



Yom Kippur Sermon 5772/2011

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“A Sermon of the Moment”

Last year I read an article in the Wall Street Journal that I could not believe. The CEO of Google told his 24,000 employees that they were no longer allowed to use laptop computers during meetings. That’s right: the leader of Google, the company whose name is now a verb, the designer of the android phone operating system and the internet search engine that could keep the most disciplined person distracted for hours, publicly acknowledged the danger that these distractions posed for his own company.

I once witnessed a parent sitting in the bleachers at the soccer field. She was rooting for daughter, and writing her grocery list, while she spoke to her mother on the phone. And I am no different. Last week I fed two babies in bouncer seats, side by side, holding bottles up to their mouths, and all the while singing the alphabet song with Shoshana. I thought it was a big success, until I ended up burping both boys for an extra half hour because I did such a bad job. It’s safe to say that if we spend our lives doing too many things at once, we risk not being able to do any of them well.

A recent scientific study shows that not only do we do our best work when we’re focused on what’s in front of us, but we are also at our happiest. Harvard researchers asked over two thousand people, at random times, what they were doing, and how they felt – ironically using an iPhone application. They found that people, on average, spend 47 percent of their time daydreaming. They also found that when people were daydreaming, they were considerably less happy than when they were focused on what they were doing. So we have proof. What we really want to do in this life is be in the moment. And we have proof of how bad we are at it.

Maybe today will be different. Yom Kippur, of all the days of the year, is the one on which more Jews than any other day stop what they are doing, unplug, and show up. In this morning’s Torah reading, Moses tells the people, *Atem n’tzavim kulchem hayom*. Here you stand today, all of you. According to our tradition, every Jew of every generation was standing there together, listening to Moses on the mountain that day. Every one of us transcended distance and time to be present at that moment three thousand

years ago. The word *n'tzavim's* meaning is not only to stand, but to be situated, to fully be there, to root our whole selves at that location. Likewise, then, we could say that every Jew of every age is here now, too, standing together before the gates of repentance, hoping to be let in.

Today, we hope, the task at hand has our full attention. But during our daily lives, this kind of single-minded focus gets more difficult every day. Rabbi Hillel asks us the famous question, "*Im lo achshav, eimatai?* If not now, when?" Usually, we interpret this as a call to action, that we cannot put off the things we must do: to love each other, to pursue justice and peace. This year, as I reflect on my life and on the life of our community, I find myself interpreting it differently. While we must reflect on our past actions and strive to overcome the challenges of the future, Yom Kippur calls on us to bring our whole selves to this moment. If it is human nature to spend half of our time letting our minds wander anywhere *but* what we are doing, the task of repentance – and indeed the task of life – demands that we rise above that nature. To slightly reframe Hillel's words, if we cannot focus on the now, what are we doing?

We live in a society that is built on multitasking. Technology and the fast pace of life have rendered the idea of doing one thing at a time obsolete. We see people texting on the subway, reading the news on the ski lift, making phone calls hands free while driving their grocery carts. If you ask me, all this is incredibly awesome. The flexibility and access we have today is exciting and, in many ways, freeing. But it does make it hard to bring our whole selves to one location at a time. In a moment, the buzz of a call or an email takes us miles away from the activity we are engaged in. The connectedness of our age can be ironically disconnecting.

Technology aside, our world places incredible demands on our attention. The pressures of deadlines, of juggling our lives at work, at home, or both, pile up in our minds, just as our mail piles up on our desks and in our email accounts. Meanwhile, other difficulties hover over us, worrying about our loved ones, caring for their needs, contemplating our own disappointments and fretting about the future. On any given day, it's hard not feel overwhelmed. With all this on our minds, how can we stay focused on the moment?

Writer James Gordon Gilkey gives us a surprising and insightful answer. We believe, he says, that "at every moment we have a dozen different things to do, a dozen problems to solve... This is a common mental picture and it is totally false... Imagine that there is an hour glass on your desk. Connecting the bowl at the top with the bowl at the bottom is a tube so thin that only one grain of sand can pass through it at a time. That is the

true picture of your life, even on a super busy day. The crowded hours come to you always one moment at a time. That is the only way they can come. The day may bring many tasks, many problems..., but invariably they come in single file.”

This teaching turns our question on its head. Not long ago I was participating in a conference call. I figured, since I wasn't speaking on the call, I would read some of my mail while I listened. Afterwards, I realized I couldn't remember anything that was said on the call – and, I had to reread all of my mail! Gilkey's words remind us that as smart as we may think we are, we can really only focus on one thing at a time, that one grain of sand that is at the center of the hourglass. Each grain commands our attention in its time. We may *think* we can listen to our loved one *and* worry about a problem at work, but in fact our loved one's words go unheard, while the problem still weighs on us. If not now, when? If we are not focused on now, what are we doing?

