

First Day of Rosh Hashanah – September 10th, 2018

Tell me if you remember these famous lyrics:

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 do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee,
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife.
In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes
How do you measure a year in the life?

In case you do not recognize these lyrics, they are from the Broadway show RENT. Believe it or not, RENT and I share an anniversary this year. This Broadway show, that forever changed the landscape of Broadway productions, is celebrating its 20th year of touring around the world and I am currently celebrating my 20th year as a Rabbi – speaking to congregations on the High Holidays. For years I have looked for ways to bring the theme of this song to Rosh Hashanah.

These words from Rent’s “Seasons of Love” pose a great question. How do we measure a year of our life? It is the perfect question to ask ourselves on Rosh Hashanah. The Jewish calendar creates this time of self-reflection, when we are urged to think a bit more about time – past, future and present.

Looking back - Was it a year filled with happiness and accomplishment?

Was it a year filled with disappointment sadness or anger?

Perhaps a year of success or a year that could have been more successful?

For our country it was a year of great challenges, but I want us to think about the year on a more personal level. How would we summarize our year that just past?

Knowing that we only have 525,600 minutes in a year, reminds us that time is limited, and we must strive to make the most of the time we have. Since we all want to make our moments count, Jewish tradition consistently tells us to strive to take the ordinary moments in life and make them extra-ordinary, enhance them with deep meaning, and sacredness and community. We all want our lives to matter, we all want to have an impact on others and to be remembered for a blessing. Perhaps the best way for us to do this is to just slow down.

I recently read an article by Rachael Macy Stafford, a Certified Special Education Teacher and contributor the Huffington Post. The title was The Day I Stopped Saying Hurry Up. Stafford wrote:

“When you're living a distracted life, every minute must be accounted for. You feel like you must be checking something off the list, staring at a screen, or rushing off to the next destination. And no matter how many ways you divide your time and attention, no matter how many duties you try and multi-task, there's never enough time in a day to ever catch up.”

Like many of us, that was how Stafford was living her life. Her thoughts and actions were controlled by electronic notifications, ring tones and jam-packed agendas. Although she desperately wanted to be on time to every activity on her overcommitted schedule, she was just not able to maintain that pace.

Eight years ago, she was blessed with a laid-back, carefree, stop and-smell-the roses type of child. When Stafford needed to be out the door, her daughter was taking her sweet time picking out a purse and a glittery crown. When she needed to grab a quick lunch at Subway, her daughter would stop to speak to the elderly woman who looked like her grandma. Her carefree child was a gift to her Type A, task-driven nature, but she did not see it. When

you live life distracted, you have tunnel vision, only looking ahead to what's next on the agenda. And anything that cannot be checked off the list is a waste of time.

Consequently, the two words Stafford most commonly spoke to her daughter were "hurry up". She started her sentences with it: "Hurry up, we're gonna be late." She ended sentences with it: "We're going to miss everything if you don't hurry up." She started her day with it: "Hurry up and eat your breakfast. Hurry up and get dressed." She ended her day with it: "Hurry up and brush your teeth. Hurry up and get in bed." And although the words "hurry up" did little if nothing to increase her child's swiftness, she said them anyway. Maybe even more than the words "I love you."

Then, one fateful day, things changed.

Stafford picked her older daughter up from school and they were getting out of the car. When her little sister was not going fast enough for her sister's liking, Stafford's older daughter crossed her arms and let out an exasperated sigh, and then said, "You are so slow." Stafford saw herself – and it was a gut-wrenching sight.

This is when Stafford realized she was a bully who pushed and pressured and hurried a small child who simply wanted to enjoy life. Stafford's eyes were opened; she saw with clarity the damage she was doing to both of her children. Voice trembling, she looked into her child's eyes and said, "I am so sorry I have been making you rush. I love that you take your time, and I want to be more like you."

From then on, when they took walks or went to the store, Stafford allowed her daughter to set the pace. And when she stopped to admire something, Stafford would push thoughts of her agenda out of her head and simply be in the moment. She witnessed expressions on her daughter's face that she'd never seen before. She studied dimples on her hands and the way her eyes crinkled up when she smiled. She saw the way other people responded to her as she stopped to take time to talk to them. Her daughter was a noticer, and she quickly learned that the noticers of the world are rare and beautiful gifts.

When Stafford hurried through life, or hurried her daughter through life, she was not able to see the sacredness in the everyday, yet her daughter saw the holiness in the present moments, and in the sights and sounds of nature. As we learned in the show RENT,

In truths that she learned or in times that he cried
In bridges he burned or the way that she died

It's time now, to sing out, though the story never ends
Let's celebrate - Remember a year in the life of friends

Think back to last year's High Holy Days. What was different? Was it our health – perhaps we were facing a serious medical challenge last year or perhaps we were cancer free then. And now, one year later, we look for strength to face what lies ahead. Was a beloved family member still around? Or maybe we were in a much darker place than we are today. Perhaps we were in the midst of a relationship that we knew needed to end but we struggled to do what needed to be done and now we have. One year ago, many of us felt more secure and less troubled by things happening around us.

How do we measure this past year? In Mondays, in phone calls, meetings, baths, practices, dinner parties, school days, vacations, doctors' appointments, test results or the times that touched our heart – those profound moments of laughter or tears. There are lots of ways to measure a year, and Rosh Hashanah is the time to measure ours.

