

The Power of Today
Kol Nidre 2023 ~ 5784
Rabbi Yael Ridberg – Congregation Dor Hadash

I'm going to be 55 in 2 weeks. I have 3 high schoolers at home, and my oldest child will graduate college this year. I've been a rabbi for 26 years, and I've been here at CDH for fully ½ of that time. My sisters are in their 40s; my parents are 80 & 81, and in a month, I'm going to the 40th reunion for my 10th grade year in Israel. Suffice it to say I've arrived at middle age. It kind of snuck up on me, in that I've only just enumerated these and other milestones to myself.

In the words of musician David Byrne, "You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?" This lyric has played in a loop in my head this year. It has felt like a calling to face my midlife moment to be in it fully, the ups and the downs, and speak to the recognition of impermanence. Everything passes – *l'chol zman va-et* – to every time and season life is fleeting – in the words of Ecclesiastes, moments, and the passing of moments, this is life.¹

What better moment than Kol Nidre – stripped bare of all pretense and ego, we stand before the passage of time and place, actions, and reactions. Our journey through life is full of twists and turns, regardless of how old we are, and in the depths of our deepest experiences our soul grows – from despair and suffering, and even from great joy.

It reminds me of the moment after Jacob awakens from the dreamscape of angels ascending and descending a ladder after bedding down for the night in a nondescript, unimportant place. *Mah norah hamakom hazeh* – he says upon awakening - "How awesome is this place."²

As I approached the *yamim noraim* this year, I was acutely aware of how present I have been to my life in the last year, how in each moment I have needed to be there – and nowhere else – recognizing the power and meaning of the now.

¹ Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *The Way of Solomon*, p.131

² Genesis 28:17

The High Holy Days are nothing, if not a sustained confirmation of life's tenuous uncertainty. I don't especially like that confirmation: who would? But serious religion raises serious reflections, and in the end, I am always glad to have spent these days on more solemn fare than the latest binge worthy media.

Maybe you have had a year like mine? The particulars don't matter, but maybe we might all pause for a moment and ask ourselves "What are we holding tonight? Gratitude? Yearning? Heartache? Regret? Confusion? Anger? Contentment? Yom Kippur is an invitation to our own inner life, and the only place to start is exactly where you are."³

If last year I was consumed with the idea of legacy making and the questions around how we can be the great ancestors the future generations need us to be, this year I am especially focused on today. Tomorrow slips easily into the unknown and the tenuous – but today is today, and what would it mean if it really was all we had?

I've lived nearly 55 years of "todays," but I'm only now feeling the need to really notice them. The todays of the past and those in the future are destinations along the journey that is living; and life is just as much each daily destination as it is the road or journey through them.

According to Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, "Todays" are also mysteries, chance meeting points in time and intersections in space, where different people's life trajectories miraculously coalesce, as if, for today, we have all stopped together for the same red light. By tomorrow the light will change and we will go our separate ways. Who knows where the people I meet today are going? Who knows what they are going through? For some, today is non-stop brilliant sunshine and bluebirds of happiness. For others today is physical or mental misery that feels like torture."⁴

Don't misunderstand me. Planning for tomorrow is also an essential piece of the life puzzle *especially* at 55. But when I consider the elements that will contribute

³ Ikar, *Intentions*

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/larry.hoffman.372>

to my future feeling well lived and full of meaning, it is to the idea of *today* I must go.

The liturgists who wrote the machzor knew this very well, for at the end of the musaf service, (although we do not usually sing it), we find the prayer *Hayom*.

*Today, give us strength,
Today grant us blessing,
Today exalt us
Today, give us goodness,
Today, inscribe us for a good life.
Today, hear our cries,
Today accept our prayers with mercy,
Today, keep us safe with righteousness.*

We are often so absorbed in memories of the past and concerns about the future that this moment, itself inherently fleeting, is rarely experienced. So, these words remind us in clear and urgent ways today – be in it now. There’s really no other place you *could* be, when you think about it, and it’s a powerful exercise to drop into this moment and only this moment, for it will pass.

Spirituality can be understood as being fully conscious of the moment while feeling the presence of something – call it God, call it a force, that enables the experience to unfold.

