

On The Passage Of Time: Treasuring Our Most Precious Commodity

It was nearly a year ago, while spending a few months on sabbatical, when I found myself in the presence of a master spiritual teacher. While I had read many books, visited many synagogues, and spent some wonderful time studying the wisdom of our tradition during those months, there was one singular experience that was among the most uplifting and enlightening. There was one master teacher with whom I was privileged to spend an evening. An evening made up of an amazing combination of singing, sermonizing, and spirituality.

His name? In New Jersey, we just call him "Bruce."

Yes, I'm talking about the wise and spiritual Bruce Springsteen. In celebration of my first fifteen years in the rabbinate, and the beginning of my sabbatical, Jane-Rachel surprised me with tickets to "Springsteen on Broadway." For those who have not seen the show (either live or on Netflix), he performs in an intimate theater setting, and fills the evening with a combination of classic Bruce Springsteen music interwoven with the story of his life and the lessons he learned along the way.

Perhaps it is because I am a rabbi, or maybe it's just because I'm a religious person who sees and hears many things through a spiritual lens, but I really felt as if the show was one long, well-crafted, soul-filling sermon.

What was the main topic of his sermon, the theme that ran throughout?

This sermon's topic was time: the passage of time, what we do with the moments that we have been blessed with on this earth, and how we hold onto the memories of the time that has been lost.

Springsteen began by talking about his childhood, describing his neighborhood in Freehold, NJ.

In our front yard, only a few feet from our porch, stood the grandest tree in town. It was a towering beautiful copper beech tree. And on sunny days I lived under its branches. On slow summer nights, I would sit with my friends, listening for the ice cream truck and listening for my grandmother's voice calling me back inside. We lived spitting distance from the Catholic church. I literally grew up surrounded by God, and my relatives- all of us in 5 houses on two adjoining streets- and when the church bells rang, we would gather to stand witness to weddings, and funerals...

We would watch as people would gather; watch as people were brought to the neighborhood cemetery on the outskirts of town, family would come to the burials of relatives and friends, and me and my sister would play among the gravestones-

As the show continued, Bruce told the stories of his long and somewhat improbable journey, celebrating his blessings, honoring various individuals

who influenced him and recounting powerful moments, and grieving for those who are no longer with him.

Towards the end of the show, like any masterful storyteller, he circled back to where he began. He recalled:

It was a beautiful fall and November evening- and I drove back to my neighborhood where I grew up...all I know is the streets were empty and the place looked like it was locked down since 1955. The church was silent.... No weddings, funerals, I rolled another 50 yards up the block to visit my tree-

And it was gone.

It had been cut down since I had last drove through...

I got out of the car, and looked down, and there was a square of musty earth that held the remaining snakes of its roots on the edge of a parking lot. So I reached down, picked up some of the dirt- and my heart sank like a kid who had an irretrievable loss, like some piece of me was gone... It was just that it had been there long before I was and I assumed it would be there long after I was.... It was at the center of our street and it had rooted our neighborhood for so long....

My great tree's life couldn't be ended so easily- because it is history, and history matters- it had stood witness to everything that had happened on these small streets beneath its arms...all the joy, all the heartbreak, all the life...

...I sat there on my street that night, mourning my old tree.¹

When the Boss was done, I sat there in stunned silence. I was crying.

¹ Netflix, Springsteen on Broadway, slightly paraphrased

I was crying because I knew in my core, in my soul, exactly what he was trying to say. I understood in a visceral and deep way that he was giving a yontif sermon. He didn't know that, but I did.

His message, one that may not be uniquely Jewish, but one that is core to Jewish tradition, core to Jewish values, core to the lives we as Jews are meant to live.

It's all about **Time, our most precious and most fleeting gift.**

Once it is gone, like that tree, it is only the memories that remain. Memories that are to be honored, memories that are to be treasured; memories that we didn't realize, at the time, were anything particularly holy or sacred. But every moment has the potential to be special, to be sacred. If only we would slow down enough and be present enough to make it so.

Hayom- we say throughout the liturgy. *Hayom*, we chant repeatedly at the end of our service. Today. Today is the day that matters. Each day is a day that matters. Each year is a year that matters. On Rosh Hashana we gather together to sanctify time, to sanctify each day, to sanctify each year. We gather to remind ourselves that each day presents us with the opportunity to create something new, and that one of the *most common mistakes*, one of

the *most common sins* that we commit throughout the year, is squandering these opportunities.

Hayom Harat Olam is a phrase that is used throughout the Musaf service today and tomorrow. In seeking to understand this phrase, Rabbi Mark Greenspan teaches:

*Hayom Harat Olam, does not mean "Today the world **was** created," (as it is often translated), but rather "Today the world **is being** created." Rosh Hashanah has something to teach us about the present. Each day marks a new beginning, an opportunity to start over; a chance to renew all that has grown old...*

According to one rabbinic tradition, it was not the world but the first human beings who were created on Rosh Hashanah. According to this Midrash, the creation of the world began on the twenty-fifth day of Elul and culminated on Rosh Hashanah, the first of Tishrei. Rosh Hashanah then, marks the beginning of humanity, not the beginning of the world.

