

Holy Time  
Rosh Hashanah Eve 5780  
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It is hard to believe a year has passed since we last gathered in this Great Hall of The Cooper Union. Much has transpired in our lives and in our world. There were milestone family moments—some joyous and others profoundly painful. There were days when we felt uplifted and times, when the world itself seemed to be crashing in around us. Time seemingly passes ever so swiftly as each of us ages. The Jewish New Year provides the frame through which we peer at time, past, present and future. Like the *Shofar* service—where we recall Abraham’s ancient trial of faith, we praise God’s unflappable sovereignty, and we yearn for a future redemption for all, *Rosh Hashanah*—these *Noraim*, provide a ten-day microcosm for reflection, remorse, determination, forgiveness and hope. The year is collapsed in our mind’s eye into this 10-day prism. During these holy days, our lips will utter scores of prayers and blessings. Our prayers will span the breadth of human emotion: regret, petition, contrition and gratitude. How can our prayers during this constricted window of time truly address all of our missteps and failed aspirations of the past year? Will God be listening?

Well, actually it hasn’t really been a year since we last gathered, has it? In fact it’s been one year and twenty-one days since the Jewish year 5779 began. We all know the adage, the Jewish holidays are either early or late...and we know, they are always on time. Due to the Jewish calendar’s lunar cycle we had an extra twenty-one days in our secular calendar, to accomplish all the goals we set last year: twenty-one more days to ponder how far we’ve strayed from the mark, of being more compassionate, more loving, more patient, more determined, more just. So, how did we all make the most of those extra twenty-one days? Did we push the envelope of personal responsibility or family harmony one notch higher on the ladder of personal accomplishments with those extra twenty-one days? If I were a betting rabbi, I would say no.

This ten-day period of *teshuvah*—of turning--is often referred to as the High Holy Days. But what exactly is holy, yet alone, High Holy? Merriam Webster has several definitions for holy: 1) Exalted or worthy of complete devotion, or 2) having a divine quality. Yes, and, let me suggest a third option: holy is that which is set apart from the ordinary—that which makes time itself unique and sacred. Ours is the task to expand the horizon of holy beyond these 10 days and stand in the presence of the holy each day of the year.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that when the Second Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, the rabbis had to shift the communal understanding of holy—from a physical structure to that of time. Finding God in one’s life no longer was linked to a sacrificial system with priests serving as intermediaries between the people and the Divine. Individuals had to discover and create holy moments for themselves. As Jews constantly faced expulsion sanctifying time, rather than a place, became a lifeline for Jewish survival.

*Rosh Hashanah*...this sacred night in time ...hinges on the month of *Elul*, the month that ended just two hours ago. Throughout the month of *Elul*, our *Kabbalat Shabbat* services began with the piercing blast of the *Shofar*. It cried out to us—urging us to take stock of our past actions, reminding us that the gates of life and death, once again will be suspended in holy time, between tonight and the end of *N’ilah* on *Yom Kippur*.

We will pray over the next ten days that our repentance is sincere and our resolve to be better will secure us a place in the Book of Life for the year 5780. Even the atheists among us

pray, if not to God, to that part deep within, for more courage—more resolve to stray less from the path they know, their humanity compels them to walk upon.

Rabbi Alvin Fine wrote the poem: Life is a Journey—written for our previous High Holy Day *machzor*, Gates of Repentance. The poem preceded the mourners' *Kaddish* on *Kol Nidre*—the Holy of Holiest days. It is also precedes *Kaddish Yatom* in tonight's service. The last stanza of the poem, familiar to many here, reads, "*From defeat to defeat to defeat, Until, looking backward or ahead, we see that victory lies not at some high place along the way but in having made the journey stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage. Birth is a beginning and death a destination and life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage to life everlasting*".

These *Noraim*—Days of Awe...days of dread...indeed, provide us with a precious, sacred, time out—time away from the mundane and profane, and they beckon us to re-engage, re-prioritize what makes life precious, even sacred. How do we, like a rock climber's carabiner--the metal ring that tethers a freely running rope--hinge ourselves to the sacred times in our lives? How do we extend 'the holiness' of this New Year's Eve into 365 awesome, sacred days? According to Jewish tradition, the path to unearthing the holy each day is not such a difficult task. It *only* requires that each of us utter 100 prayers or blessings each day. Let me do the math for you--one hundred blessings a day averages one blessing every 9.6 minutes a person is awake. I see the look on your faces even with these stage lights glaring in my eyes. For observant Jews, in theory, the task is not so daunting...praying three times a day and reciting the requisite blessings when they wake, sleep, pray eat, etc...pushes observant Jews to the 100 blessings finish line. Each of those blessings, ***IF*** recited with intentionality and not just by rote, creates sacred moments in time. Clearly, this is a greater challenge for all of us in the sanctuary who don't pray fervently three times each day. And even for the most observant Jews, if prayers are recited in a perfunctory manner...a task to plow through or executed without *kavanah*—meaningful intention, they, too, fall short of the holiness finish line.

