Tuesday, August 31, 2011

CURRENT AND RECURRENT THEMES FOR THE High Holy Days

What is holy must be renewed and what is new must be made holy--Rav Kook.

Chicago Board of Rabbis High Holy Day Sermon Seminar

Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, PhD Congregation Emanu-El

I—THE PERSONAL SERMON: SELF DISCLOSURE

Balancing what congregants want to know with what we want/ought to tell them. Focus on universal qualities that the *darshan* also struggles with.

1. Jonathan Jaffe sermon: "Interfaith Dialogue"
2. Syndey B. Mintz sermon: "*Ayn Kemach, Ayn Torah*: Only A Moment Living in the Pit"
3. "Youth and Experience: The Crossroads of Time."
4. "Flash of Insight."

II—THE YIZKOR SERMON AS AN ART FORM

WHAT IF YOU KNEW YOU ONLY HAD A FEW MONTHS TO LIVE?
THE FLEETING NATURE OF TIME

5. "The Sting of Perishable Things."
6. "The Pursuit of Happiness: Simhat Mitzvah Makes Life a Work of Art"
7. "Driven By The Urgency of Time"
8. "All I Got Was Words."
9. 9a—"Return To The Scene of The Crime."
   9b—"Mind the Light"

UTILIZING TIME WELL

10. "Not to Weep But to Fulfill."

IF ONLY WE COULD LIVE FOREVER: IMMORTALITY & LEAVING A LASTING MARK

11. "In Search of What is Eternal. "

THE EYE IS NEVER SATISFIED WITH SEEING

12. "Seeing Beyond the Veil of Tears."
13. "Mind the Light."

III—CIVILITY: THE TYRANNY OF THE URGENT, BAD PUBLIC BEHAVIOR, CIVILITY & THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

THE PARADOX OF TECHNOLOGY—THE LONELINESS OF THE LONGDISTANCE CALLER—DRAWING PEOPLE CLOSER VS FOSTERING DETACHMENT

Modern technology enlarges and intensifies the ubiquitous 24/7 communication of always being available and connected to data streams, but also allows for devious and unwelcome behavior: call screening, thoughtless/abusive behavior (pushing the "Send" button only to regret what was sent in haste or "Reply to all" accidents).
Loneliness—it is now possible to be in touch with people but never have physical human contact.
One-way communication—people have broadcast information rather than participate in real give-and-take dialogue.
Abusive and dangerous behavior, invasion of privacy and "sexting" messages resent to a larger audience result in embarrassment from which there is no recovery and has led to suicides and criminal proceedings. Risky or inappropriate teenage behavior is no longer the realm of imagination. Technology has turned bullying into a new art from! The very real danger of children meeting predators online.
New tools allow users to be devious or cowardly by avoiding direct communication: Slydial allows callers to dial a mobile phone and avoid unwanted conversation or intimacy by bypassing the object of the call and guiding calls directly into voicemail. Another service permits the insertion of background noise such as heavy traffic to excuse lateness. Automated service allows a user to call himself at a predetermined time to extricate himself from a meeting by taking an "urgent" call.

14. Sample news reports of the consequences of "sexting"

The pervasiveness of immediacy & the lack of civility and technologty etiquette make technology/cell phone/blackberry pervasive at worship, board meetings, driving, etc. What is the time "created" by multi-tasking utilized for? Kids often use their technological advantage not to improve themselves, but to immerse themselves in a trivial, solipsistic, distracting online world at the expense of more enriching activities: reading, writing and

translating thoughts into coherent and complete sentences, visiting museums, and so forth.
Technology has enabled people to stay in close contact, but what happens when people use technology in public space?

15. "The Erosion of Trust."
16. "Civil War."
17. "Civility In The Age of Immediacy"

DO WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXPECT MORE OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS?
Former Rep. Anthony Weiner or former NY Gov. Elliot Spitzer?

IV—SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE ENVIRONMENT & GLOBAL WARMING

18. Economic Benefits of Social Justice Work
19. "Eco-Reverence or Ethnic and Religious Strife."
20. ""Global Requiem." & "Protect These Ancient Trees: Prayer for the Redwoods"

Get started with low hanging fruit:
Deforest Your Life: Don't Dump it! 17 Cool Things to do With Your Castoffs!
CDs and DVDs: http://www.cdrecyclingcenter.com
Cellphones, PDAs and phone accessories: http://www.greenphone.com
http://www.gooddeedfoundation.org
Computers: http://www.myboneyard.com
General Electronics: for COSTCO members http://www.costco.com click on electronics http://www.officedepot.com/techrecycling
IPOD: http://www.apple.com/environment/recycling/ipodrecycling
Printer Cartridges: http://www.tonerbuy.com
Business Attire: http://www.dressforsuccess.org
Formalwear and Accessories: http://www.glassslipperproject.org
Sneakers: http://www.letmeplay.com/reuseashoe
Books: http://www.intlbookproject.org
Carpets: http://www.carpetrecovery.org
Home, Office, Outdoor Furniture: http://www.excessaccess.com
Outdoor Equipment: http://www.gears4good.com
Toxic Leftovers: http://www.earth911.org
GIVE and TAKE: http://www.freerecycle.org http://www.swaporama.org
http://www.throwplace.com

McDonough, W. & Braungart, M. (2002). *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point Press (Water Proof Durabook).
Wilson, B. (2008). *"The Last Bite: Is The World's Food System Collapsing?"* In *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2008.

V—ECONOMIC ABUSES/SHADOW BANKING SYSTEM/FAILURE TO PROTECT THOSE IN NEED OF PROTECTION

21. "Coziness, Drowsiness, The Lulling Effect, False Profits and Truth Decay—Restoring Trust After the Bubble Decade of Economic Triumphalism, Materialism, Arrogance, Exploitation, Malignant Narcissism, and Bretrayal"

VI—REMEMBERANCE

22. Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Eichmann Trial: 'Those Who Cannot Remember The Past Are Condemned to Repeat it.'"

VI—WHERE ARE WE JEWS? THE LANDSCAPE: NOT VERY JEWISH JEWS, NO LONGER JEWISH JEWS, SUDDENLY JEWISH JEWS, HALF-JEWISH JEWS & MORE

23. "How Jewish Are We?"
    Revised and expanded list provided in: "Shifting Landscapes: The Response of Modernity to Faith, Social Advocacy and Demographic Change" found in the Spring 2011 issue of the *CCAR Journal*

VI—BIOTECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

24. *"Keeping Up With The Cloneses: The Posthuman Future."*

VII— MEN'S ISSUES

25. *"Man Enough."*

VIII—THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE RABBI

26. "Planning for The Holidays"

IX—PLANNING AHEAD FOR THE FORTHCOMING THE ELECTION: THE SILOIZATION AND CLUSTERING OF AMERICA; THE RETREAT INTO SAFETY OF CLOSED COMMUNITIES

Bishop, B. (2008). *The Big Sort: Why The Clustering of Like-Minded People is Tearing Us Apart*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. Soon after the 2000 election, Bush pollster Matthew Dowd reported to Karl Rove that there wasn't much point in focusing any campaign on independents or moderate voters anymore. The country was too polarized, essentially along the cultural lines that Bishop lays out: "If you drive a Volvo and do yoga, you are pretty much a Democrat. If you drive a Lincoln or a BMW and you own a gun, you vote Republican. Yoga people have clustered in one set of culturally segregated enclaves and the gun owners in another."