We need help to be in the moment, and Judaism models this for us in many ways: the Kabbalat Shabbat service, created by the mystics in Tzfat, uses music to prepare us mentally for the Sabbath; the lighting of a candle marks a moment like the beginning of Shabbat, or brings to mind the memory of a lost loved one. We have physical ways to indicate that we are in sacred time, like entering a sanctuary and wearing a kippah. I find that my kippah helps me to transition into an important moment. The act of putting it on has a physical and emotional impact on me. Prayer itself can be used in this way. Jewish prayer is not only about the content of the words. If you have ever seen orthodox Jews pray, they shuckle back and forth in a trance. Sometimes when I lead services on Shabbat, I am pleased to see a worshipper closing her eyes, chanting along and using the prayer like an Eastern meditation. It's good to be intellectually engaged in the experience we're having, but it is also good just to experience.

Shabbat is a day with tremendous potential for bringing us into the moment. Traditional observance may feel incompatible with our modern lifestyle, but we can make the spirit of Shabbat our own. We can use it, or some part of it, as a day when we make no advanced plans, an island of time away from all our commitments. We can turn off our cell phones and try not to check our email. We can do something we enjoy: walking, cooking, exercising, visiting with others.

What are the things we do to be present every day of the week? What practices and strategies do the people in our congregation use to confront this challenge? I spoke to some of our members and asked them. Some strategies I heard were surprising, like sucking on a mint to bring one's mind

into focus. Others were ones we know, but always need to be reminded of: an outdoor bike ride, yoga, or meditation. One person gets up very early, before anyone else in the house. That half hour has become a closely guarded part of the day. He listens to music and reads the paper, and then he goes through the same routine of getting ready every day, shaving, preparing his lunch, almost a ritual. It's not until an hour later, when he arrives at work, that he speaks his first words to another person. He calls this his boot-up time.

Another member of our community starts her morning with an email on the Torah portion of the week or a commentary from the book on her nightstand, and then she steps outside into the yard with a cup of espresso. She looks at the trees and notices the light of the early morning. She savors the pure taste of her coffee. In these moments, she thinks about God. These brief activities leave her ready for a challenging day of work. I talked with a friend who has a particularly challenging job as a social worker. Each session can be intense and requires her full attention. When moving on to her next meeting, she takes a couple of minutes to breathe, to bring her a sense of calmness and presence. She surrounds herself with things she loves: a photo of her girls from a trip to a national park, a bottle of sand from Bermuda and some rocks from Maine; reminders of the good life she lives, and of some of the happiest moments of her life.

Part of being present in the moment is appreciating that moment for what it is. Sometimes, that's not easy to do. But we can look for the good that each moment brings. Life moves from stage to stage, and sometimes we want to resist those changes. Jaimee and I occasionally long for the days when we could sit down to a meal together or take a walk. We count the weeks till the end of our nighttime feedings and diaper changes. But Hillel's words help us to be present, not just in the moment, but also at this phase in our lives. There are only a limited number of grains of sand in the hour glass, only so many chances to hold Aaron or Jonah's head in my hand, only so many times that Shoshana will plop into my lap to read a book. Just as each moment is valued, so is every stage of our lives.

At *this* moment, we begin the Day of Atonement. Today, in synagogues all around the world, sit millions of Jews, flawed but well-intentioned, distracted and daydreaming, listening, singing, and fidgeting. I've often wondered why our prayer book forces us to read lists of sins in unison, confessing generically, whether we're guilty or not; why we all confess to an alphabet of woe: we are "arrogant, brutal, careless and destructive." Our tradition gives us an answer to this question. *Kol yisrael aravim zeh lazeh*, we Jews are all responsible for each other. If one of us has sinned, it is as if all of us have. Likewise, we could say that just as all of Israel is intertwined, this community is too, in its own right.

It's a powerful concept and in many ways it rings true. It demands that we be present for one another. But there must also be another answer. It is easy to read the liturgy without seeing ourselves in it. But understanding how difficult it is in this world to pay attention, another answer presents itself: we sit together, turning the pages and uttering confessions, hoping that at some point our minds will click in. We will begin to focus in earnest on the reflection each of us needs to do on Yom Kippur. What will it take to bring us to this moment? A deep breath, a closing of the eyes? In the *Al Cheit*, we confess, "For the sin we have committed against you consciously or unconsciously." We have a choice at this moment, to

bring our consciousness to the work before us or to pass the hours lost in other thoughts. We decide what we want to do with that private time today, when we get to be on our own. What would it feel like tomorrow morning to really be engaged in the moment of *Avinu Malkeinu*, reading the text and feeling its truth, allowing the music to enter us and bring us into the urgency of the prayer? "*Avinu malkeinu*, make an end to sickness, war, and famine," not just words on a page – a desperate plea. How would it feel to take the silent moments of the service, or the quiet times of the day, to look for ourselves in the prayers of repentance? How would this change the day for us, and the coming year?

We plead with God, "*S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.*" Each of these phrases carries a different meaning. "Forgive us, wipe us clean, erase the smudges that have clouded our souls." This day helps us to begin anew, fully present for ourselves and those around us. Are we here? Are we prepared to pass through the closing gates? As we begin to make ourselves ready for the new year, let's look around, take a breath, and fully appreciate this moment, Yom Kippur 5772.