The origin of this 100-Blessings tradition is two-fold:

In Deuteronomy 10:12 Moses, speaks to the Israelites and says,

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֹת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:

And now, Israel, what does *Adonai* your God require of you, but to fear *Adonai*, your God, to walk in all God's ways, and to love God, and to serve *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

"What does God ask of you?" The Talmud vocalizes *Mah* to *Me-ah*, the number 100, and extrapolates that God requires 100 blessings from us each and every day.

The second source comes from the biblical story of a plague during King David's reign in which 100 people died each day. The plague, was believed to have been caused by God in response to the Israelites lack of faithfulness. King David, to counter God's decree, implemented the recitation of 100 blessings each day—and the plague abated. Their holy utterances were prayed with sincerity and enabled life-saving change.

What about us here tonight? How do we serve God with all of our hearts and souls? What do we do each day that provides spiritual grounding--that we may consider sacred time: yoga, spin classes, a run along the Hudson? Yes, we often we engage in these activities to clear

our minds. I recently met with a bar mitzvah student who loves rock climbing? When I asked him what it does for him, he responded that it enables him to focus—all other stimuli—mental or physical are pushed aside. Indeed, 30 or 60 minutes of physical activity provide emotional release, and aids our physical well-being, but does it strengthen our connections to others, motivate us to go beyond ourselves and do good in our world, or move us closer to God, or do these habitual activities provide the cocoon we need to insulate ourselves from daily upset and challenges? Does they catapult us onto greater rungs of appreciation and gratitude on life's holy ladder? Perhaps, but, more often, no.

Many of us have been reeling by a world replete with violence, lack of civility, racism, bombardment of lies, whether from water companies, drug companies, government officials, and those whom we once trusted. And just last week the word 'retarded' was used to describe Greta Thunberg--unrelenting champion of climate justice in our world. And then there is Israel-facing perhaps a third unprecedented election, and the U.S. House decision to open up impeachment proceedings against the president. We are spiritually, emotionally and physically assaulted by the news headlines and biased and grotesque tweets. I receive a minimum of 15-20 emails each day from both the Democratic and Republican parties--a double blessing! The emails, not surprisingly, have one common thread...instill sufficient fear, panic and hopelessness in the recipient to persuade them to make a repeating donation to X. I find it difficult to comprehend how both parties can be losing an upcoming election for the exact same race, at the exact same moment. I have discovered unsubscribing somehow doesn't work. Like the Gemino Curse in Harry Potter, every time I unsubscribe to a list serve, the amount of emails seems to double and I am inundated with new political friends.

In this month's *Kesher* I wrote about sacred time. Surely, for God, time is eternal—time exists within God. Aristotle posited time has a circular motion. Jewish time rushes to the future as we live each moment. The past and the present serve as the building blocks that move us into the future, the same way our reflection of the year past and our intentions this day chart the course for 5780.

In July of 2017—Time Magazine ran an article on the Jewish relationship to time. The response came from rabbis across the spectrum of Jewish belief...Reform, Orthodox, Conservative Renewal—every flavor of Judaism was captured. Rabbi Laura Novak-Winer, a Reform colleague, in the article, expanding on Rabbi Heschel's previous comment and stated, "Our holidays align with the seasons of the year; our prayer life aligns with the rising and setting of the sun as well as with the generations of those who lived before us and will live after us." Each blessing we recite...whether each day or on sacred Festivals...are set in time." Waking up each morning provides us with the potential of making that day unique.

From the beginning of time, each generation required holy time out. And for us today, as our world spins at lightning speed, and at times we find ourselves reeling down the vortex of time, like preceding generations, God gifted us 52 weeks a year, with a holy time out—with *Shabbat*. *Shabbat*--A day set apart...one that all of us abuse by not fully taking advantage of its rich opportunity to create holy moments. It is ever more important, that for however long we observe *Shabbat*—Friday night...a couple of hours on Saturday...we mark that time as wholly other. In his book *The Sabbath*, Heschel wrote, "To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.

Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern... (p. 3). Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self. "(p.13) Shabbat, whether we attend services, light candles, say *Kiddush*, must provide us with a weekly frame to create sparks of holiness...a day on which we acknowledge the wonder and possibility of the universe...a day on which we express gratitude to our creator...to one another.

I would like to suggest an even greater personal challenge for each of us. Reciting 100 blessings a day is, in all probability, an unrealistic goal. But what about 3 blessings each day...3 times each day when we sanctify time by expressing gratitude for life...for friends...for security...for strength...for resilience...for family...the list, like the acrostic of the Ashamnu we will recite on Yom Kippur...is without end...and if we dig deep inside...we can touch those moments of gratitude that can uplift us...even in moments of emotional darkness...and we can take a moment to acknowledge them...providing a spiritual salve and an injection of affirmation each and every day.

