

We Get to Be Here...and Now

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783*

These past few months came to be known – among my family and friends – as “The Summer of Todd.” The stars just seemed to align in my favor as summer plans unfolded. For the first time in 20 years, Michele chose to work at Eisner Camp for the full summer, running the operations side of the health center there, and while I missed her during our days apart, camp was blessed to have her. This decision meant that, for much of the summer, I was able to split my days between Needham – attending to TBS duties and helping my mother to settle into her new space in our home – and camp, our family’s home away from home.

Summer is also when I am able to take a more substantive break from my responsibilities here at TBS, and – this year – with most of the family at camp and unable to travel with me, I planned for time away doing the next best thing...visits with countless friends – many of whom I had not spent appreciable time with since 2019 – and...as much live music as I could pack in.

The confluence of so many people, moments, and experiences that I had been longing for made these summer days particularly special. It felt like holy time...a reality I became more acutely aware of when I found myself gratefully repeating the same phrase over and over again all summer long... “I get to be here!” Dancing with dear friends as our favorite band plays, following years that made such gatherings impossible... “Wow! I get to be here! How amazing is this?” Marking deeply meaningful lifecycle moments with members of our TBS community... “I get to be here!” At camp services, and meals, and song sessions, and being a fly on the wall, catching glimpses of our kids’ summer... “I get to be here!” Enjoying the view from seats at Fenway or from an old friend’s new home...“I get to be here!”

It became something of a mantra for me this summer – an ever-present reminder of the blessings I was experiencing. I shared it with friends and was bemused when I heard others repeating it back to me during their own moments of gratitude. Over time, I also found myself uttering those words in the midst of much more ordinary experiences...getting to kiss the kids goodnight after weeks when I could do no such thing up in their bunks...“I get to be here.” At family meals... “I get to be here.” At meetings, and movies, walking the dog and running errands, “I get to be here.” Even when the experience was hard or sad – like selecting the language for my father’s stone memorial marker at the cemetery – what a blessing it is to have this added reason to be recalling him and his life’s legacy... “I get to be here.”

This simple phrase had such impact on me not only because it served as a regular reminder that – in most moments – it is a privilege to be able to do what I am doing, and the alternatives might well be far worse. “I get to be here” also focused me on the “here” part...the immediate, the present, the right now. And this – I must admit – can be a real challenge for me. I’m a reminiscer – often nostalgic for times-gone-by, and I’m a Reform rabbi, professionally trained to keep an entire congregation of post-modern

Jews firmly rooted in our shared past. So too, I'm a worrier, forever fretting over what the future will hold.

I know I am not alone in that struggle to focus on the present moment as it seems to have been part of the human condition for millennia now. "The Holy One said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and be there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the commandments on them.'"¹ Puzzled by this text from Exodus, the Kotzker Rebbe wondered, "If Moses came up to the mountaintop, he would already be there, right? So why would God also bother to specify, 'and be there?' But from this apparent redundancy," the Kotzker taught, "we find proof that even one who strains to ascend onto a high mountaintop, and is indeed able to reach the summit, it is nevertheless possible that that person is still not there. Even though one may be standing on the very peak itself, one's head may be somewhere else. The goal, you see, is not merely to ascend but also to be there, to be actually present there, and nowhere else..."²

During these days set aside for uncomfortable questions asked in the interest of personal growth - here's a good one for each of us to consider...how often am I physically in one place but mentally, emotionally, or spiritually in another...and at what cost to myself...to my family...my friends and co-workers?

Meals consumed while our minds are back at work...only half listening to others as we stress about something we fear will happen later...the several hundred times a day that our laptops and phones win the battle for our attention...counting pages in the High Holy Day prayer book to see how much service is left. They all pull us out of the now...we're there, but not really.

And those distractions merely amplify a problem seemingly endemic to our humanity. Reb Nachman of Breslov spoke to this reality when he wryly taught, "Today you feel up! Don't let yesterdays and tomorrows bring you down."³ Or, as one of Oprah's favorite self-help teachers, Eckhart Tolle put it, "*If you were.. totally present in the Now, all negativity would dissolve almost instantly. It could not survive in your presence.*"⁴ Such is the power of centering ourselves in the here and now...even if only for a few moments.

Yet we resist that path, so often preferring the allure of trips down memory lane or daydreaming about what is yet-to-come. The past holds our roots, our stories, our individual and collective memories, but often when our minds dwell there at length, fertile ground is prepared for regret and remorse to take root, and – for some – depression and dismay over an unchangeable history or a lost time to which we cannot return. Likewise, the future is our great beacon, encouraging us forward, ever-hopeful for what lies behind the horizon. Yet, when our minds dwell there too long, the result is quite often anxious worry over what is yet-to-be – or not to be.

