



## **"Measuring Our Year"**

Rosh Hashanah Sermon  
Rabbi Amy Schwartzman  
September 17, 2012/1 Tishrei, 5773

I often take my fingers off the keys of the computer and wait. It's 60 seconds before the photos magically appear on the screen. Slide follows slide randomly, jumping decades, the eighties, the sixties, last year, switching from Kevin's family to mine, then to ours together.

*My brothers and I standing in front of our childhood home in those horrible High School band uniforms. ..Hannah's first day of school... Kevin's grandparent's looking regal on their 60th wedding anniversary... My mother, zichrona livracha, holding Ellie just after she was born.  
[piano starts softly]*

Photos of wonderful moments with family and friends, some here, some gone from us; people, places, landmarks, come and go, come and go, like time itself...

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Six Hundred Minutes – Our Honeymoon*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Moments so Dear – Thanksgiving 1971*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Six Hundred Minutes – My Ordination*  
*How Do You Measure - Measure A Year? – My best friend*  
*In Daylights - In Sunsets*  
*In Midnights - In Cups Of Coffee*  
*In Inches - In Miles*  
*In Laughter - In Strife*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Six Hundred Minutes*  
*How Do You Measure*  
*A Year In The Life*

How do you measure a year of life? Isn't that what we're doing here?  
Rosh Hashanah, the New Year - This is a time to not only look ahead, but



also to look back and assess what has transpired since we observed this holiday last year. Rosh Hashanah, after all, is called Yom Hazikaron - the day to remember, to reflect, to learn to do better.

Today we boot up a year's worth of memory and project on the mind's eye the joyful and proud moments, and the "oh, how I wish I could forget" times of the year now gone.

Doesn't it feel like we were just here? Is the calendar playing tricks on us, or has it really been 525,600 minutes since we last sat in these seats to welcome a New Year? Memory rarely takes us along a direct path. We can't predict which image will fade and which will stick forever. Usually we are burdened with total recall by our awkward stumbles and missed opportunities. But today, in the quiet of this sanctuary, we seek to measure it all.

Today we take precious time...to slow down the clock, to replay the sunsets and the midnights, the good talks over cups of coffee and the sleepless nights of worry. We heap up on the scale of life the garbage and the glory--and everything in between. We return, here, to come to grips -- *somehow* -- with time passing, yes, with our...lives...passing. We come here to this sacred place, surrounded by this sacred community, to learn to add meaning to each moment, lest we live with regret, lest we neglect to number our days.

This eternally important lesson is captured so poignantly in the song you just heard – Seasons of Love. Many years ago our student Cantor, Leigh Korn, had our teen choir sing this signature piece from the musical *Rent* and I was struck by its prayer-like power.

No surprise -- *Rent's* creator, Jonathan Larson, was Jewish. Sadly, ironically, Larson died of an undiagnosed heart problem at age 36, one day before *Rent's* premiere. I hope Mr. Larson would be touched to see his sermonic song now go from Broadway-- to bema.

I read the lyrics again last summer when Leigh and his rabbi, Judy Shanks, folded them into a sermon they wrote together. Cantor Scher and I are grateful they shared their work with us and encouraged us to use it as well.

But since last year so much has happened – our congregation has lost many precious members, tragedies from around our country have become permanent images in our minds; our world seems plagued by economic, social and moral challenges. At times it feels as though we are living in an era where time is measured from one tragedy to the next.



Looking back, these events can mask our own significant experiences. They can distract us from doing our own personal work of reflection and improvement.

Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, is indeed called the Day of Remembrance but this day has yet one more name. It is also called HaYom. HaYom, on the one hand the word simply means 'today' but the Hebrew has its own nuance. Really it translates with great urgency as THE DAY, THIS DAY, today and perhaps no other. Today is what we know we have.

As another Larson lyric from Rent makes the point: "No day but today...my only goal is just to be, there is only here, only now. No day but today." And if today is what we know we have, the question is: how will we use it? Locked in a cycle of spiraling despair or determined to make every minute count?

A colleague of mine recently remarked: Rosh Hashanah is "the big tick-tock." Tick Tock! How will we, *blessed, really*, with so much freedom, how will we choose to live hayom -- today -- and -- tick tock -- when all the days of our lives are added up, complete, what impact will we have made, what images will others have of us, how will we be remembered?

When we open ourselves to the power of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, HaYom, we are drawn to these questions and each year we vow - *with urgency* – to turn back toward the better people we most want to be. Today's prayers prod and push us out of our lethargy and our excuses. They pull us back to the minutes of a year, to our own particular stories, to our revolving picture frames... the images fixed or dim in our memories. [*piano starts softly*] We scroll through them, pull them into the light, reliving the feelings, taking in the enormity of the year in a life. What felt just right? What could we have done better? Time lost, time well spent...What pictures do you see in your mind?...