If you are like me, you need this lesson of slowing down, of being in the moment and not pressing people to move faster than they can. Some of us are list makers. It's fulfilling when we are able to check things off and even better once we can delete the whole list from our phone. Do you have a countdown clock? Mine is an internal clock, always aware of the next big event, the next High Holiday or the next meeting or responsibility or the next vacation.

The trouble with counting down is that by constantly looking to the future, we are rarely here in the present. It is something I know I need to work on. To be more patient – to be more in the moment. The older I get the more I realize how critical it is to healthy living – both physically and emotionally – to be more in the moment. Holiness is found in appreciating the present, no matter what the present holds.

When we are in our 20's and 30's we think we have so much time ahead of us. At that age, important decisions can prepare us well for our future. As we age, as we go through our 40's 50's and 60's we're busy doing what we do, but we try to slow time down and live just in the moment, and then if we are blessed to live into our 8th or 9th decade of life, we live mostly for today, not taking time for granted and doing what we can to just focus on today.

On the simplest level, the High Holy Days remind us of this value every year. Some of us are aware of one of the most common words in our liturgy is the word *Hayom* – Today. We first saw it in the Torah reading this past Shabbat, always the reading prior to Rosh Hashanah when Moses instructs the Israelites to focus on the moment at hand, *Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kulchem Lifnei Adonai Elohechem*, You are all standing here today, we say it immediately prior to every Torah reading, *Atem Hadvetim B'Adonai Elohechem, Chayim Kulchem HaYom* – You are all connected to Adonai, all of us are living here today, and it appears over and over again in our liturgy today – *HaYom*. Now that I made you aware of this word, you will see how often it appears in the Machzor. Each time we see it, we are encouraged to not only think about the past year or the New Year but rather focus on this moment, to slow things down and stay in the present – *HaYom*, today – right now.

These holidays are a sacred reminder that this life is the only one we have, and we need to pay attention in order to not waste our time. We need to ask ourselves who we are and what we are doing here – at this moment in our lives, in this world - *Hayom*. In Hebrew, these days are called the *Yamin Noraim* – The Days of Awe, days filled with wonder and gratitude, gratitude for the gift of life and all of its blessings – and also with trepidation and awe, knowing what it takes to truly accept life's fragility.

There are lots of ways to measure one's life. The question is: what's the right way to measure our life? What has filled our time? Are we proud of the choices we've made?

Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes. How did we spend them? In which moments did we find holiness and connection? In our technological world, where messages are sent in an instant, with snapchat and instant messaging and Twitter and so many other ways to rush through life, I want us all to pause and reconsider how quickly we do things and instead stop to realize that the most meaningful experiences in life, just take time. Too many of us hurry from task to task, meeting to meeting, comment to comment. We are great at packing our schedules so tightly that we may postpone doing things more patiently. We may even consciously over program ourselves so that we can avoid certain people or certain tasks. We must remember this as we explore the process of *Teshuva*, turning back, of reconciling and apologizing. To do this right, it takes time. By nature, most of us avoid conflict, and we don't love apologizing when we are wrong. So, we keep ourselves distracted, over filling our moments and running from one thing to the next to avoid turning back.

I know it is a cliché, but it is valid – Life is too short. We need to reconcile and apologize today because tomorrow might be too late. Too often I sit with families who have experienced a tragedy, a sudden loss of a loved one and they are overwhelmed by sadness and regret. They had so much they wanted to still do together, to still experience together, to say to one another. At those times that I am left at a loss of words, so instead I speak to you today. God forbid this should ever happen to anyone we know, but just in case, let's focus more on today, on this moment, on what we want to do or say or experience right now.

Too often parents tell me how they feel badly about how they spoke to their children, how they put too much pressure on their children or how they raised their voice or expressed anger instead of patience - and now they have regrets. This is a lesson many of us can learn from. The time to do so is today. Have the challenging conversation. Pick up the phone or send that email or text and turn back! Apologize this year – this month, this week or maybe even today. We must make sure we always refrain from the hurtful words and include the right words, I am sorry

and I love you before we say goodbye. It makes a difference, not only in making the moment sacred, but it can measure our life.

A famous Hasidic rabbi from the early 19th century, The Kotzker Rebbe, teaches that our actions are “the visible traces of our character in this world.” What do our actions say about us? Do our actions create moments of holiness and connection? If someone were to describe us, would they mention our patience, our giving nature and our kindness? Will we leave traces of our social action work in the world? Are we allocating enough time in our schedule to volunteer for a cause that could utilize our time and talent?

This High Holy Day season, my hope for us all is that by reflecting on the 525,600 minutes that just ended, we can make better choices and decisions in the year ahead. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes about potential for our Jewish traditions to help us refocus our lives. “Judaism can save our life from being wasted, from being spent on the trivial.... Judaism is a way of making sure that we don’t spend our whole life, with its potential for holiness, on simply eating, sleeping, and paying the bills. It is a guide to investing our life in things that really matter, so that our life will matter. It comes to teach us how to transform pleasure into joy and celebration, how to feel like an extension of God by doing what God does, taking the ordinary and making it holy.”

Over the next year, may we all be moved to strive for the good instead of the mundane. May we act in a way that would make God proud, and, more importantly, may we make ourselves proud of the choices we make. We must decide now how we would like to be able to describe the year that will have just passed when we are sitting here a year from now. This year, may we be the best versions of ourselves, spending every minute of the year we can on living a life measured by moments of goodness and measured in love.