On Rosh Hashanah, the first human beings lived out the entirety of existence. The Midrash tells us what happened on that first day, hour by hour. In the first hour God decided to create humanity; in the second, God consulted with the angels concerning the creation of human beings; and in the third hour, God gathered earth from which humanity was fashioned. In the fourth and fifth hours 'God kneaded the dust and jointed the part' and in the six, seventh, and eight hours, God stood the first human beings up, breathed life into them and placed them in the garden. What happened in the final hours of that first day? God commanded them not to eat from the tree of life, watched as they disobeyed, and then passed judgment on them in the eleventh hour. Finally, in the twelfth hour, the Midrash says God forgave their trespass. Adam and even 'went forth from the Holy One's presence free.'

In other words, birth, formation, rebellion, judgment, repentance, and redemption, all of life's transformational moments, took place on Rosh Hashanah. All of life unfolded and took place in a single day...

*Imagine thinking about our lives in this way. **Each moment has infinite potential. Just as every life is like an entire world, every moment is an eternity.** When we awake each day the entire world lies before us; what will we make of it? A wasted day is a wasted life...*

Like the first human beings we are born, we develop, we rebel, we obey, we are judged, and we are forgiven. Each day is an opportunity to create a new universe for ourselves and for others. There is no yesterday and tomorrow, only Hayom, only today. What will we do with this day while it's still here?²

Each moment has infinite potential. Each moment is like an eternity.

A wasted day is a wasted life...Each day is an opportunity: Only we are often too busy to notice. We are too rushed to pay attention. We have too many other things on our mind. We are stressed out, distracted, so easily distracted, that we fail to notice the potential in each sacred moment that we have been given.

But our friends will not be there forever. Our family will not be there forever. Our homes, our neighborhoods, our neighbors, our acquaintances, won't be there forever. Even that tree, that glorious tree in front of our home, with deep roots and a sturdy trunk, under whose shade we used to sit, may someday be taken down.

² Greenspan, 305-306, in Elkins, *Rosh Hashanah Readings*

Living with this sensibility is certainly not easy, and may not even be possible on a daily basis. That is why our tradition gave us Shabbat each week. To exercise the muscle of recognizing, honoring, and acting upon the preciousness of time; the sacredness of each week. That is why our tradition gives us Rosh Hodesh each month- to mark the passage of one month and the beginning of a new one. That is why our tradition gives us so *many* holidays throughout the year, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Passover, and Shavuot (to name a few) to pause and sanctify time. That is why once a year, we gather together in this space, on this long Rosh Hashanah day, to mark the end of one year and to celebrate the beginning of another.

Over and over again, our tradition is reminding us that there is nothing more precious in this life than time. Over and over again our tradition is asking us to consider: Where has the time gone- this week, this month, this year? And what exactly have we done with all of that time? Like the words from the old hit Broadway show, Rent: *"Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes. Five hundred twenty five thousand moments so dear. Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes. How do you measure, measure a year?"*

So this morning I want all of us to consider how we are using the precious time that we are given each and every day? Do we honor the time that we

have been given, or do we waste it? Do we pay lip service to the notion that each moment is precious, each day is precious; or are we too busy “making a living” to truly be “living” at all?

Living in this way takes work, it takes discipline, and -- most of all -- it takes awareness. Are we even awake to notice that each moment that passes is so incredibly precious? Are we truly aware that each day that goes by is one that can never be re-captured? Why is it that we often only notice this when we get sick, when a loved one gets sick, or when someone dies? What might we be able to do to live with more awareness, more purpose, and more intention to sanctify each moment that we have been blessed to receive? How might we learn to practice the discipline of **this** day; of **“hayom living”** throughout the rest of the calendar year? How might we remember that time is something that, once spent, we can never get back?

One of the messages of these sacred days is that we are called to begin treating time like the precious commodity that it is. We are being tasked to make daily, conscious decisions to live life according to the priorities, relationships, and values that *we claim* to hold so dear.

There is a story told about a young girl’s father who had given her a silver dollar to put into her bank. She excitedly ran off to her room to “deposit” the coin. However, in a few minutes she returned and handed the silver coin back to her father.

"Daddy," she said sadly, "here's your dollar back. I can't get it into my bank."

"Why not?" her concerned father asked.

"It's too full," she said, obviously disappointed.

Her father accompanied her back to her room and, sure enough, her bank was too full to accept even one more coin. It was stuffed with pennies.