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Six Hundred Minutes*  
*Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Journeys To Plan...Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand*  
*Six Hundred Minutes*  
*How Do You Measure The Life*  
*Of A Woman Or A Man?*

*In Truths That She Learned... [Piano underplay]*



In truths that she learned... "I dodged the bullet this time." "It was my wake-up call." "Now I know what is really important." We've all said these words, or nodded our heads in firm agreement with such a moment of truth. Someone close to us, a neighbor, ourselves – hurt or felled -- out of the blue, and in an instant, we learn how vulnerable, how fragile, life is. We vow to put our priorities back in the right order ... again...

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]  
Or In Times That He Cried...[Piano underplay]*

Or in times that he cried... "Please don't cry at my Bat Mitzvah" a teenager begs her dad. But he cried when she was born, when she went off to Kindergarten and when she moved into her freshman dorm. He cries during the evening news when he sees hungry children her age.

As our tradition says: there is in this world beauty enough to exalt the soul, pain enough to break the heart. We are meant to weep – tears of joy and tears of compassion so intense we are shaken from our complacency into action. The times that he cried...did we shed grateful tears in the year gone by? Will we use our love and strength to bring justice into the world?

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]  
In Bridges He Burned...[piano underplay]*

In bridges he burned...It can happen in a split second - a moment of anger or impatience, the wrong tone, an ill-chosen word. *I am right and you are wrong.* We dig in. Maybe even now as we remember it, our hearts hardened by time, we still think we were so very right.

The Midrash teaches: "Holding onto a grudge is like taking a spoonful of poison every day, hoping that your enemy will get sick." But how full of relief, how long and sweet and free, is the moment we release our grudges. How many minutes left to repair the damage? We just don't know. Hayom - no day like today.

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]  
Or The Way That She Died...[piano underplay]*

Or the way that she died.... This is the season we ask: who will live and who will die? There is no way to know how long will be our journey from here to eternity. But in the most important ways, we choose how we will live and how we will die...the freedom is ours already.

-Who with no sense of satisfaction and who with few regrets?

- Who still complaining and who still offering love?
- Who holding her possessions with a closed fist and who giving with an open hand?
- Who harboring grudges and who forgiving imperfections?
- Who must I embrace today, this day, while I still have the gift of time?

*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]  
Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand  
Six Hundred Minutes  
Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand  
Journeys To Plan...Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand  
Six Hundred Minutes  
How Do You Measure The Life  
Of A Woman Or A Man?*

Long before Larson captured his generation with Rent, Pete Seeger wrote a song that the rock group, The Byrds, -- remember them? -- made famous. This text from Ecclesiastes became a baby boomer anthem: *[piano picks up and all are encouraged to sing...]* "To everything turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn and a time to every purpose under heaven. *[piano fades]* and a time for every purpose under heaven.

I imagine that Ecclesiastes hoped that throughout all of our lives we endure a spectrum of experiences and emotions. There are times to dance with the person we love. There are times to stand at a graveside dripping painful tears. And times to sooth a frightened child with words of comfort. If we are blessed with a long life, we may be blessed to experience every purposeful deed.

But beautiful as the text is -- as much as we loved that song -- that is not really life as we know it. We don't have time for every purpose under heaven. There is not time for this and then that - for another book at bedtime, for another trip to the nursing home to visit, There isn't enough time to tell all of our stories or explain why we believe what we believe. No -- we're stunned, stupefied sometimes at how fast a life flashes by, how hard it is to capture, to understand, to make the most of -- and how, at the end, there is usually too little time left for all we wish to learn, to do, to be. Consider instead the modern Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai's version of Ecclesiastes' ancient words.



A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything.  
He doesn't have seasons enough to have a season for every purpose.  
Ecclesiastes was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and hate at the same moment,  
To laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
With the same hands to throw stones  
And gather them,

To make love in war and war in love,  
And to hate and forgive, and remember and forget,  
To arrange and confuse, to eat and digest,  
What history takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.  
When he loses he seeks,  
When he finds he forgets,  
When he forgets he loves,  
When he loves he begins to forget.

Amichai and Larson and all the great teachers of Judaism before them understood the big tick tock: minute-to-minute we must notice how remarkable are the unremarkable moments ticking by. Day by day we weave together a messy patchwork life - of trial and triumph, love and disappointment, glory and garbage.

Today – Rosh Hashanah - we start counting, we start making real that unquenchable hope that we can make ourselves anew even within the constraints of circumstance.

Hayom – Today, we can step out of our self-made prisons to which we already hold the keys.

Hayom – This is the day to make our time-bound journey more sacred than mundane.

Hayom - To stick with our tasks, but to elevate our vision, adding more moments of meaning, purpose, connection and compassion to our lives.

*[Piano plays softly...]*

Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, Hayom - The time to bring the past and future together through the clear lens of this holy day.  
That is how we measure a year, a good Year, a sweet New Year in our lives...  
How will you measure, measure your year?



*[Cantor Tracey Scher sings]  
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 will you measure, measure your year?*

---

Delivered by Rabbi Amy Schwartzman and Cantor Tracey Scher.  
Temple Rodef Shalom 2012-5773  
The sermon is adapted from an original text by Rabbi Judy Shanks  
accompanied by Cantor Leigh Korn.