

**Rosh Hashanah 5770**  
**September 19, 2009**  
**Rabbi Katie Bauman**  
**“Being There”**

Rosh Hashanah: the celebration of a new year. It is a happy day, and one full of hope for a bright future. The sweetness of the apples and honey, the energizing blast of the shofar, even the elevating music of the worship service led and arranged by Cantor Kaplan remind us of the happy and hopeful message of this day.

The music is grand and uplifting. But then we get to the middle of the service and we hear this:

*Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom ki hu nora v'iyom.*

If we turn to page 176 in our prayer books, we find these words and their translation. “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is awesome and full of dread.” These words are the defining theological statement of the HHD season, and even if we didn’t have the prayer books in front of us to tell us that this is their meaning, we might intuit as much from the music.

The tune is haunting. It sounds ominous, so much so that we might wonder whether John Williams was thinking of *Unetaneh Tokef* when he wrote “The Imperial March” for *Star Wars*. Sometimes the music of our prayers, the tunes of our liturgy are the best translators of its spirit.

With all the joy associated with celebrating a new year, this prayer on page 176 reminds us that while this day is joyful, it is not the carefree blowout that December 31<sup>st</sup> is in our secular lives. This day does have a foreboding associated with it. What is so scary about a new year?

It’s hard to put our finger on what the fear is all about. Surely it’s not that God is actually sealing our fate next week. We as modern, progressive Reform Jews don’t usually ascribe to that theology. Especially not when we as a society are in control of so much in our own lives. We are so powerful as human beings, and getting more so all the time.

The most cherished gift I received this summer along with my rabbinical ordination was the chance of a lifetime, the humbling honor of being called rabbi of this outstanding Temple.

But I must tell you that the second most cherished gift I received this summer was my iPhone. Anyone who knows me knows I am not tech-y at all, but I love that little machine. It makes me feel so powerful! I am connected to everyone all the time, able to manage my life and appointments better than ever before, and no matter what I need, as the commercial slogan goes, “There’s an app for that!”

So, with all this power, with all this control, how do we connect with the feeling of vulnerability that our liturgy and this entire holiday season is trying to convey? This prayer in our prayer book, I believe, gives us the answer. While we have an app for almost everything, there’s no app that can allow us to see the future, regardless of how well it’s calendared, and no app that freezes time so that nothing will ever change.

On page 177 it reads, “On RH it is written, and on YK it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die.” A modern paraphrase and one that suits our modern approach to life: No matter how powerful we are as individuals and as a society, no matter how focused, how ambitious, how organized, the only thing we can predict with absolute certainty in the coming year is that the unexpected will happen.

For example, think about a simple drive to an appointment of any kind. You have it in your calendar. You know where you’re headed. And you leave yourself time to get there. But somewhere between here and there, there’s an accident on the road, someone does something irresponsible, or you do, or there’s just unanticipated construction. And boom – your best-laid plan falls apart. You meant to be there, you planned to be there, but you didn’t get there.

It’s no wonder, as we’re traveling down the road, determined to get where we need to go, with all the unpredictable parts of our lives that we try to schedule so perfectly, it’s no wonder with all the other cars and the construction on the road, we often have a hard time “being there.”

*Being there* – it sounds so simple. We go through our lives, typing things into our blackberries and I Phones or flipping through the pages of [whisper] a paper calendar, scribbling down details on post-it notes. She has a dance recital? “I can be there.” Dinner with a friend on Sunday night? “I can be there.” Going on a walk on this beautiful day? “I can be there.”

We’re great at committing our precious time, making sure our bodies are seated in the right chairs, our eyes focused on the right person for any given hour of our day. We are where we say we’ll be when we say we’ll be there... or close enough.

And those commitments we make, the daily mundane commitments, often come off without a hitch, and we complete them. So much so that it is easy to go through life forgetting that message of Unetaneh Tokef, forgetting how unpredictable life is and how vulnerable we are. If we kept the message of Rosh Hashanah close to our hearts throughout the day, would the greater subtext of our lives really read: recital, dinner, walk...?