¹ Exodus 24:12

² As translated in [Sparks Beneath the Surface: A Spiritual Commentary on the Torah](#) by Lawrence Kushner and Kerry Olitzky, Jason Aaronson Press, 1977

³ Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #288

⁴ <https://mobile.twitter.com/EckTOLLEQuotes/status/1000399983118499840>

We control neither the past, now forever behind us, nor the future with its infinite mysteries. These Holy Days are replete with stark reminders of that reality as we wonder aloud who shall live and who shall die, who will be inscribed and sealed for blessing in the book of life, and for whom that reality is not meant to be.

The answer of these Holy Days to that existential conundrum? Make the most of today! Speak the words you need to speak today. Focus on where – or better yet, when - you actually have a locus of control...on the moment you are living in right now. One of the traditional prayers for this day of Rosh Hashanah is like a precursor to the acrostics we'll recite ten days from now during our Yom Kippur confessions. It contains twenty-two lines of prayer – one for each letter of the Hebrew *aleph-bet*, each a different heartfelt plea with the Holy One, and each beginning with the word, *Ha-yom*...today.

Ha-yom t'amtzeinu – Ha-yom t'varcheinu

Ha-yom t'gadleinu – Ha-yom tid're-sheinu l'tovah

Today, may You strengthen us...**Today**, may You bless us...**Today**, make us great...**Today**, seek out our good...and so on for eighteen more stanzas.

Today, we beseech the Holy One to focus on this day...this moment...this here and now because we know that this is what we need to do as well. At least for today, we get to be here. Let's not miss it.

We ought to learn to focus on the present because doing so is healthy for us, and we all need some time carved out for reflection and renewal after the last few years we've lived. Thankfully, we inherit the wisdom of generations of Jewish spiritual practitioners to help us access what Dr. Nan Fink Gefen calls "the silence within." This author and teacher of Jewish meditation writes, "When we enter into this state, we have our most intense spiritual experiences and receive our most significant moments of understanding. If you are like many people, you probably don't pay much attention to the silence within as you rush from place to place, juggling responsibilities and meeting deadlines. But you sense its existence. In the quiet moments it hovers just outside your consciousness, and you are drawn to it."⁵ Perhaps the moments we now share are quiet enough to feel its presence...maybe even sense The Presence of The Holy One.

Throughout Torah, God is known by the name spelled, in Hebrew, *yud-heh-vav-heh*. Of this unpronounceable holy moniker, Rabbi Larry Kushner writes, "This word is the sound of breathing. The holiest Name in the world, the Name of the Creator, is the sound of your own breathing. That these letters are unpronounceable is no accident,"⁶ nor is it happenstance that the letters of God's name are the root of the Hebrew verb "to be." We find God when we stop moving, and just be. And it is, similarly, no coincidence that – on Rosh Hashanah – the birthday of the world – we recall our stories of Creation in which God bestows life by breathing it into the first human. That is our source.

⁵ Discovering Jewish Meditation: Instruction & Guidance for Learning an Ancient Spiritual Practice by Nan Fink Gefen, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2011, p. 3

⁶ The Book of Words by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993, p. 27

In Hebrew, the word for breath, *neshimah*, is all-but-identical to *neshamah*, meaning soul. If we are to reconnect with our souls, we must begin by making ourselves aware of our breathing. No time like the present.

Dr. Gefen invites us to:

“Begin by breathing deeply.

Let your breath out with a slight sound, just audible enough for you to hear.

Experience your body releasing the tension you are holding.

Let the slight sound of your breath carry it away.

Do this several times.

Now, breathe in your usual way.

Watch your breath as it fills your lungs.

Watch as your body expands to receive it.

Then notice your chest contract as your breath begins to depart.

Notice your body release it.

Keep your mind on your breath.

If your mind begins to wander, bring it back.

Pay attention.

The breath flows in. The breath flows out...”⁷

That simple exercise took under a minute. Odds are that many of our pulses have slowed. We are less distracted by the stressors we brought into the sanctuary with us tonight. We’re all a little bit more here now.

What kind of difference might it have on our lives if each of us engaged in such a centering activity for just 5, 10 or 15 minutes a day?

Many among us have a head start on such experiences, having learned to focus through prayer, yoga, meditation or other mindfulness practices that help us to be in the now. We will all have the opportunity to learn and experiment anew this year as our own Stephanie Javaheri, long Temple Beth Shalom’s pre-Shabbat yoga instructor, will be leading us in brief focused meditations during our Friday evening services once a month. Making time for such endeavors – here at TBS, before bed, at our desks or in the great outdoors – will be good for us, body and soul.