Author and minister Steve Goodier asks us to consider whether or not our lives are like that bank. Are we so filled with pennies -- with errands, obligations, and activities that are of no real lasting value -- that there is simply no room left in the bank of our lives for that which is truly important, for the silver dollars? Are our priorities in order and if not, can we remove the pennies that are simply taking up space, that we will likely not even know are missing?³

We should ask ourselves- what exactly are we doing with our time each day? Is there something more important that we want to be doing? Is there one thing that we wish we had more time to do? One person that we want to spend more time with or to call more often? One new or old hobby or habit that we want to bring into our lives? What is stopping us?

³ <http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/>

In order to make these decisions, in order to focus on, and make room for, the “silver dollars” in our lives, we have to first be willing to slow down enough to assess what we are doing with our time. We have to slow down enough to assess where we are wasting our time and examine what exactly gets overlooked or deprioritized. If we are so “busy” running around all of the time, we cannot possibly stop to accurately assess just what it is that we are passing by, ignoring, missing, or even avoiding.

Shabbat, Festivals, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, all share a component of “slowing down” time. As I rabbi I will often hear comments about the “length” of services, especially on these days. I know that services can sometimes feel slow and may even take a long time. I was always the child that “counted” how many pages were left until we were done. But as an adult, I have come to realize that sometimes “slow time” is a good thing. Sometimes, being forced to slow down in a world where we are otherwise always racing around (myself included) is exactly what we need.

So, as you slow down a bit today, taking time to sit with family, friends, and loved ones in services; spending some time in the slow lane instead of the fast lane for a change, ask yourself to consider some of the following:

- How have you spent your time this year?
- What have you prioritized?
- What, or who, have you neglected?
- And, what are you going to do about it?

Hayom. Today. And each day that follows through this coming year?

This past summer I spent some time looking through old photos. Photos of my parents, grandparents, and relatives. Photos of my childhood. Photos of our wedding, our children as infants and toddlers. Photo after photo I kept saying to myself: “Wow, what happened?” **Where did the time go?**

I know that I am not alone in this kind of experience. I asked each of you to bring in a photo today that could be titled: “Where did the time go?” I want you to take it out for a minute. Look at it. Really look at it. Share it with your neighbor. **(Pause for one minute)**

Why is that picture, that moment in time, so important? What is it about that photo that reminds you of the preciousness of time? If you are in that picture, what would you tell your younger self about the value of time? If your loved ones are in that picture, consider the time that you have spent,

are spending, or hope to spend with them. Is it "slow time," quality time, intentional time?

Here is my picture.

There are dozens of pictures that I could have chosen for this exercise.

Pictures from my childhood, pictures of relatives no longer living, pictures of Jane-Rachel and me when we were first dating, pictures of our children as infants and toddlers. But I chose a picture from my college graduation with my Aunt Ruthann and Uncle Larry who travelled from Tucson to St. Louis to be with me on that day.

I have always been particularly close with this aunt and uncle, Tanta Ruchel and Leibel Bachie (as I call them). During my teenage years it was this aunt and uncle who helped provide a sense of stability in my life. It was the two of them who -- in addition to my father, of course -- helped raise me, influenced me, and helped me to develop into the person that stands before you today. I look at this picture and wonder where the time has gone.

It was just the other day that Uncle Larry and I would walk together to synagogue each week. After services, Uncle Larry and I would pick out our pieces of cake from the kiddush, and then walk home together. It was just the other day that my Aunt Ruthann was picking me up from school, or

karate, telling me to take my foot down off the dashboard and asking me about my homework. It was just the other day that my uncle the engineer was helping me with my science experiment to test whether or not I could cook food with the heat of the sun. It was just the other day that we celebrated holiday meals at their home, elaborate meals that my aunt would prepare for 40 people at a time, making sure that all of the kids and grandkids, including me and my sisters, her nephew and nieces, felt at home. It was just the other day that they were both young and healthy and living busy vibrant lives, my aunt running my father's office, and then eventually running her synagogue gift shop; my uncle working and then volunteering around the community; the two of them travelling to NY to visit me in rabbinical school and travelling around California to spend time with their friends and children and grandchildren.

Those days now seem long ago. I still call my aunt and uncle regularly, and I try to see them at least once a year in California, but they can no longer travel, and they can barely even talk on the phone. My aunt has terrible Parkinsons and my uncle can hardly hear. Where did the time go? They were just vibrant and healthy. I was just this young college grad.

Why this picture? Because it reminds me that time is never to be wasted; that time is our most precious commodity. It reminds me that people are not to be taken for granted. Loved ones are not to be dismissed because we have work to get done, too much to do, or we are in too much of a hurry. Our health is not to be taken for granted. We could be healthy one day, and not the next. Our blessings are not to be taken for granted. The sacred work of our hands, our purpose, our ability to make a difference on any level, is something to be prioritized Hayom, today- each and every day.

Hayom Harat Olam. Today is the day, inviting us to spend our year, to spend each day, creating moments of meaning, creating memories, creating ourselves. What are we doing with our time? How are we spending our time? How are we wasting our time? What do we want to create with our time, as this New Year is upon us? And what could we possibly be waiting for?

Shanah Tova.