I don’t think so. Rather, the subtext of our calendar would sound something more like this: “She’s growing up. There will only be a handful more chances to go to a dance recital in which she can’t wait to see me in the audience. I must be there.”

Or it might be: “The health my friend enjoys now will not last much longer, and this may be our last dinner together for a long time. I must be there.” Or it might sound like this: “This beautiful day, the last of the season, has the potential to reinvigorate me for the rough week ahead. I must be there.”

Being there – we use the phrase a million times a day. But how often are we *really* present, really invested, really emotionally and spiritually connected to each moment, to the gift of our lives, and to those we love? Sometimes in our fast-paced, business oriented and technologically savvy lives, it’s tempting to think of work, meetings, and the daily grind as the “real world,” and who has enough energy to be that present in the real world? The real world, we might protest, is all about getting things done.

But in midst of crisis and loss, when we, or someone we love, faces life and death, when the gifts of life and love hang in the balance – *that is the real world*. Those times demand our presence and full attention, and those times are when we really learn who we are, what and who we love, and what we absolutely must do.

The happy, tranquil times, the spaces between the drama, it seems, are not as demanding. When things are going fine, when things are good, a parent takes a phone call during a family dinner, a teenager watches TV all evening, friends get into fights about little things, an exhausted professional allows herself to completely zone.

Imagine if the same awareness we have when we hear *Unetaneh tokef*, the same dread and simultaneous appreciation of the gift of life, was a strong during these tranquil and undemanding times as it is when we're sitting in the hospital with an ailing parent or at a loved one's funeral. What if we could capture that clarity every day, if even for one moment?

Being emotionally and spiritually present is not about seizing the moment – about detaching from all our responsibilities and our “normal” way of life because life is fleeting. Rather, being emotionally and spiritually present is about becoming more attuned to and appreciative of that which is good in our lives, of embracing reality for all it has to offer.

There is so much opportunity for joy in a human life, and most of us are blessed with many moments with our loved ones and friends doing things we enjoy. And in those moments, we must be sure to ask ourselves, “Where am I?”

The answer is all too often, for so many of us, “Not there,” or, “I’m thinking about something else,” or, “I’m thinking about nothing.” I believe the reason is because we all struggle with “being there” when it’s not demanded of us. For one thing, it’s so easy, in our busy lives, in a world full of distractions, just to go through the motions of living. It’s so easy to slip into the pattern of completing the “tasks” of spending time with loved ones and meeting our own emotional and spiritual needs in the same way we complete “tasks” of taking out the trash or filling the car up with gas. It’s so easy to forget what’s really important.

But there is an even greater problem: while being emotionally and spiritually present during our everyday lives is hard, it is even harder to notice and correct *not* being present. As we prepare to evaluate our lives in anticipation of Yom Kippur, to make amends, and to begin this New Year with every intention to live it better than the last, we can take pride in that most of us, I hope, haven’t done anything blatantly horrible.

Think of the story of Abraham and Isaac that we just read. It contains many lessons, but perhaps the clearest is this: Abraham’s willingness to perform this act of violence – of sacrificing his son – is unequivocally unacceptable to God. And when we examine this text with our modern eyes and ears, we are so aghast at Abraham’s willingness to perform this act of violence, to cast aside his ethics, his morals, that it is hard to even view him as a sympathetic character, let alone to think of him as an example.

The fact that we have this reaction to the story demonstrates that most us know right from wrong. Most of us, again, I hope, haven’t intentionally killed, stolen, been abusive or dishonest and, for the most part, would never do so. (If you have, I truly invite you to pay attention at Yom Kippur.) But everyone hurts someone he or she loves sometimes – by saying

something harsh, by forgetting something important, by being selfish, even unintentionally. And for most of us, when we do those things, these sins we can identify, we know it and we apologize.

But a much more difficult sin to atone for than those I just mentioned – difficult because the sin is elusive and subtle – is this sin of going through the motions, of taking life and love for granted, of not being completely present in our lives. And how much do we sacrifice, cumulatively throughout our lives, by making that mistake?