X—ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS: MAINLINE PROTESTANTS VS EVANGELICALS; THE ARAB SPRING AND THE INCREASING MARGINALIZATION OF CHRISTIANS IN ARAB LANDS

XI—WORK IN PROGRESS

"The Age of Entitlement"
Wuthnow, Robert (2007). *After The Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Gottleib, Laura (2011). "How The Cult of Self-Esteem Is Ruining Our Kids." Also titled: "How To Land Your Kid in Therapy: Why The Obsession With Our Kids' Happiness May Be Dooming Them to Unhappy Adulthoods. A Therapist and Mother Reports." In *The Atlantic*, July/Aug 2011.

"Yearnings & Kindnesses"
Gup, Ted (2010). *A Secret Gift: How One man's Kindness—And A Trove of Letters—Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression.* New York: Penguin.

ISRAEL

Thoughts by Our Rabbinic Intern, Jonathan Jaffe

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE #1

SERMON FOR PARSHAT NITZAVIM

Delivered by Rabbinic Intern Jonathan Jaffe on September 15, 2006

One fall afternoon nearly four years ago, a young man sat on a bus outside of Afula, Israel when he noticed that the passenger in front of him was acting strangely. For one thing, he was wearing a large coat in the middle of September. Second, he thought he saw a wire protruding from the man's coat. Fearing the man was possibly a suicide bomber, he searched for a way to alert the police, but he didn't have a cell phone on him. In a moment of pure *chutzpah*, he asked the man in the coat if he could borrow his cell phone. Even more surprisingly, the man shrugged and quietly obliged, handing it to him. The passenger calmly stepped to the back of the bus and, whispering into the phone, called the police. When the bus stopped in the Arab-Israeli town of Um Al Fachem, the police were waiting. Stepping off the bus, the bomber saw the police and detonated his explosives. Because he was outside of the bus, none of the passengers was killed. It was later revealed that the bomber was planning to transfer to a bus to Tel-Aviv where he hoped to set off his bomb. The bus passenger had saved dozens of lives through his courageous action.

This story is fantastic for so many reasons. First, this passenger had acted so heroically to save his fellow passengers. Second, he had the audacity to borrow the bomber's own cell phone in order to call the police. Yet both of these aspects pale in comparison to the most amazing aspect of the story: The passenger's name was Ra'id Muhammed and he was an Arab Israeli. He had risked his own life to stop a fellow Arab Muslim from killing Israeli civilians.

I read about Ra'id Muhammed while working on an Arab Israeli construction crew at Kibbutz Ginnegar, outside of Afula. It was Sukkot break during my first year of rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. In order to improve my Hebrew, I had volunteered to work at Ginnegar for the two-week break between Hebrew ulpan and classes. Each morning, I would arise at 4:30 am to meet Chabashi, Jamal, and Achmed in the tool shed where we would sip our Turkish coffee and collect our equipment before heading out for the day. One day after work, I read about Ra'id Muhammed in *The New York Times* online. And I saw that he was recovering at the nearby Ha'Emek Hospital from his injuries from the bomb blast. And so I decided that given my proximity and sense of indebtedness to this young man, I would visit Ra'id Muhammed to say "thank you."

I shared my idea with another volunteer on the kibbutz, a British soldier named Danny. Danny had just finished a tour of duty in Kosovo and was looking for some peace and quiet ... and so naturally came to Israel. To say that Danny stood out in Israel would be an incredible understatement. Red-haired and freckled, standing a good 6'4" and weighing at least 250 pounds, he made me look like a small dark midget. But he was looking for something to do and asked to come along on the journey to Ha'Emek Hospital. And so, like George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men,* we sojourned into the warm evening and set out for Afula.

Upon arriving at the hospital, I realized that I had no idea of what I was supposed to do or say. I went to the hospital's front desk and said that I was hoping to visit Ra'id Muhammed. The clerk asked me why. "I want to say thank you," I replied. And so of course, they called security. After about 20 minutes of questioning, we were given permission and sent to the top floor of the hospital. We strolled past half-lit rooms with wallpaper peeling off the walls, each filled with Arab Israelis, five or six to a room. Each patient lay with their families gathered around them. I turned the corner and saw in the back of the room, two Muslim women in burkas, sitting next to a young boy. There lay Ra'id Muhammed with his mother and sister at either side of him.

I had forgotten that Ra'id was all of seventeen years old. I saw him now and was astonished by how young he looked. He was really just a kid. Danny and I approached Ra'id's mother and sister and, not exactly knowing what to do, managed sort of a half bow, saying *"Salaam Aleikum". "Aleikum HaSalaam"* they replied. As Danny didn't speak a word of Hebrew or Arabic, he took a position directly behind me, arms folded behind his back, as if I had brought my own British security guard. Ra'id looked up at me and quietly said hello. He was scrawny with teenage acne and looked tired and dreary. Later, I found out that Ra'id had regained consciousness after the bombing only to find himself handcuffed to his bed as a possible suspect. Being one of two Arabs on a targeted Israeli bus will do that to you. I also found out that his family had received daily death threats from Arabs upset that Ra'id had stopped the bomber. No wonder he looked so exhausted.

After a moment of uncomfortably long silence, I spoke to Ra'id in my best fourth grade level Hebrew. I said,

"Ra'id, thank you for seeing us. My name is Jonathan and I am an American student. I am also a Jew. This is my friend Danny from England. (Danny nodded.) We read about you in the American newspapers and traveled here to say thank you. What you did was incredibly brave and we want to make sure that you know that your deed was noticed and appreciated. There is a teaching in Judaism that to save one life is like saving the entire world. You have preserved all of the potential that comes from that one life. So thank you." I continued, "In America, there are some people who believe that all Arabs and Muslims wish them harm, especially after September eleventh of last year. But I believe this is false. I want you to know that for the rest of my life, when anyone tells me that all the Arabs want to kill the Jews, you will be my refutation. 'Not Ra'id Muhammed', I will say. 'There's one Arab boy who risked everything in order to save a bunch of Jewish strangers - and I'm sure there are many more where he came from'. You forever will be my symbol for the potential for peace and understanding between our religions and cultures. Thank you for what you did. I wish you a speedy recovery and all the best for you and your family."

Ra'id calmly nodded and pointed to the newspaper article I had printed out. "Can we keep it?" his mother asked. I handed it to her. In response, Ra'id's sister, sitting on the other side of his bed, extended a box of chocolates towards me and Danny. We each took one and said thank you. The five of us remained in a moment of silence as Danny and I munched on our chocolates. So there we were, an Arab Israeli family, a Jew from Hawaii and a British soldier, intersecting at the most improbable of moments and places, all nibbling away. It sounds mundane, yet it was a magical moment.

