

## **Awareness: Being Present, Moment to Moment**

*Ma Nishtanah Ha-Shanah Ha-Zot Mi-kol Hashanim?* How is this year different from all other years?

Wrong holiday, but the right question. Because how is it not different?

As I stand here this morning, speaking with a full heart, to an empty room, it is hard to find the right words to begin our journey together from one strange year into what will most certainly be another.

On this first day of the Jewish New Year, I find myself thinking back to the beginning of the secular year. In a time pre-global pandemic, when I found myself calmly and blissfully on a Jewish spirituality retreat, practicing mindfulness, meditation, and learning about the deep well of mystical Jewish practices and teachings that can help us learn how to be more awake to our life.

When I left for this partially silent retreat, which I understood would involve a tremendous amount of simply, "sitting still," I was not sure exactly what to expect. Anyone who knows me well understands that I am constantly in motion -- verbally, physically, always rushing from one place to the next. I

am the person who used to love to challenge myself in graduate school to see how much I could get done in-between classes by walking ten Manhattan city blocks to my apartment or to the store and back, during a 15 minute break! Slowing down, sitting still, taking time to be present in any given moment, is something that I have learned how to do in certain circumstances, but it is not exactly my “go to” posture.

Thank God I went to this retreat.

Thank God I went for my neshamah, my soul. Thank God I went for my rabbinate. And thank God I went right before the world turned upside down.

Early on in the retreat, one of our teachers, Rabbi Jonathan Slater, began by telling us a story about what it means to be present in any given moment. The story takes place in the shtetls of Eastern Europe and involves a man who found himself walking to morning minyan to pray.

As he was walking through the shtetl to the shul, he was stopped by a police officer who had had too much to drink and thought he would have some fun harassing a Jew. “Where are you going?” the officer asked. But the man did

not answer. "Where are you going?" the officer demanded more forcefully. Still, no answer. "I demand, Jew, that you tell me where you are going, or I will take you to jail!" Still, no answer. So off they went and the Jew spent the night in jail.

In the morning, once the officer had sobered up a bit, some compassion overtook him. "I am going to let you out," he said to the Jew, "but tell me -- I asked you where you were going, and you wouldn't answer. I asked you again, still, no answer. Where were you going?" To which the Jew replied: **"Who knows where I was going? I thought I was going to morning services, but instead, I ended up here, in jail, with you."**

What's the message? We never know exactly where we are going- do we? We never know exactly what is going to happen next on any given day though we might think that we do. We only have so much control in life, and it isn't nearly as much as we thought, or as much as we had hoped. If we have learned anything over these past six months of coronavirus, we have surely learned this.

Rabbi Slater proceeded to explain to our group that mindfulness practice, both in the secular and in the spiritual realm, is about learning how to be

present to the moment *that we are actually experiencing* so that we can “wake up” to our lives instead of simply going through the motions. As the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism once taught: “*b’makom she-makhshevet adam, sham hu kulo,*” we are situated wherever our mind is focused.

This is often much easier said than done. I will give you a small, but memorable, example. Sometime last year I got a traffic ticket in the mail. The ticket said that I had passed a bus while its stop sign was out. I had NO idea what the ticket was referring to and thought, at first, that it must be a mistake. At that point, I was picking up my kids from a bus every day. I am generally very careful around buses, especially since they carry children just like my own. What did I miss?

Well- when I went to traffic court, I saw the video. Sure enough, I had gone right by a huge bus with a stop sign clearly sticking out of its side. How could I have done that? Was I day dreaming? Was I distracted? Were my kids yelling? How could I have missed what was right in front of me? Who knows? But I did. I missed the HUGE RED stop sign that was right in front of me and the HUGE YELLOW bus that was right next to me.

I paid my fine, was fortunate to have an understanding prosecutor and judge, and went home quickly to take an eight hour defensive driver's course online to get any points off of my record. During the course I learned that my mistake had a term, *it was called "inattentive blindness."* This is how they describe the phenomenon of going from point A to point B without any idea how you got there.

My friends, these days of Covid-19 have forced us to slow down. They have forced us to stop in so many ways. But have we learned to pay closer attention to our lives, or are we walking through life with "inattentive blindness"?

Cultivating awareness sounds easy enough. But the challenge is that it's hard to be "situated where our mind is focused" when our minds are so often all over the place. And what's worse, like my incident with the stop sign on the bus, we are not usually even aware of our lack of awareness.

And that is a problem. Because **awareness**, as I have come to learn over the past nine months, is the key to living a spiritually meaningful life.

**Awareness** is the key to living a calm, centered, focused and purposeful life. **Awareness** is the key to getting through each and every day,

particularly when they are as incredibly challenging as these days are for all of us right now. **Awareness** is the key to knowing what is actually going on in our lives, and in our world, to enable us to move forward, and sometimes, to make a difference.

Once we wake up to the moment that we are **actually in**, instead of the moment that we would like to be in, or that we wish we weren't in, we will be able to be more compassionate, caring, and loving-- towards ourselves, and towards one another. Once we are able to wake up and notice what is **actually** happening, we can cultivate a sense of calm, purpose, and direction. Once we allow ourselves to cultivate this attitude of continued awareness, we give ourselves the gift of truly living, instead of merely existing.

In a sense this mindfulness practice is about creating "*Hineni*" moments. Like Abraham's response to God's call in our Torah reading tomorrow, or the prayer that will be chanted to open the Musaf service this morning, we declare: "*Hineni*, I am here, I am present." We begin each year with this goal, with this challenge, with the task of learning how to be "present" in our own lives, each moment of each day.