In this world where the only thing we can be certain of is change and the occurrence of the unexpected, our greatest regrets as we reflect back on our lives may be not the mistakes that we make once or twice in a lifetime – a single moment that we wish we could take back or do over – but rather the mistakes we make a thousand times a day: not truly engaging in our family time, not really taking time to look around and enjoy the beauty of the natural world, not actually remembering when we're with our friends how much we love them; not really being present, not finding joy and inspiration wherever and whenever we can.

These sins do not strike us as egregious because they are not singular events that we can point to and say, "I definitely should not have done that." Atoning for these sins, sins of being distant, is about the way we approach our lives at every turn.

This Day of Remembrance is "awesome and full of dread" because it is a day when we're reminded of the fragility and transience of life. *Unetaneh tokef* reminds us that the world is going to change between this RH and the next, that there will be gain but there will also inevitably be loss. That's the reality of human life. Our charge, then, is to use the awe and dread of the High Holy Days to make a promise to our God, to our loved ones, and to ourselves that this is a year during which we'll truly practice being there.

Every individual will have to determine for him or herself how to be more present. But I would like to offer two suggestions, two strategies, for addressing this problem. One is timely, and the other is timeless.

The timely suggestion is to use whatever calendaring tool we have – be it I Phone, day planner, or post-its – to remind ourselves to be present. We have the capacity, as never before, to manage a huge amount of information, to set reminders for ourselves of every birthday, every recurring appointment, we get newsflashes by the minute. Why hesitate to make notes, set reminders, and use our countless "apps" not just to arrive there but to be there too.

During the next 10 days, let's take a look – a physical look – at the year that has passed, really evaluate when we succeeded in appreciating the many gifts of our lives and when we didn't, and make plans – actual plans – to do better this year. Perhaps schedule in a cell-phone free meal with the family. Or set a reminder to step outside and enjoy the natural world once a week. Or make a note of the most cherished trait of a friend before you see her. Let's use the tools at our disposal, the tools that are constantly criticized as the source of our disconnection as a society, and use them as a source of deeper connection.

The timeless suggestion is not just to look to our newest tools, but to our most ancient. Our Jewish tradition – its entire essence – is about making sure we're present in our own lives, aware of our vulnerability, and grateful for the gifts we receive every day.

Our holidays exist to mark moments, to make sure that our time doesn't just pass from season to season or from week to weekend. From lighting candles on Shabbat to signify that time is sacred to building a rickety booth on Sukkot to remind us of our vulnerability and to give us a chance to marvel at the outdoors, Jewish holidays address this problem of "being there" with tremendous consideration and wisdom.

Our ancient sages prescribe blessings for all occasions. Saying blessings require us to take a moment, acknowledge something special, and actually say that we're grateful for it. Blessings that express our desire to protect and guard our children, that articulate the wonder of seeing a rainbow, that acknowledge the joy of reaching pivotal moments in our lives. Our Judaism is our richest, most valuable inheritance for practicing being there, and its "apps" are eternal. Let's use them this year to avoid the sin of being distant, the sin of not being there.

Finally, *Unetaneh Tokef* has one more lesson to teach.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed.*

Yes, that means RH and YK are pivotal days. But, more importantly, it means is that the Ten Days of Awe in between are when our fate is determined.

Adonai our God, help us to know that the big days are important, but as we leave this sanctuary of holy space and holy time and continue with our daily grind, help us to remember that the in-between time, how we approach our down time when we don't really have to be anywhere, is also vitally important to how we are judged by God and how we judge ourselves.

And next year, when we look back on 5770, O God, help us to be filled with appreciation for the gifts of love and life that we receive every day, and to know that, although the future is always uncertain, what is certain is that we took every opportunity to love and live well.

*Areshet s'fateinu ye-erav l'fanecha, Eil ram v'nisa.*

O God Supreme, accept these offering of our lips, and look with favor upon us this day.  
Amen.