For the past 3 years, on both *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, our community acknowledge sacred personal and communal moments that happened this past year. When the *Torah*, our *Etz Chaim*—our Tree of Life—is taken from the *Aron Hakodesh*—its holy abode—members of this congregation join shoulder to shoulder for a blessing of healing, whether spiritual or physical, whether for themselves or for others. And on Yom Kippur, a similar prayer is offered, but preceded by a blessing, for those who have experienced the miracle of healing or avoided calamity during the past year. Tomorrow, we will follow this same tradition, with one significant change. In past years, people stood under a large tallit that was sewn together by Alex Tansky. Tomorrow those who come forward will stand under a new canopy of blessings...designed by Nancy Katz and executed by Gabrielli *tallit* weavers in Israel. The canopy has 10 stripes, representing the requisite number of people for communal prayer. The stripes are majestic hues of purple and blue. Each side of the canopy is inscribed with specific phrases marking sacred time in our lives.

1. *R'fuat hanefesh v'r'fuat haguf*—For healing of soul and body
2. *She'hech'zart b'nishmati b'chemla*—For returning my soul to me in compassion.
3. *Zeh hayom asah adonain, nagila v'nism'cha bo*-This is the day God has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.
4. *V'shinantam l'vanecha*— you shall teach them to your children-- the lynchpin of the Jewish people. This last phrase, as we know is taken from the *V'ahavta*...we are to teach our children the joy of performing *mitzvot*—*mitzvot* that provide a blueprint for sanctifying time – and when we sanctify time we provide blessing for one another and form sacred community.

Take a moment, close your eyes and think about this past year. How do these four phrases resonate inside of you? How many times have you asked for healing for a loved one—for yourself? How often did you feel grateful the second medical test negated the original fear? What about kvelling at a college graduation or child's first real job? Did you experience moments of despair because of the loss of a loved one or debilitating illness, or because of the violence and hatred oozing from every corner of our country and globe? Were there moments when you caught your breath...when your soul was refreshed and nourished? What were the moments of elation...of sadness? Did you take a moment of sacred time to acknowledge the wonder of those moments in time? Did you make timely moments sacred?

As a congregation we will stand next to each other under this canopy, not only on these Noraim, but, throughout the year. Our religious school children will be consecrated under the

canopy...and, I fervently hope the congregation's next rabbi...surrounded by past and present leadership, will be installed under it as well, and may that day be one of joy and gladness, reflecting the canopy's inscription, הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְהוָה נִגְלָה וְנִשְׁמְחָה בּוֹ זֶה-הַיּוֹם עִשׂ—“This is the day God has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.” The search committee for this congregation's next settled rabbi will spend hours together forming sacred connections. It will be less about the minutia of the search process...less about the answers to questions and more about the human connection that made the time spent so unique—so holy. Similarly, for those congregants who went to Israel or participated in the Civil Rights Journey, or will be in Morocco in March—each one can point to a specific program, specific meal, specific locations that were special—but, it was the precious time spent together...the minutes and hours that linked us and crafted unity and meaning.

Personally, the passage of time these past three years has gone by so quickly. I recall standing on this bimah 3 years ago and speaking about transition and resilience. The congregation, indeed, had traversed treacherous, spiritual waters. Each time a rabbi finds a new spiritual home, they embark upon sacred time. No less for an interim rabbi. I have been blessed these past three years. It is not about the physicality of that spiritual home. In fact, NYC is home to many more grand synagogue structures. What transcends the space is the sacred time, that stands out like the statcato blasts of the shofar, each one unique...each one inextricably linked to the one before and after it. I want to take a moment of personal privilege. To all of you who traversed those trying times of years past...to those who journeyed with me on this sacred path of time...Thank you, with all my heart. And in the years ahead when Carole and I reflect upon our four years at The Village Temple, we will ever be grateful for this precious slice of time.

In the Times article, Gershon Winkler a non-denominational rabbi from Denmark, draws a poignant connection between the Hebrew words, *Z'man*-meaning time and the word, *hazmanah*—invitation—both words share the same three letter Hebrew root. In quoting his teacher, Rav Efraim Zeitchek, Rabbi Winkler invites us to understand our relationship to time. He wrote, quoting psalm 144:4, “The life of a person is like a breath exhaling; their days are like a passing shadow”. The *Midrash* adds, “Not like the shadow of a tree, but like the shadow of a bird while she is flying”: The shadow of a tree vanishes when the sun shifts, but the shadow of a bird moves with the bird in flight. Rav Zeitchik taught, “We journey with and within time. “We ride the waves of time, whether the tides are high or low. We eat time, we drink time, are shadowed by time. How can we truly know life when whatever happened is already past, and what is going to happen is yet unknown, and we are oblivious to what is happening?” The missing link is the “invitation,” the knowledge of time in the present, the shadow of our wings while we are in flight. Otherwise, “We can live even a thousand years and still feel like it's been only a single day” (Zohar, Vol. 1, folio 223b). Time is the thread, and we are the weavers. And our lives are the fabric waiting to be woven.”

Indeed time invites us to acknowledge the moments that we make sacred.

מָה יְהוָה אֲלֹהֵינוּ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמּוֹךְ --What does God require of us. To acknowledge each day those moments in our lives, that uplift the soul, that bring us closer to walking with God and walking with one another. On *Yom Kippur* morning we will read, ‘choose life so that you and your offspring will live.’ May that life be replete with the blessings we receive, the ones we create, and the ones we utter. *Keyn Yihi Ratzon*.