I tell this story now as this past week we observed the fifth anniversary of 9/11, a dark day for our community. This year, the anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center falls in the month of *Elul,* a time of reconciliation and forgiveness in the Jewish calendar. It is a season for bridging the chasm between people and for combating hate with dialogue and understanding. As 9/11 moves further into history and we do our best to honor the memory of those who died, we receive instruction from this week's Torah portion. *Parshat Nitzavim* commands us in simple terms, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – so you are your offspring may live." And so, I tell the story of Ra'id Muhammed as an example of one who chose life and, in doing so, inspired me and countless others to do the same.

It is now four years since I met Ra'id Muhammed and much has changed. I entered rabbinical school a curious single twenty-something. This May, I will graduate and be ordained as a rabbi. In the process, I have become a somewhat more mature, married thirty-something with our first baby due next month. My friend Danny is serving under the British Army in Iraq, and I receive emails from him, from time to time.

Though much has changed since that fall evening, I still think of Ra'id Muhammed and wonder what ever happened to him. I wish I could speak with him again, to thank him this time for influencing my Israel experience in such a profound way. After meeting with him, I returned to the kibbutz with a new vigor for interfaith dialogue. For the next two weeks, my Arab-Israeli construction crew became an informal discussion group. We painted roofs and poured cement, all the while debating Muslim-Jewish relations and our views on everything from the internet to Jewish and Arab cooking. One day, Achmed asked me how big the World Trade Center was. "Really, really tall," I responded. He asked, "Bigger than the kibbutz dining hall?" I realized then and there that we were worlds apart. But at least we had begun the process of finding common ground.

I wish I could speak with Ra'id Muhammed, now as I reach ordination and look forward to entering the rabbinate. I would say to him,

"Ra'id, I want to thank you again. I am forever indebted to you for influencing me so profoundly. Back in America, our newspapers tell of the daily violence between the West and the Arab world. I wish that more Americans could meet people like you, Arab or Jew, who choose life over religion, commonality over division. Meeting you gave me a sense of optimism that can never be shaken. You remain my proof that we have more in common than we do in opposition. And so for the rest of my career, I will work towards this goal from my side and you from yours. I hope one day we may see each other again, meeting somewhere in between. For now, *Salaam Aleikum* and Shabbat Shalom."

Yom Kippur 5768
Ayn Kemach, Ayn Torah: Only A Moment of Living in the Pit

Rabbi Sydney Mintz

Last week, I was in line for groceries at a crowded grocery store in the city. There were about 4 or 5 people in line behind me when I received the unfortunate news that my total came out to $9.17. It was unfortunate because I had $9 with me exactly. No credit card, no ATM card, no spare change in my pocket. I had calculated exactly how much food I could buy for $9. I had used my coupons, I took 2 pennies from the cup next to the register and still I was 15 cents short. The man behind me cleared his throat several times. He glanced at his watch. I told the woman behind the cash register that I didn't have enough money-she said it's only 15 cents, just take an something out of the bag and she would deduct it. The man behind me told whomever he was talking to on the phone that he was going to be late. He had finally had enough and reached into his pocket. Without looking at me he tossed a quarter onto the belt and said: "There." Last week I was humiliated in a grocery store line as if I was an idiot or poor or just barely human because I was 15 cents short and was holding up the line. I guarantee that if I had been wearing rabbi clothes and been carrying my leather briefcase and had on jewelry instead of sweats and a baseball hat that the blackberry toting, well dressed man who so ungraciously tossed the quarter at me would have very civilly and immediately handed me a quarter. But last week was different. Last week I was on Food Stamps.

What was I doing on Food Stamps? I was participating in the Congressional Food stamp Challenge in which individuals attempt to live on an average American's food stamp budget of $1 per meal or $21 per week. It is also the perfect sermon subject for Yom Kippur, the day we fast, the day food is supposed to be the farthest thing from our mind. But, really I'm not talking about food today, I'm talking about hunger. Not only is hunger at the center of our message form the prophet Isaiah in the Haftorah this morning, but going on food stamps is like volunteering to star in a terrifying reality television show. Going on food stamps for a week was not only impossible to accomplish, but it was degrading, demeaning, disgusting, and profoundly eye opening to witness how little tzedek there is our world. Rabbi Shelom of Karlin from the 18th Century taught: If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light."

I discussed the challenge with my sons Eli and Gabe over dinner at Ton Kiang on Geary and reluctantly, they agreed to participate. The bill for dinner that night was $40 with a tip for dim sum-which they figured out was the equivalent of over four days of food stamp food for us.

The night before we started I did one last Whole Foods run. It was like the binge before the fast. It is in this bag. I bought 3 Honey Crisp Organic Apples and a Half gallon of Organic Milk. The total: $8.92. It was the exact amount we could spend the next day on food for three people.

In this bag is the next day's groceries, which I bought with the help of that quarter from the good Samaritan behind me in line: $9: Beans, rice, tortillas, frozen waffles, bread, peanut butter, 2 bananas.

When we were growing up in this country, we heard: "Eat your food-there are starving children in _____" and depending on your generation, it was China or Africa or Europe. In our world today 6 million children under 5 die every year from hunger. It's a fairly gruesome number for Jews to contemplate. But, for many reasons, we can understand that, it is fathomable to us in the developing world, in impoverished countries, over there that 6 million children will die this year and the next and the next and the next. But over here, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, it is a little more difficult to wrap our heads and our hearts around. There are 30 million Americans that are food insecure. That's the term that the

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federal government replaced hungry with several years ago. Food insecure sounds better than hungry. Hungry sounds too much like hunger.

The words of Isaiah in our Haftorah are explicit: God isn't really interested in our 24 hours of fasting, of standing around and beating our chests, complaining of our famished state, wondering how many more hours until we can nosh and fress our way through a breakfast or two. God is far more interested in our ability to do teshuvah, to right our own wrongs and get on with work of real tzedek in the world. The prophet Isaiah demands: "What is the fast that I desire: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily, your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Eternal shall be your rear guard. If you shall pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the eternal will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not."

Yom Kippur is a day for balance. We are expected to do our own internal work-teshuvah and a day to witness the words of the prophet and do justice. But, we can't act righteously in the world, until we make it right with ourselves. At the very root of teshuvah, its actual essence is hunger. Hunger as in the opposite of complacency. If you are complacent, you can tolerate a lot of wrongs and grief and pain as a result of the life you are living. If you hunger for the truth in yourself, for living with integrity, walking your talk, then you hunger for the results of teshuvah. Each of us is hungry for something today that isn't food. And going without food and drink is the means by which to focus us on that place of hunger, of spiritual lack in our souls. What inside of you is empty, afflicted, lacking that you can fill from your own self, not from the outside? So often, we fill our holes and our pain from the outside with food or power or money or clothes or things or getting ahead or ambition or people or that fabulous new Lexus. All those things make us feel good on some level, but only temporarily.