Tonight, we begin the 25-hour rehearsal for our last *today*. Rabbi Eliezer offers in tractate Shabbat 15a, “repent one day before your death.” Not surprisingly, his students ask him how they can possibly know when they will die. Eliezer replies that is why it is important to recognize your mistakes and wrong actions right away, make appropriate amends, just in case tomorrow never comes.

Yom Kippur is built upon the realization that death is very much a part of life. At the heart of embracing that mystery is the powerful opportunity each of us has, to make today and everyday matter. Living inspired Jewish, human lives.

Judaism does, after all, sanctify time over space. We mark and measure time because we are mortal, finite and physical human beings, and whether days are

ordinary or sacred, we are granted rituals and words that enable us to experience the time in important ways. All at once, consider that we feel the rush of time more as we grow older. That is certainly how I am feeling – for my/our sense of time’s speed comes from having experienced more with every passing year. I’m sure I’ve already lived more of my life than I have left – which isn’t being morbid – only awake to the preciousness of every today.

“*The days are long and the years are short*” goes the old adage. When we reflect on where the time went and how did we miss it, that’s how we feel. If time seems to pass more quickly closer to the end rather than the beginning, what are we then obliged to notice and do?

The Torah portion of *Nitzavim* is read just before Rosh HaShanah. From the book of Deuteronomy, it begins with the words “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*” — You stand today (*hayom*) before God. Moses is speaking to the assembled people before him, but his remarks are addressed also to the future generations of Israel. The word *hayom* is repeated 6 times in the text, underscoring the urgency of the covenant making at the core of the narrative, even while seeming to speak across time.

Standing in place is another form of presence. As Moses’ last speech to the people before his death, which he knows is coming, there is a sense of urgency in the *now/today* of his words; a kind of holding on while simultaneously letting go. Every person in the community is called to stand in the moment. They are called to stand together and reach for Torah and *teshuvah* – instruction and return.

According to Rabbi Aviva Richman, “Learning Torah (the instruction) is what makes Teshuvah within reach because such learning tames the habits and inertia that have developed within us that make it feel impossible to change...”⁵

Embarking on the work of *teshuvah* is perhaps one of the most powerful representations of being in the now, the *today* of time. When we realize how our actions and inactions impact others – the sooner we can recognize it, the sooner we can do the work to repair the relationship. Not because amends and forgiveness will automatically happen, but when we can really *see ourselves* in our imperfection, we are better able to repair something broken. It is an urgent act of love to say, “I’m sorry,” and it is an urgent act of love to say, “I forgive you.”

⁵ <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/torah-within-reach-part-1-torah-and-teshuvah>

Moses offers the insight that the *torah* – the teaching – of that today *hayom* – is not too baffling for us, not beyond our reach, not in the heavens nor across the sea that we should inquire, who shall go and get it for us. No, says Moses. *Ki karov eleicha hadavar* – this thing is very close to you, in your mouth and heart to observe it.⁶

What this text points to is that while looking beyond the moment may invite connectedness to the past and the future, *being in the moment allows for access to the depths of feelings, and the expansiveness of experiences.*

Each and every one of us can suspend planning for whatever comes next to be able to “taste and see” in the words of the Psalmist, that such presence is good.⁷

We are often pulled outside of ourselves thinking what we need most is somewhere else. In choosing life, as the Torah instructs, we affirm what it means to make meaning right here, and right now.

Again, in the words of Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman: “We spend too much time plotting a path to the tomorrows that we cannot control; too little time harvesting our todays that are actually upon us. It is not nothing, each and every day, to have and feel strength enough to go on; and to carry others whose strength is temporarily spent; to realize that we are blessed and to share the blessing amply; to feel exaltation and to lift up those who are ground down; and both to give and to receive as much kindness and goodness as our soul can find.”⁸

Mah norah hamakom hazeh – how awesome is this place right now, with all of you, with our ancestors no longer here, and with the future generations yet to come. Let us choose life *so that we may live* – fully, deeply, and urgently. *Hayom. Today.*

Gmar Hatima Tovah, may we be present to the journey of teshuvah

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁷ Psalm 34:8

⁸ [ps://www.facebook.com/larry.hoffman.372](https://www.facebook.com/larry.hoffman.372)

