

If Only I Could Turn Back Time...

Congregation Betenu Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779

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Time is such a mystifying concept, at once objective and subjective. A second, a minute, a year is, in reality, the same for every living being on the planet. Yet, we all experience time differently. Perhaps thinking about how much time has passed between last Rosh Hashanah and today feels like an eternity. Maybe last Rosh Hashanah feels like just yesterday. Time has a way of getting away from us— of slowing down when we want it to speed up and speeding up when we want it to slow down. I've thought a lot in the past few years about a saying I have heard and found to be very true about parenting: The days are long and the years are short.

And, year after year, no matter how long it's really felt, we enter the synagogue and pray with our community for another year of success, of blessing, and of health. We reflect, we remember, and we know that the year we have just completed was not a perfect one. Of course, we could have been better. We could have listened better, loved more, complained less, empathized, appreciated, eaten better; we could have found more constructive ways to raise up the values that we hold dear, we could have been better communicators, better friends, better role models to those who look up to us. We know that in the last year we missed the mark, and we resign ourselves to the fact that next year, though we hope to have learned from our missteps, we will not be perfect either.

We recognize that we are blessed with freedom. Freedom to do what we want, eat what we want, go where we want, and to do as we please with our time. Time is freedom. In Exodus chapter 12 verse 2, as the Israelites are preparing to leave Egypt, we are told that "this month,"

referring to the month of Nissan, “will be for you the beginning of months.” The Torah seems to be teaching us that we should begin counting the year from the month of Nissan, which is indeed one of the ways we count the beginning of the year. In fact, the Mishna teaches us that there are four “heads of the year,” four Rosh Hashanahs, of which today is one. But, back to the text in Exodus, instead of understanding the phrase “this month will be for you the beginning of months” as an indication of how we should mark the beginning of the year, the 16th-century Italian commentator Sforno remarks that this phrase means that “from here on out these months are yours, to do with them as you’d like, in contrast to the days of slavery, when your days were not your own, but instead were for the service of others and their will.” In other words, since we are free people, time belongs to us. No one else dictates to us what we do with our time, not humans and not even G-d. Of course, the freedom to do as we wish with our time is an absolute blessing, and it is one reminder that highlights the fact that we have free will.

Hopefully, we will choose well with this blessing of free will and freedom of time! Hopefully, we will not squander it away — we will use it for good: we will organize to support the causes we care about, we will read to expand our minds, we will have meaningful conversations, we will watch less TV! And alas, another year goes by where we have not yet perfected our use of time. Freedom of will and freedom of time means that we have no one else to blame for our inaction, for our apathy, for our idleness. The year ends and begins again, and Rosh Hashanah affords us the opportunity to reflect — how did I choose to use my time in the last year? Did the year fly by, or did it creep along slowly? Did it feel fulfilling, successful, sacred? What might that tell me about how I can do better next year?

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his prolific work The Sabbath writes that “the higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.” How might

you define a sacred moment? For Heschel, sacred moments are attached to the concept of holiness in time— that it is time rather than space which we are to identify as hallowed. Accordingly, every moment has the potential to be sacred. One way to sanctify time might be through ritual and observance of *mitzvot*, but there are certainly others.

Take a moment and think: when was the last time you felt yourself facing a sacred moment, however you might define it? Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? How long ago was it? How can you bring more sacred moments into your life in the upcoming year?

Now, if that exercise was difficult, or perhaps you've realized that sacred moments have been fewer and farther between than you'd like, consider yourself in good company and don't despair. As much as we long for those sacred moments, we know that life can sometimes get in the way— as the Yiddish proverb goes, “A person plans, and G-d laughs;” or, as John Lennon put it, “Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.” But it doesn't have to be that way. We are not passive observers of our own lives, but the captains of our own destiny. Rosh Hashanah gives us the occasion to stop and think, and to intentionally steer our lives in the direction we wish.

This morning we read about Creation, about our tradition's understanding of how the world and all that is in it came to be. When it comes time for people to be created, G-d chooses first to create Adam, the first person, alone. Why? The Talmud¹ asks. “So that the righteous will not say: We are the children of the righteous, and righteousness is natural for us, so there is no need for us to exert ourselves to be righteous; and so that the wicked will not say: We are the children of the wicked and cannot change our ways.” No person is predestined to be righteous or

¹ Sanhedrin 38a: תנו רבנן אדם יחידי נברא ומפני מה שלא יהו המינים אומרים הרבה רשויות בשמים דבר אחר מפני הצדיקים ומפני הרשעים שלא יהו הצדיקים אומרים אנו בני צדיק ורשעים אומרים אנו בני רשע

wicked forever; so too, a person can change their behavior to do more, to face more sacred moments, and to take hold of time. This is the essence of *Teshuva*, repentance, and the time of year in which we find ourselves. All year, but especially now, we have the ability to turn ourselves around— this is the beauty of free will. Since we control our own destiny, we have in our power the capacity to change, or to stay the same. The amazing thing about *Teshuva* in our tradition is the great value that is placed on learning from our mistakes. We are not expected to be perfect— in fact, Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance² states that a person who does *Teshuva*, repents, is “loved and desired,” that because the person separated him or herself from their misstep and resolves to not do it again, subduing their inclination, they now stand in a higher place than the completely righteous, and it is as if the misstep had never taken place.

We are not expected to be perfect. We are, however, expected to learn from our mistakes, to improve from year to year, and to grow. Just because we did not always value our time or use it in the best way possible last year does not mean that we need to make the same mistake this year. The ten days of repentance are a time for us to remember, to reflect, and to resolve how we can improve our own lives, the lives of those we love, and the lives of the stranger. It is a time to take stock of that which is important to us and that which we have not yet made enough time and space for in our lives. We have the incredible opportunity to start anew each year— to be different than we were last year and to step up to face more sacred moments. I would like to bless us all that 5779 be a year of positive change and growth, of less missteps than the year preceding, and a year of making time for sacred moments, sacred experiences, and sacred connections— within the world, within this community, within our families, and within

² 7:4

ourselves. *L'Shana Tovah Umetukah*— to a sweet New Year, and *G'mar Chatimah Tovah*— may we all be sealed for good, for health, and for life.