I believe that Teshuvah is really a four part process. Most of our focus is on two of these-making amends with others and making amends with God. But, the 1st step in forgiveness begins not with God and not with others, it begins with the self. Before we can actively face another human being and ask to be forgiven, we must first forgive ourselves. It's not that easy. Last night and this morning when we were reading the al cheyt section..."For the sin that we have sinned before you by....", not only did I recognize many of those transgressions in myself and not only did I recognize some of them from the previous year's al cheyt lists, but there are still mistakes and errors on that list for which I have yet to forgive myself. Although God is El Elyon-the ultimate and supreme Judge of all Judges, we are the first judge. The one who stares back at us in the mirror. If the first step of teshuvah is self-forgiveness, then the final act of teshuvah is righteous action. The power of teshuvah becomes evident after we turn from the internal work to the work in the world. Each human being is microcosm of the world itself. The Baal Shem Tov taught that when our liturgy says: "Turn from Evil and do Good", the teaching is actually turn toward evil, turn into evil and transform it into Good. We can only do this in the world if have made the honest effort of looking at our own evil, our faults, our dark places in the face and transformed them into good. The Talmud teaches us that "Where penitents stand, the wholly righteous cannot stand." BT Brachot 34b. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz translates this to mean that one who does the real work of teshuvah has the power of the forces of both the good in his soul and in his world and those of evil which he transforms into holiness.

This may sound strange, but one of my holiest tasks involves something that few people enjoy. I love to make my kids their lunches for school. Maybe there is something about not being with them, and knowing that they can feel my love when they open their lunch box. One day during our food stamp challenge I sent Gabriel to school with half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a banana. His exact words: "Seriously, it was the worst lunch of my entire life." Gabriel is prone to hyperbole, however, it probably was his worst meal. It was literally the worst meal of his life. He and his friends are used to having beyond enough, they are used to excess. One dad in his class shared with me that he sends his son with

enough food for at least two lunches everyday just in case. "In case what?" I asked him. He answered: "In case there was an earthquake or another disaster and that way he would have enough food for dinner if I couldn't pick him up." Another mom admitted to regularly sending almost two complete lunches in case her son rejected the first one. For the week that I was on food stamps, I was hungry, cranky, tired, unfocussed and I stole snacks from my assistant. When Gabriel demanded I buy him Doritos from a vending machine as a reward for having gone to a doctor's appointment I told him that we had already spent our money for the day and we each only had a dollar left for dinner. He persisted. He was relentless. I finally took the dollar out of my pocket and handed it to him. He asked what he would eat for dinner if he bought the .95 Doritos from the machine? I told him he would eat his dinner. He asked me how he could eat Doritos and dinner. I told him that was my $1 for dinner that he could use for the Doritos. He thought about it, looked at the vending machine, looked at the dollar in his hand, looked at my face and in a very serious way, handed me back the money. I can't eat your dinner Ima he told me. You eat it.

You eat it??? In the Pesach Haggadah we read: HaLachma Anya, di achalu avahatana b'ar'a d'mitzrayim. This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share our Passover. What is our affliction today? That we have no bread? No! It is that in our world there is plenty of bread, but there are still hungry people all around us. And for those of us who have enough, what are we suppose to do about it? It's difficult enough to plow through the year of wrongs and transgressions and errors and ask for forgiveness, but to go out and do the same thing for the entire world? Believing in God in a world where we are responsible for doing most of the work would cause people to question perhaps not the existence of God, but at least God's work ethic. And speaking of work, the job description for all the fixing and healing and tikkun is very general. Isaiah's terms are very loose: Feed, Clothe, Shelter...He doesn't have a powerpoint presentation to show us exactly the plan to fix the problem. He just says, once you do your own teshuvah and have returned yourself to equilibrium, get to work on the balance of the planet. But, what is enough? I have enough to buy expensive food. I buy organic fruits and vegetables and milk and meat. I spend excessive amounts of money on food at restaurants. I am not here to chastise you. I am guilty myself of all of your transgressions and I guarantee you many more.

So, here's the challenge. Don't just fast once a year. Make the fast a regular experience. I don't mean fast everyday or once a week. But give up lunch once a week and at the end of the year write a check to Mazon the national Jewish response to hunger. (My kid's organic school lunches average $7-8 each day!!) Dedicate a day each week and come to our healthy children's pantry at Cobb school. When you put food in your mouth, do it in a Jewish way. Say a blessing. Give some of your food away. Buy more than you need when you are at the market and bring a bag over to the shul for the SF Food Bank-the bins are outside each day that someone in San Francisco is hungry-365 days a year. Get informed and challenge our government to change the way we deal with hunger in America. Call our members of Congress about the 2007 Farm Bill which if passed would change the average food stamp benefit, increase funding to Food Banks and help raise the standard of the Supplemental Senior Food Programs. Read the Farm Bill and find out what's right and what's wrong in it. Over 2 million Californians who are eligible for food stamps are not receiving them. Read Barbara Ehrenreich's book Nickel and Dimed and watch an episode of 30 days in which Morgan Spurlock, the creator and star of Super Size me puts average Americans into settings that are the polar opposite of who they are and what they believe. He and his fiancé tried to live on Minimum wage for 30 days in Ohio-they couldn't make it. Most Americans can't.

A teacher in Minnesota asked his class: "How many of you had breakfast this morning?" As he expected, only a few of them raised their hands. So he continued: "How many of you skipped breakfast this morning because you don't like breakfast? Lots of hands went up. And how many of you skipped breakfast because you didn't have time for it?" Many other hands went up. He was pretty sure by then that the remaining children hadn't eaten, but he didn't want to ask them about poverty. So he asked them: "How many of you skipped breakfast because you family doesn't usually eat breakfast?" A few more hands were raised. Then he noticed a small boy in the middle of the classroom, whose hand hadn't gone up. Thinking

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the boy hadn't understood, he asked: "And why didn't you eat breakfast this morning?" The boy replied, his face serious, "Because it wasn't my turn." Irving Cramer

The Prophet Isaiah is challenging us to make good on this year's teshuvah. Being forgiving and forgiven, starting off 5768 with clean hands and a pure heart... if that was it, if that was all we accomplished we could say dayenu. It would be enough to do our own personal teshuvah, walk out the door after Neilah and go to our breakfast. That is, if we were living in the garden of eden or Olam Ha-Bah-the world to come or another planet. It is impossible to live in our world and not see that evil is alive all around us. But I believe in that profound teaching from the Baal Shem Tov, don't turn away and act as if evil doesn't exist, face it, grab it by the kishkes, and transform into something that we recognize and we need more of in this world: goodness, mercy, justice. We do real teshuvah when we turn evil into good. It is not the fast, it is the feeding, the building, the clothing, the housing that will change the world.

Ein Kemach, Ein torah: Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said: Where there is no flour, there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no flour." (Pirkei Avot 3:17)

I was never completely certain what that verse from Pirkei Avot meant. Now I think I get it. Where there isn't enough flour, you can't study Torah. And if you don't study torah you won't learn what we are expected to do with flour. If you don't believe me, take on that food stamp challenge. That will definitely change your mind.

Tzom Kal-An easy Fast!

