating room, the student taking the test, the friend who is asked for advice... the decisive action is in the moment. Living in the moment means getting the timing right: the right swing for the right pitch, the right procedure for the specific illness, the right answer and the right advice given at the right moment. Living life fully is about getting the timing right.

On the minds of every American right now are the upcoming Presidential elections. And just as it in our individual lives, so it is in the life of our country, we are approaching a decisive moment, a moment where we have to make a decision. I don't think it is an understatement to say that many people in our country are unhappy about the choices in front of us.

This has been a remarkably different election season. A colleague of mine was asked: "Do you think that if a Jew was running for president of the United States there would be lots of fighting?" He answered: "In this election both candidates have Jews as 'in laws,' and look how much fighting we already have, can you imagine if we had a Jewish candidate!"

"A season is set for everything..." and this is the season for voting. We may not happy with our choices, but we have to look at the choices in front of us and make the best possible decision for this moment.

I'm not going to tell you who to vote for. Some of you support Donald Trump and some, Hillary Clinton,... and you will vote for whoever you think is right.

What upsets me the most, however, is that I have heard many people say: "I don't like either candidate, so I am not going to vote for President," or "I am going to vote for a third-party candidate (even though I don't really want them, either)."

Now is not the time to say "Utter futility, all is futile." Now is the time to do the best we can in this moment, even when the choices aren't perfect. Make your vote meaningful. Don't throw it away!

There are important things going on in this world and they will impact us, not just as Americans, but as Jews. When we step back and look at what is happening in our world — not just in the United States — but throughout the world, it is clear that this is a decisive moment. Our world is steadily marching towards the extremes.

Not just in this country, but throughout the world: The Brexit vote in Great Britain, with its populist overtones, the growing power of the hard right in countries like France, Germany, the former Soviet Union countries, and Russia, the emerging power of the extreme left in our country, with its disturbing efforts to stifle dissent on college campuses, including the BDS movement to cast Israel, and all Jews, as colonialists and racists.

"Intersectionality Matters" was a sign I saw held up around the Democratic National Convention. Most of us have no idea what that is. Intersectionality is the dangerous idea that all leftist causes are related... all "oppressed" people — women, blacks, gay and lesbian people, transgender, Palestinians, and so forth,

they are all interconnected. They are all being oppressed by the same white, male, Zionist, colonial, forces. Those who espouse intersectionality label anyone who deviates from their opinion as racist, imperialist, and Zionist. They attempt to stifle dissent on college campuses and to prevent Israeli academicians, or anyone who is deemed by these groups to be pro-Israel, whether they are American professors or students on campus, from speaking.

History has demonstrated that frustrated and angry people often make bad decisions. We Jews have suffered over and over again when frustrated and angry people have taken over.

In a world moving towards the extreme we need to raise our voices. Of course, Black Lives Matter: All lives matter. Immigrants matter. Israel matters. the Republican Party matters, the Democratic Party matters, business matters, fair taxes matter, freedom of speech matters, gays, lesbians, and straight people matter, the center matters, moderation matters, what we do at this moment, in our lives, in our community, and in our nation, matters.

This moment is a decisive moment.

This summer on the flight to Israel I saw a movie called Eddie the Eagle. It was a dramatization, a bio flick, about Eddie “the Eagle” Edwards, a tenacious British underdog ski jumper who charmed the world at the 1988 Winter Olympics. Eddie did not have a chance in the world of winning an Olympic medal, but he so wanted to be an Olympian and represent his country that he found a sport where Great Britain did not participate in the Winter Olympics and began to training. With no competition from any other Brits, he would learn ski jumping, and join the British team at the games.

Though he charmed the world because of his spirit, his story doesn't have a fairy tale ending. He didn't win a medal at the games, but, at the end of the movie, he is paired on his final jump with the top ski jumper in the world. And in the elevator on their way to the top, the soon to be gold medalist, his competitor, turns to Eddie and says: "You and I aren't that different. To us it isn't about winning or losing. It's about giving our very best effort at this moment. Win or lose, we must attempt our very best. That is what matters."

To do the very best that we can, at this moment, in these circumstances. That is all we can do. To recognize that it is not what we do tomorrow, or what happened yesterday that is important, but who are and who we will be in this moment... that is what gives life meaning, and what makes this moment worth living.

Rosh Hashanah is called HAYOM "the day,"

When the shofar is sounded, we say: HAYOM HARAT OLAM, Today is the creation of a new world.

When we read in our prayer book: "Let us declare the greatness of THIS DAY" we are reminded that this day is "YOM HADIN, the Day of Judgement."

The Shofar blast itself is a wakeup call!

It screams: "Today," not yesterday, not tomorrow, TODAY.

Now: to be the best Jew; the best friend, the best mother or father, the best spouse... the best American, the best human being we can be.

It was Victor Frankel, a survivor of Auschwitz, who wrote:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a human but one thing: ... to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would become the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate or whether you would choose instead to be free.

The Shofar is the sound of freedom. It will be heard, tradition teaches, at the end of time, proclaiming freedom and liberty throughout the world.... Let something of that Shofar sound awaken us today to the fact that this moment is the moment.

Shanah Tovah!