In my lifetime, nowhere have I been more challenged and tested in my efforts to be present than during a global pandemic, working full time to care for the congregation, with a spouse who is also working full time, and with a first grader, and three teenagers in the house. I have tried and tried (sometimes successfully, many times not) to live the cliché advice of “taking things one moment at a time.” I suspect that I am not alone in this. But this is one of the many challenges of this moment in time: to figure out how to say “hineni,” to be awake and present in the moment that is actually unfolding before us, instead of being distracted, stressed out, or oblivious.

The hardest part of this is that we have to fight our natural urge to be in control. The idea is not to quiet anything or stop anything or avoid anything, the idea is not to block out feelings or emotions, but instead to just be aware and present with whatever is happening: inside our heads, inside our homes, and outside in our world. When we are aware and present, we can consciously set an intention -- a way we want to be or a desire to change -- and return to it again and again. In other words, by being aware and present, we can do a type of teshuvah, a type of turning and returning.

Indeed teshuvah is exactly the type of work that we are to be focusing on during these Days of Awe. Teshuvah is a process of returning to the moment that we are in, returning to our best selves, returning to our loved ones, and returning to God, as we wake up to what is actually happening in our lives.

Our tradition holds that we must repent the day before we die. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer taught that, since none of us can ever know when our time is up, we should do teshuvah, we should repent and return, every single day lest any given day be our last (Shabbat 153a).

The chance to return is always before us. The chance to be awake to a given moment, to return to the present and to what is happening in our own lives and in the lives of those around us, and to set an intention for how to respond.

This is incredibly empowering. Because literally, with every breath we take, we are given a chance to start again. Any good parent knows that the most effective way to handle a child's temper tantrum is to remind that child to stop, breathe, and start again. The advice seems so simple, and yet as we get older we get more and more distracted, less and less aware, and less



and less practiced at stopping, taking that breath, and returning to our best selves to start again.

Rabbi Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, the Kedushat Levi, taught that:

*at each moment, the breath seeks to leave us, and the blessed Holy One, in great mercy, watches over us from moment to moment and has compassion for us, and does not let the breath depart. In this manner, when we raise this thought to awareness, from moment to moment, we (will recognize that we) actually are created anew as a new creature. (This generates enthusiasm to serve the blessed Creator, since everything that is new or renewed sparks enthusiasm...<sup>1</sup>)*

What do our lives look like if we recognize that every breath, literally every breath, is a gift from God, is a chance to serve God, and an opportunity to bring God's presence into the world? What does our life look like if we were to be so incredibly grateful for each moment, because no moment is like the one that came before it? And what if we approached each new moment with an awareness of that preciousness, and a gratitude towards God for enabling us to take that new breath.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rosh Hashanah, IJS, retreat one, day 2*

We all get SO excited when we get new “things”: new clothes, new gadgets, a new car. Why is it that we are not excited, or even aware, when we get a new breath, a new “moment?” Especially now- when we get these moments thousands of times a day, and there are so many, so, so many fellow citizens, friends, and loved ones who have been denied these moments because they have lost their lives to Covid-19.

We cannot control this terrible pandemic. We cannot control people who choose to ignore science. We cannot control people who are bent on politicizing mask wearing, or a virus that could not care one bit if you are a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Communist! We cannot control the nearly 200,000 deaths in the U.S. alone, and nearly 20 million cases of Covid-19 worldwide.

**But we can** control ourselves. We can take time to practice, each day, taking a deep breath, waking up and returning to the moment that we are in; recognizing that it is a gift; recognizing that this new moment and new breath was not guaranteed, and then setting an intention as to how we would like to proceed from that space, how we want to move forward.

What's more, when we return to appreciate any given moment, we can also return to the intentions that we had hoped to set for that moment. None of us start out on any given day, at any given moment, wanting to be short tempered with our loved ones, or irritated with strangers. Most of us do not intend to be hurtful to our co-workers, snarky with our children, snippy with our life partners, impatient with our aging parents. But we do it, all the time. This Rosh Hashana, I wish to pass along to all of you advice that Rabbi Jonathan Slater gave our clergy group during our retreat:

*"We always have a choice- always, of how to be, how to respond, how to return to a given intention. And when we have a new intention and when we enact it, and when we change course, then we are a "new being." Then we are a beriyah chadasha, a new creation- and then we allow God to move through us as we free ourselves from our own narrow places, our own mitzrayims, our own places of enslavement, our own personal Egypts.*

Think back to last Rosh Hashanah. What was your intention? What was the one thing that you were going to work on this year? How did you do? Think back to last month, or last week- what was your intention- when it came to your health, your spouse, your child, your grandchild, your co-worker, your spiritual practice? How did you do? If you did not reach the place that you wanted to reach, don't beat yourself up. That is not helpful.

Instead, try this: Take some deep breaths. Seriously. Find a space today where you can have ten minutes of quiet. Set a timer and sit. Breathe in and out for ten minutes and focus on nothing except your breathing. Remind yourself that you are alive. Remind yourself that each breath is a gift from God.

After all, isn't that what these Days of Awe are all about? A chance to return. A chance to try again. A chance to wake up to our lives?

What is happening for you today? What would you like to accomplish today? What relationship would you like to improve today? Who do you need to reach out to, today? What intention do you have for yourself today? What things, people, projects, priorities are simply a distraction?

God has given each one of us another breath. God has given you another moment, a moment that we know all too well, especially in these days of such great loss, is not guaranteed. How are you using your moment? What is your purpose right now? And if you are not living in the way that you intended, how might you learn to take a deep breath and try again?

May this be a sweet and, more importantly, a safe and healthy new year for all of us as we strive to remember that every moment is precious, and every moment is a gift, and every moment is a chance to try again. As we journey forward into the unknown, painfully aware of just how little control we have in life, let us not forget that *we do have some*. And then, let us try to return, to do teshuvah, and proceed accordingly. Shanah Tovah.