Saturday, July 19, 2008

YOUTH AND EXPERIENCE: THE CROSSROADS OF TIME

Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, Ph.D. Congregation Emanu-El

All the elements of a soap opera are captured in the story of two young men. One named Zimri flaunted the moral code of his day by cohabiting with a Midianite woman. Pinhas, the grandson of Aaron and the great nephew of Moses, the second individual, for whom this week's Torah portion is named, was the first High Priest and consolidated levitical power into an elite priestly class known as the Kohanim. Young, impetuous, and driven by passion, Zimri and Pinhas clashed. Incensed by the cohabitation of Zimri and the Midianite woman, Pinhas brutally murdered them by running a spear through both of them while they were intimate. The text comments that Israel's ethical standard was upheld and a plague that had raged in the community was lifted. Thus, the biblical author justified the action of Pinhas by crowning him a defender of the faith, and elevating his violence to the level of a virtuous act by indicating that God rewarded it.

The medieval Midrash, *Pitaron Hatorah*, fictionalized conversations between mature Moses, the passion-filled Zimri, and the fervent Pinhas in which Moses reprimanded Zimri for taking up with a Midianite woman. In response, Zimri questioned the purity of Moses' reprimand by reminding him that Zipporah, Moses' wife, was a Midianite. Moses discounted his action, saying that he married Zipporah before the Torah, which forbade such relationships, was given at Sinai. Zimri tersely replied, "When you seek to justify an action, you always rationalize."

The dialogue continued. Moses reprimanded headstrong Pinhas for taking the law into his own hands. Pinhas reminded Moses that he too was once young and brash: "Who told you to kill an Egyptian taskmaster?" Again Moses offered the same argument: "That was before the Torah was given." Pinhas, like Zimri, dismissed Moses: "When you want to justify an action, you always rationalize."

Contemporary scholar, Gershom Gorenberg best sums up this collision of youth and experience, "If you don't side with Pinhas when you're 20, you have no spirit. If you still side with him years later. . . you have no sense."

Parents and children are no strangers to this kind of intergenerational struggle, a paradox that many of us feel as we look back on our foolish mistakes, hoping to save our children from the very same missteps. With maturity and wisdom, parents understand that the actions of their own younger years may well have been precipitous; were they to live their lives over again would not repeat their impetuous actions. However, parents do not have the opportunity to live their lives over and youth does not have the ability to benefit from the wisdom that comes from having lived and experienced many things.

What parent has not been anguished or has smiled upon speaking to his child the way his parent spoke to him, or seeing his child repeat words he said or actions that he himself performed years ago? Parents often hear voices from the past that own and direct their thoughts and actions. They are frustrated because children cannot possibly understand the consequences of their actions. Like Moses' confrontation with Zimri and Pinhas, at times parents find themselves at odds with their children over their behavior. Yet at the same time, they are confronted by their children for things parents did in their youth. For some parents, seeing their children repeat their own mistakes makes them feel closer to their children, in much the same way that becoming a parent makes individuals more sympathetic toward their own mothers and fathers. This insight is captured in words of Henry Ward Beecher:

"We never know the love of the parent till we become parents ourselves. When we first bend over the cradle of our own child, God throws back the temple door, and reveals to us the sacredness and mystery of father's and mother's love to ourselves."

To look backward and forward, to understand and be sympathetic toward both our children and our parents at the same moment is an extraordinary vantage point. It many ways, it is a privilege, but it is also a moment of truth. Standing at the crossroads of time, we see into the past and future at the same instant. Conflicted parents who remember the pitfalls of their own youth are often overcome with tears and laughter when they recall their own youth and see their own children doing the same things and making the same mistakes. Suddenly they see themselves as their own parents who now are portrayed as reasonable human beings. Each generation rebels only to grow toward its parents' wisdom, a truth captured in this anonymous poem:

When I was young I heard a song.
One song I heard, no others.
I learned the words and sang along;
The song it was my mother's.
She never told me how to sing.
She never told my why.
She simply sang the song she'd heard
When she was young as I.
Some lines were repeated.
Some lines were repeated.
Some lines were repeated.
And some of them were wise.
They were mommy's bible
They were mommy's blueprint
They were mommy's comfort.
But some of them were lies.
I often write my own songs now.
But more than now and then,
I find a voice inside me
Singing mommy's song again.

Shabbat Shalom!

R1+95

(4)

Rosh HaShanah, Monday, September 25, 1995-5756
Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, Ph.D.

FLASH OF INSIGHT:
The Congregation Emanu-El

We all have moments when a thought suddenly occurs to us. We are often quite astonished, and at times horrified, that we have missed the obvious, when we see all of the pieces of a puzzle fall into place in one flash of insight. Such moments are accompanied by a variety of emotions. We may be overjoyed when we finally make sense of seemingly unrelated or random facts and thoughts; we may become furious when we think we have been had and didn't realize it; we may be saddened by a truth never recognized before. It is moments like this that enable children to leave their immaturity behind as they enter an adult world with fewer illusions than their youth.

Let me share an example of an adult who recalled once such moment from childhood when he was forced to confront himself and those whom he loved. It turned out to be a moment of growth, but it was, nevertheless, ever so painful. Russ, a middle-aged architect called his moment of insight "a loss of innocence."

from Secrets of a Small Town

Each year at Halloween all the students put on a costume and the teachers tried to figure out who was who. The student who was not identified would get a prize. I was in the third grade. My heart just wanted to win. I remember going to this place with my mother to get a lion costume. I said: "I have the best costume in the world! No one's ever going to figure out." I was in the locker room at school putting my costume on for the contest. The kid next to me said: "Everybody's going to know who you are, Rusty. You take one step, and it's going to be totally obvious who you are." Something clicked way inside of me. It was like my whole universe caved in. For the first time, I realized everybody was pretending with me. Everybody was lying. My mother was lying, the teachers were lying, the kids at school were lying. They all pretended that nobody was going to figure out who I was. I had had polio. I limped. To me, having polio was like wearing glasses. I couldn't see myself limping, so I never even dreamed of that as an issue. So all of that happened five minutes before I was to walk out there. When it was my turn, I stepped out on the field and walked in front of the teachers. I had this mask on and I cried...And I could just cry and cry because I had this lion's mask on. I could just cry and cry and cry. I remember it like it was yesterday. I didn't feel badly because I limped. It was because people were lying to me. Ah, it hurt. My whole world lied. (Biederman, 1991)

Think for a moment about what this story triggered in your mind. Did you recall a similar hurt? Perhaps your mind wandered to a moment of lost innocence when something you held to be sacred was swept away by a comment that accidentally slipped out. Perhaps you remembered seeing a parent, teacher or respected adult commit some petty or thoughtless act that made you realize that he was not the perfect human being you believed him to be. Did you think of a person who whispered some secret or truth your family was trying to protect you or someone else from?

It is easier to recall how we first learned that we were lied to or protected from the truth by hearing a story that triggers our memories than it is to merely dredge up such an incident on command. We not only relate to such stories, but we identify their themes in our own lives. That is the power of stories.