⁷ Discovering Jewish Meditation: Instruction & Guidance for Learning an Ancient Spiritual Practice by Nan Fink Gefen, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2011, p. 39

As Gefen writes, “Jewish meditation brings about [personal] change ...by teaching *concentration*...[helping us] to focus more intently on one thing at a time... [experiencing each] in a fuller way...

...[it also increases] *awareness*. During meditation we observe our thoughts and watch them rise and fall away. We learn what they are, and we find out how our minds work...

...and [that]...leads to greater knowledge of the self. Taking the time to explore the broken places within ourselves can lead to great healing.”⁸

Yet, renewed focus on being in the now has benefits well beyond the personal healing so many of us need after the trials of the last several years.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, suggests that the demands of now also compel us to engage in one of our greatest challenges of this High Holy Day season: repairing our relationships – and making good on the damage we’ve done - through acts of *teshuvah* – heartfelt repentance for our misdeeds. Sacks cites a verse from Deuteronomy which reads, “**Now**, O Israel, what does Adonai, your God, ask of you?”⁹ and a comment on these words from our Sages, who...perplexingly, write in response, “The word ‘now’ [in this verse] means nothing except for *teshuvah* – [repentance].”¹⁰ Sacks tries to explain their intent by recounting this story:

“My father once told me how he gave up smoking, the habit of a lifetime. He said: there is only one way. You take your cigarettes or your pipe and you throw them in the dustbin. You have to decide here and now to make the irrevocable gesture. It’s an experience I have since heard recounted many times by many people.

They say, in effect, that to break any longstanding habit or dependency, there has to be decisive ‘Now’. Tomorrow is the enemy of *teshuva*,” writes Sacks, echoing the sentiments of a TBS pre-schooler who once told me that he didn’t like saying “I’m sorry,” because he could always think of something else he’d rather be doing.

Rabbi Sacks continues, “Of all *mitzvot*, indeed of all ideas in Judaism, *teshuva* brings us most unremittingly to the bedrock psychological truth: that we are precisely what at any given moment we will ourselves to be. No historian whose concern is to explain the past, no scientist whose business is to predict the future, can deliver this particular truth, which belongs to the radical present. *Teshuva*,” repentance, “insists that we can liberate ourselves from our past, [and] defy predictions of our future, [all] by a single act of turning...as long as we do it now.”¹¹

In just ten days’ time, mid-morning on Yom Kippur, when the remaining hours until break fast are causing our tummies to rumble and our minds to wander, as the Gates of Repentance begin to creak shut, our Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning will

⁸ Ibid. p. 20

⁹ Deut. 10:12

¹⁰ Bereishit Rabbah 21:6

¹¹ [The Word ‘Now’: Reflections on the Psychology of Teshuva – https://media.rabbisacks.org/20211006223850/Issue-20-RH-5746-1985.pdf](https://media.rabbisacks.org/20211006223850/Issue-20-RH-5746-1985.pdf)

demand our immediate attention, with Moses' repetitive emphasis beckoning us into the right now:

"You stand **today**, all of you, before your God יהוה

to enter into the covenant which your God יהוה is [re-establishing] with you **today**...

...I make this covenant...not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us **today** before our God יהוה and with those who are not with us here **today**...

... Surely, this Torah which I give you **today** is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach...

... No, it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart...

...I call heaven and earth to witness against you **today**: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life — so that you and your children may live."¹²

Life – real life – is to be found in the right now – in every today that we are blessed to live and every breath we are fortunate enough to breathe. When we opt to be full participants in our present reality – with its uplifting highs and devastating lows, in its moments of mind-blowing resplendence and those of mind-numbing mundaneness - we are choosing life and health...for ourselves – body and soul...for our relationships with loved-ones and with The Holy One...we are choosing life – lived most fully in real time - for us and for the generations who are relying upon us.

To paraphrase the words of American historian, Alice Morse Earle, "*5782 is history. 5783 is [largely] a mystery. Today is a gift. That is why it is called the present.*"¹³

Let's commit to accepting that gift and living fully in that present together. Why wouldn't we?

After all...we get to be here. *L'shanah Tovah!*

¹² Deut. 29:9-30-:19 (excerpts)

¹³ Sundials And Roses Of Yesterday - Garden Delights Which Are Here Displayed In Very Truth And Are Moreover Regarded As Emblems by Alice Morse Earle, MacMillan Press, 1902, New York