My new book, Flash of Insight: Metaphor and Narrative in Therapy (Pearce, 1996), released last month, is the culmination of four years of research on this subject.

For years, I had noticed how stories have great power to influence people. When a story like the one I just shared is utilized in a sermon, I observed that people sit up and take notice, while conversely, minds frequently wander during the expository sections of the same homilies. I have also found that metaphors can free people from their defenses, enabling them to consider what might have otherwise been unacceptable. That is because on the simplest level, all of us have experience with stories. They constitute one of our earliest childhood experiences, and we are thus favorably disposed to hearing them and being entertained by them. A story is just a story and need be nothing more, but often it is a great deal more.

I have found that good advice is not always useful because it assumes that people are rational about the concerns and issues of their lives. Most of us cannot be rational when it comes to emotional issues because something inside us, over which we have no control, takes over and in a instant, old angers surge, tempers flare, jealousies resurface and hurts cause us to ache anew. This emotional baggage causes us to reject sound advice outright. But a story that resonates deeply within us enables us to think about life's hurts and difficulties, just as many of us thought about our own moments of lost innocence when we listened to Rusty's story. But stories do more than enable us to think deeply about matters revealed through a flash of insight. They also provide a vehicle for healing.

To my mind, the most dramatic illustration of how tales can heal is the story of the rabbi, whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. He was asked to tell a story about the great master.

"A story," he began, "must be told in such a way that it constitutes help itself." And he told: "My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!" (Buber, 1947)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every story had such dramatic affect? However, most narratives and metaphors, work in more subtle, indirect ways that are not always readily identifiable. Not many among us can identify a flash of insight that resulted from listening to a particular story. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said:

"Everything in creation has its appointed painter or poet, and remains in bondage like the princess in the fairy tale, till its appropriate liberator comes to set it free. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is more than a fairy tale, it is an allegory of the life of every human being who fights his way through life."

The trick for the listener is to allow the hearing of a story to be liberating, to allow the release of something locked up inside.

Another major power inherent to narrative is its power to help the individual identify with the group. Our tradition is filled with examples. The story of the Exodus, for example, serves as a constant reminder that we, like our ancestors, are capable of realizing personal redemption from the things that enslave us. Our tradition teaches us that each Jew is to consider himself as if he or she personally was redeemed from Egyptian enslavement. Deuteronomy 6:23 says:

"And he freed us from there in order to take us and give us the land that he swore to give our fathers."

The rabbis of the Talmud emphasized that the references to "us" were not only to those who experienced the redemption from slavery, but to their contemporaries and to all generations.

When we hear the Exodus story we come to cherish our personal freedom, and we are filled with rage over the injustice of enslavement just as Moses was when he stood before Pharaoh. Just as Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites for the sin of building the Golden Calf, we too, should intuit his compassion and make it our own. When you listen to the description of the bread of affliction, are you moved to help the poor? What do the words, "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt" speak to you about personal liberation? Do the words of the Haggadah inspire you to break the bonds of bondage or are they merely a nice tale of days gone by.

As an aside, the biblical text we read on Yom Kippur includes all generations, past, present and future. When Moses addresses the Israelites as they receive the Law, God says: "I make this covenant ... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day ... and with those who are not with us here this day." As with the Passover story, when we hear these words, we are drawn into the experience of receiving the law, thus reinforcing the historical immediacy of our tradition.

Have you ever given much thought to why the story of the binding of Isaac was chosen for the New Year rather than the story of Creation, which might seem like a more relevant choice for the New Year? According to Jewish tradition, the hearing of this story serves as a vehicle for individual redemption. For some, listening to the story of the Binding of Isaac, listening to the ram's horn is the equivalent of the redemptive act of sacrificing the sin offering of the ram which was given in substitute for the offering of Isaac. As one scholar put it:

...for the sake of Abraham's compliance with the divine command of offering up Isaac, God would accept hereafter sacrifices of animals as an atonement for the people's sin. When Abraham asked, "What will happen if they will no longer be able to bring such sacrifices?" God replied, "Let them recite it before me, and it will be for me like unto the sacrifice." (Gaster, 1928).

However, an individual need not gain a sense of personal redemption from hearing this legend; not everyone gains the same message. Remember that on the simplest level the story of Isaac is just a story and may not provide any flash of insight; others come away with profound understanding.

Our ancestors developed a novel method of gleaning insights from the biblical narrative. The Hebrew word *midrash* literally means "an explanation." Originally, it was meant to explain difficulties, inconsistencies in the biblical text, and to answer questions in stories we are familiar with. *Midrash* became the rich literary playground of rabbis and scholars, a fanciful world where their minds run free as they derive new meaning for what is not readily apparent. By reading the biblical text along with the *midrash* be it ancient or modern, we can gain a flash of insight our problems and concerns. For example, holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel (1976) asked why Isaac, the most tragic of the patriarchs has a name which means laughter. Wiesel suggests,

As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

For some like Wiesel, thinking about the life of Isaac, reading *midrash* presents an opportunity, as do other stories, to gently guide lives in new directions. A parent might understand that the Binding of Isaac signifies that parents do not murder their children even though they may harbor the secret wish to do so at times; others gain a richer understanding of the need for children to separate from parents when they realize that at the end of the story the text says: "So Abraham returned home." No mention is made of Isaac returning with his father.

Some who intuitively grasp a deeper meaning from the text may see a portent for Jewish history with Jews frequently having a knife held at their throats. A different historic prophesy is offered by Jayseth Guberman (1986) in a poem entitled "While Abraham Was Binding Isaac."

While Abraham was binding Isaac to Mount Moriah he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Who could this be?" he thought.

"We don't even own a door," he cried.

So he continued binding Isaac to the altar. Again, a knock that could make the deaf hear. Abraham had to stop and look for the door.

He yelled, "Leave me alone, I'm doing God's work!" and returned to continue the *akedah*. And again a knock interrupted him, and again, and again--Abraham did not know what to do, whether to laugh or to cry.

And then he thought: "This will be the history of my children. When we will be doing our work or God's work there will always come a knock at the door to interrupt us...whether we own a door or not." And it came to pass that the history of the Jews is a history of interruptions.

Still others may intuit in the *Akadah* an overly intense relationship between parent and child in this story as illustrated by Mel Lazarus' comic strip Momma, which features the rotund woman with big eyes, bushy hair and three children. One strip featured a telephone conversation between Momma and son Francis:

Listen: "Francis," says momma, "I don't like the way you live... You should..."

"Momma," interrupts Francis. "I can't hear you. We have a bad connection."

Momma continues: "I said you've got to change your lifestyle, and..."

"Hugh?" says Francis. Momma, we have a bad connection. Our connection. Momma, our connection...it's not good."

Momma's eyes are bulging. She looks worried. Hold it, Francis," she says. "Is this that same old stuff about the 'umbilical cord?'"

This, to some, is not only momma and Francis, it is Isaac and Abraham and lots of other parent-child relationships.

Let me share one final flash of insight that relates to today's Torah portion, one gained by the twentieth century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (in Brown, Heschel & Novak,1967), who related his realization of what the story meant when he was a mere child studying with his rabbi in Poland:

Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: "Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God." And here I broke into tears and wept aloud.

"Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi. "You know Isaac was not killed.

And I said to him, still weeping, "But rabbi, suppose the angel had come a second too late?"

Heschel then added: "An angel cannot come late, my friends, but we, made of flesh and blood, we may come late."

This was a moment of truth for young Heschel. We, too hearing this story, can grasp deeper meanings that enrich our understanding of life and change how we live.

Arthur Koestler once commented that there are three kinds of stories.

"Ha ha" stories to amuse and entertain, "Ah ha" stories for discovery of ideas and education, and "Ahhh" stories, where the tales are sublime and connect the teller and listener with a golden thread.

May this New Year connect you to the golden thread that not only tugs at your heart, but changes your life through a flash of insight. Amen!

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5766 Yom Kippur Yizkor Service
Thursday, October 13, 2005

THE STING OF PERISHABLE THINGS

Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, PhD
CONGREGATION EMANU-EL

Shanah, the Hebrew word "year," connotes "repetition," and *machzor*, the Hebrew High Holy Day prayer book signifies "another go-around." These words serve as a reminder of the brevity and preciousness of life—we do not have unlimited opportunities to get it right. *Tempus fugit* — Time flies, it vanishes, and then is gone forever.

Time ultimately devours everything. Nevertheless, not all time is the same. Time has different rhythms and cadences, wide variation in the way different people from dissimilar cultures and disparate ages perceive time. For example, in the run-up toward the end of the year, time moves with alacrity, but in the doldrums of January and February, time creeps along at a snail's pace. Albert Einstein once explained the variable nature of time by defining relativity in this way: "When you sit with a nice girl for two hours you think it's only a minute. But when you sit on a hot stove for a minute you think it's two hours. That's relativity." Furthermore, time moves more rapidly or slowly, depending upon one's age. Oldsters experience the paradox of seeing time flying by at a cruel pace but are often burdened by idle days that weigh heavily on their souls as the hours seem to drag on and on. Holidays come around more quickly each year but days crawl at an exceedingly slow pace. However, for youngsters who cannot wait to grow up, reaching maturity often seems to take a life time. One school year can seem to last for an eternity. Recognizing a child's perception that the passage of time moves with indolence, it is no surprise that a keen observer estimated that by age eight, children subjectively feel that they have lived two-thirds of their lives.

An acquaintance once told me of a painful time in his teen years when he felt stuck in a time warp that made it virtually impossible for him to age chronologically. When he was 14, he lied about his age, having said that he was 18 in order to get summer employment as a waiter at a Catskill Mountain resort. For the next few years, until he actually reached 18, he claimed the same fictional age, 18, for what seemed to him to be an eternity. It was only after he finally attained that age that he could resume growing up.

Swiss psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz in her book *Time: Rhythm and Repose* (1978) identified culturally-biased determinants that define time in dissimilar ways. She emphasized that "even our seemingly self-evident concepts of past, present, and future do not seem to be universal." The ancients conceived of time as a gift from the gods with a sacred dimension that is more than a mechanical ticking clock. She adds, "Only in modern Western physics has time become part of a mathematical framework."

In Alan Lightman's book, *Einstein's Dreams* (1993), Lightman depicts a young Einstein working in 1905 on the theory of relativity that would ultimately revolutionize the conception of time. So obsessed was Einstein with time that at night he would dream about worlds where time is not chronological: a universe in which time runs backward, with people growing younger each day; a world in which time is circular, with events happening over and over again; and a world where time passes more slowly at higher elevations, sanctioning the rich to build at higher altitudes in order to live a bit longer than they might at sea level.

Humorist Harry Golden reported visiting a friend who complained that he worked much too hard and didn't spend as much time with his family as he might have liked. "But it would not always be that way," he said. "After the children grow up, those will be the good days. Then I can take it a little easier and really begin to enjoy them." Golden concluded that it would never again be as "good" as it was at that moment, because from that moment on, life rushes on and on toward an anticlimax. Soon the children would begin to lead their own lives, accumulate their own problems, and have their own musings about how much better life will be later on!

A distraught patient said to her psychiatrist, "Doctor, I keep seeing into the future!" When did this start happening?" asked the psychiatrist. The woman replied, "Next Thursday!" Technology has influenced the way we understand time as we have become a culture of relentless button pushers. We are compulsive in our search for improving the speed and efficiency of time. We have smart, phones with SMS, MMS, GSM, GPRS, EDGE, HSDPA, and many others features. Our hyper-momentum, information-saturated world affects our relationship with time and with other human beings. As machines get faster and faster, the velocity of life speeds up, compressing time, so that we get impatient when we have to wait for anything. We relentlessly push an elevator button in the false hope that it will come sooner. Fast food chains champion orders filled in ninety seconds. Even with that speed, people still tap their fingers on the counters and get impatient with the speed-driven servers.

You may remember that Domino's Pizza had to stop its popular "30-minute guaranteed delivery time or the pizza is free" policy because of all the accidents its delivery people were getting into. Although the task of deliveryman is considered one of the ten most hazardous jobs, the company emphasized speed as well as safety in its driver training manual. In a statement that is the antithesis of leisurely dining, the manual admonished its trainees to be mindful of the speed of fast food in these words:

> Speed is vital. For Domino's the deadline is 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, the hungry customer begins to get restless. After 40 minutes, he gets worried. After 50 minutes, he gets irritated. After an hour he explodes.

After four years of this policy (in 1988), the Chicago-based National Safe Workplace Institute claimed that Domino's drivers were involved in 100 accidents, resulting in 10 deaths in a one-year period. This was followed (in 1990) by the installation of a toll-free number that people could call to report a Domino's employee driving recklessly; but following a 78 million dollar judgment against the company for a near-fatal accident caused by a pizza deliveryman, the company finally abandoned this policy. Mary Jane Ryan in her book, *The Power of Patience: How to Slow the Rush and Enjoy More Happiness, Success, and Peace of Mind* (2003) reports that a popular Tokyo all-you-can-eat buffet has refined the meaning of "fast food" by charging diners by the minute. The faster a patron eats, the cheaper the meal!

Computers that once seemed to race at the speed of light now seem to move at a snail's pace and are too slow to operate more sophisticated software. The pace of change is so blistering that we feel like we are falling behind even before we are caught up. We multitask—answer emails and do other tasks while talking to others on the phone. I often hear the click of keyboard strokes, the dinging sound of instant messaging, or the hum of a microwave while I am talking to people on the telephone. People expect instant replies to emails and become increasingly insistent and upset when a day passes without the recipient pushing REPLY.

Do we really need the velocity at which all of our gizmos and contraptions operate? Time saving gadgets—computers, pagers, cell phones, call waiting, speed dialing, voice mail, and beepers—have not created more time; rather they have imprisoned us and made it impossible to accomplish things without interruption. The head of Hitachi's portable computer division sums up this transformation in his admonition to his workers: "Speed is God, and time is the devil."

Put another way, the mantra of our age is: "So much to do and little time." People try to accomplish everything necessary to complete a day's work in the allotted twenty-four hours before a new day dawns and it is time to start all over again. Everything seems like a race against the clock. Rabbis and cantors hear the constant remark of brides, grooms, mourners, lay leaders, and worshippers who extend invitations to invoke and benedict: "Rabbi, keep it short" "How soon can you do it?" "Hurry up with the joy." "Hurry up with the sorrow." "Hurry up with the celebration, with the blessing, with growing up, with dying." I bristle when I hear this. Brevity has become the major criterion for the success of a sermon, lecture, or address. No matter what the content, if it is short, it is good. Even if it is bad, as long as it is short, it is good. If it is long, no matter how good it may be, it is bad.

Some years ago, when the news came out that Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, his friends rushed to his home to congratulate him, and reporters and photographers hurried to interview and photograph him. One of the photographers asked if he would sit at his desk for a photograph while pretending to write something. Agnon scribbled a few words on a piece of paper and the photo was taken. After the crowd left, someone looked at the discarded piece of paper to see what he had written. It contained some words from the Yom Kippur liturgy: *Adam yisodo mai'afar, v'sofo mai'afar, vichuley,* — "Man comes from the dust and returns to the dust, etc." The word *vichuley* — "etc" is key here and makes it clear that Agnon was thinking of the end of this liturgical line that reads: "Man's origin is dust, his end is dust, and his life is a struggle for his daily bread. He is like, a fragile potsherd, like grass that withers, *k'tsit hanovel*—like a flower that fades." Agnon, famous for plays on words, was making a pun. He said that life is fragile and precious, and that nothing is permanent, k'tsit hanovel—like a flower that fades. But *k'tsit hanovel* can also loosely be translated to mean "including the Nobel Prize!" Here was Agnon's greatest achievement, his moment of greatest glory and adulation, and what it really reminded him of was his mortality and the realization that all life is evanescent; all glory is momentary; everything ends in dust — *k'tsit hanovel* — including the Nobel Prize.

If at no other moment of the year, this quiet time of prayer, meditation, and reflection is when we, too, acknowledge that all flesh is like grass; all its goodness, like flowers of the field, shrivels and wastes away, as Isaiah emphasizes: "When the breath of the Lord blows upon them, man, like grass, withers and fades" (paraphrase, Isaiah 40:6-7). Many of us would like to make time stand still and make these and other moments last. If only we could freeze time in order to keep close what we love and cherish; and not see it fade and disappear into the embrace of eternity. We may scheme to save, stretch, or kill time, but nonetheless, finally, it kills us.

We come here not to weep but to fulfill. At this moment of memory and longing, we stand as witnesses to yet another rhythm of time—transcendent time. This is forcefully brought into focus by the profound understanding that the work that parents can no longer do must be taken up by children. Transcendent time pushes us to reconsecrate our lives to the tasks held dear by those we loved. We come to sing songs unsung that once resonated in their hearts. Through the veil of tears and longing, we see them before us at this sacred moment as we cherish their dreams and pledge to fill the void their passing has left behind, to be motivated by and thereby utilize what Jonathan Swift once called "the sting of perishable things." We cannot hold back time, but we can rise above it by making a pledge to fill the void left in our lives and in our community, accomplishing the work that they can do no more, taking up where they left off. We come here to make them proud by transcending the swift passage of time through the realization of the of the psalmist's powerful words: "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). Amen!

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Wednesday, October 8, 2008 Kol Nidre 5769

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: SIMHAT MITZVAH MAKES LIFE A WORK OF ART

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During this time of personal reflection and soul searching, the turmoil in world financial markets detracts from the holiness of this, the Ultimate Sabbath. Profligate spending and poor financial management have unleashed unintended consequences for so many who believed their lives secure and sheltered from the disquiet that now gnaws at our souls. And so before I begin my remarks, I ask you to join me in prayer that paraphrases words of the old *Union Prayer Book*:

Master of all worlds, we pray now and in the days to come for those whose lives have been unsettled, disrupted, and even tormented by the loss of safety and security. As we enter this New Year, may all find refuge in the shelter of your loving presence. May we be reassured by the knowledge that open hearts and intelligent minds are working to return calm and refuge to those buffeted about by the storms of life. "Bless our country as a stronghold of peace and its advocate among the nations." Grant wisdom to our leaders and to all who work for a just and compassionate society. "May contentment reign within our borders, health and happiness within our homes. Strengthen the bonds of friendship and fellowship among all the inhabitants of our land. Plant virtue in every soul, and may the love of Thy name hallow every home and every heart. Praised be Thou, O Lord, Giver of peace." Amen.

Confronted by a diagnosis of terminal acute leukemia, a 30-year-old man's affirmation of life and courage in the face of the death captured the imagination of people many years ago. His howling lament (also a documentary film) framed the end of his life:

> I have not forsaken you, but I cannot be among you all.
> I stand before you all aching with truth
> Trembling with desire to make you know. . .
> O, I am weeping, but it's stage center for all of us. . .
> Step lightly, we're walking home now. . .
> The plain stretches out ahead,
> then the hills, the valleys, the meadows.
> Keep moving people. How could I not be among you?
> (Rosenthal, 1973)

Every now and then, a terminally ill individual provides a reminder that one day you and I will not be here. *Tuesday's with Morey* (Albom, 1997), for example, records discussions between beloved Brandeis University professor Morrie Schwartz, dying from Lou Gherig's Disease and his student Mitch Albom. The resulting bestseller reflects Schwartz' rich philosophical musing:

- Once you know how to die, you know how to live.
- Dying is one thing to be sad about, living unhappily is another.

This year provided additional examples of articulate people confronting mortality. Randolph Frederick (Randy) Pausch (pronounced: powsh) died on July 25, 2008 at age 47—11 months after his diagnosis of terminal cancer. Knowing that he had only a short time to live and move his wife and three children, ages 6, 3, and 2 closer to family and create lasting memories for them, he embarked on a high-speed race against the clock to, as he put it, "get 30 years of parenting into three months . . . trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children." Last September, he tied up loose ends, said his good-byes, and agreed to give a lecture as part of Carnegie-Mellon's retiring professors' tradition of delivering "last lectures." His 90 minutes of humor-filled, life-experience examples of how to make the most of life and make dreams come true was heard by about 400 students and colleagues, and subsequently was viewed by millions of others on the Internet. An abbreviated version appeared on Oprah, and *The Last Lecture* (Pausch, R. & Zaslow, J. 2008) was expanded into a best-selling book. Pausch, a cross between showman Jerry Seinfeld and earnest Jimmy Stewart, commented that after he got his PhD, his mother relished introducting him by saying, "This is my son. He's a doctor, but not the kind that helps people." Of course, his mother was wrong. Thousands of strangers found his upbeat lecture laced with inspiring life-changing humor and pithy aphorisms including:

- If you don't get your dream—you still learn a lot in the process.
- Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.
- People who care will push you. It's only when they no longer care that you will not be pushed.
- Brick walls are in your life for a reason—they let us prove how badly we want our dream.
- You can spend your time in life complaining or playing the game hard.