

In case you missed it, I'm going to recap yesterday's sermon in two sentences: We are facing stormy seas as a people, and the stress from that causes us to act out in many dysfunctional ways. However, we have faced hard things before in our lives, and when we are truly conscious that we have survived them and are indeed alive, we can be aware that we are stronger and braver and more loving and loved than we fear.

All of that plus a pirate hat. Arr!

But what I see again and again as a rabbi is that I give a sermon on this or that topic – and its effect lasts for about three weeks. And I'm not doing these holidays every three weeks! But in truth, this makes sense. The life projects described in a high holiday sermon require sustained work – ritual, really – and ways to remind ourselves of it. Hence the pirate hat.

But even more so, it's because of the problem of the self. The problem of the individual. That is, every person has a lot going on in their own inner life, stuff that they don't even know about – but patterns and behaviors that I see, and their own individuality always returns and potentially gets in the way of the Big Projects.

What are the High Holidays for? They are for one core thing: turning our gaze inward. Looking at ourselves and the role we play in creating the world around us.

The primary way they do this is by talking about mortality. By talking about death, we can remember that we need to address the problem of the self.

There's a midrash, a story, that I often share at funerals, that I want to share this morning. From Kohelet Rabbah, a midrash on the book of Ecclesiastes:

Rabbi Pinḥas said: Ecclesiastes tells us, the day of death is better than the day of one's birth. When he is born everyone is joyous; when he dies, everyone weeps. But that should not be so; rather, when a person is born no one should be joyous, as they do not know the challenges and actions that will confront him, and whether he will be righteous or wicked, good or bad. When he dies, they should rejoice that he passed away with a good name and departed from the world in peace. This is analogous to two ships at sail in the Mediterranean Sea; one was leaving the port and one was entering the port. Regarding the one leaving the port, everyone rejoiced, and regarding the one entering the port, they did not rejoice. There was one clever person there. He said to them: 'I see matters to the contrary. Regarding the one leaving the port, they should not rejoice with it, because they do not know what challenges will confront it, how many days it will be challenged, how many storms it will encounter. But when it returns to port, everyone should rejoice that it returned in peace.' Similarly, when a person dies, everyone should rejoice, and praise him that he passed away in peace from the world with a good name. That is what Ecclesiastes said: "And the day of death than the day of one's birth."

Okay, so there's a reason that I share this teaching at funerals and not at baby-namings.

What I think this is getting at, though, and what you are probably picking up, is the question of perspective. When you think about the end of life, it changes how you live. And, in fact, when you think about mortality – of others, of yourself – it can help you to truly live today. As I said yesterday: Ve-atem ha-devekim bAdonai Eloheichem, chayim kulchem hayom. You who are cleaving to the Lord your God, all of you are truly alive today. When you think about your whole life, how do you want it to be? What really matters?

In stormy seas, being in touch with what truly matters – and connecting with the things that make you truly alive – is important. I think this is the overarching theme of these holidays: not teshuvah, but mortality, is the theme, and our goal is to say: given not only the storms that face the world and the Jewish people, but also the storms in our own individual lives, how can we be truly alive? Here are some suggestions.

First, gratitude.

Maimonides writes in the Guide for the Perplexed that the fact of creation is itself a manifestation of God's grace. That is: there is nothing we could have possibly done to merit being created, and so creation itself is a pure gift. And thus, our proper posture toward God should be one of thankfulness.

Now, this theologically correct, but what I don't think it captures is that, when stuff is really hard in your life, it's not easy to feel gratitude. And I also don't want to have the chutzpah to say, here, to, for example, parents who have given birth to children with Tay-Sachs, feel gratitude for the world around you.

What I am really talking about is a posture of gratitude toward the world. A gratitude practice. A way of noticing and naming the good in the world. There's a phrase for this in Judaism: hakarat hatov. Naming the good.

This can do so much to keep you balanced on a rocking ship. To notice what is about you.

You can integrate this into a tefilah or a prayer practice. We have these blessings we say every morning, or when we eat, or all the time. They are about cultivating gratitude. We are supposed to say 100 blessings a day, according to Rabbi Meir in the Talmud Menachot. Maybe that feels like a lot. Do you think you can do one?

You can make this a compliment practice. Tell someone that you enjoy talking to them. Tell someone they make you happy. Tell someone that you really like their Rosh Hashanah sermon, especially the pirate bit.

Hakarat hatov means noticing and naming what is good in the world. Do this, and it will help you to be more truly alive, and to be present for the kind of persona you want to be when you consider your mortality.

A second suggestion: slow down and accept imperfection.

I hear from you all again and again about how stressful your jobs are. About your lives. I can't fix that. But what I can share is something I have noticed. Although much of the stress is external to us, coming at us, we also create a lot of stress for ourselves. It's not like we have no part in all of this.

You might have to have your email on your phone, or on your watch. But do you have to keep it by your bedside?

You might have to pay attention to the news – but do you have to wreck your sleep for it?

You might worry about helping a family-member – but is it possible that you can focus on the helping without the worrying?

And yesterday I mentioned -- when we are angry, can we still refrain from passing on that anger to others, taking it out on them and making them angry?

These things are easier said than done. When I am worried about something, I tend to turn it over and over in my head, and it's like, I get harmed twice: the first time by the thing itself, the second time by my thinking about it.

What slowing down does is, it helps us to diminish worry. Not everything is immediate. Not everything is fast. We can be slow.

A third suggestion: connect to your core self.

This could be connecting to an old friend. An old hobby. Things that have been dormant in yourself.

This might sound silly. But I know that there are things in my own life that make me feel grounded and centered, and how easy it is for me to lose track of them. When I return to them, I feel much more present, much more able to connect, and more grateful.

This is connected to the former. Slowing down can give me space to do things that make me feel whole. And remembering interests that I have long held but forgotten puts me in touch with a larger view of my life that I find leads me to be both more compassionate with myself and also to inspire me to live better. Remember what I said yesterday: that teshuvah, repentance, is about a return to our true self. I want you to rediscover your passions. They don't have to be deep. That just have to be yours.

A fourth suggestion: give, sustainably.

There is something about giving to others that is healing for the self. I am not sure why this is. My theological reading is that each of us, each of our selves, is not really complete, and when we connect with or give to others, we are rebuilding parts of our own self. We all see this phenomenon, though. We see that service is a way to truly live. There are many ways to do this.

What we call "tikkun olam" is one way – feeding the hungry, teaching someone to read, cleaning up a park.

What we call "hesed" is another way – helping to drive someone to shul who needs a ride, cooking food for a new parent or a bereaved family.

What we call "nihum avelim" is another way – comforting mourners by attending shiva minyanim. What we call "tzedakah" is another way. Giving financially to support important causes, like DESK, City Seed, or New Haven Reads.

But giving can also be about giving of your heart and time to another person. Listening to someone's story. Saying hi to someone new.

The thing is, I want to make sure that you are giving sustainably – that you aren't courting burnout, or aren't over-functioning. There's a way of relating to Judaism that actually creates too much giving – there can be a constant pressure to over-perform, to martyr, and it's dysfunctional. It has to be paired with the previous imperative: slowing down.

All of this work, frankly, is slow. And I think that's important. I want to share another story, this one from the Tzantzer Rebbe, a hasidic story a thousand years later than the story in Kohelet Rabbah:

There was once a poor countrywoman who had many children. They were always begging for food, but she had none to give them. One day she found an egg. She called her children and said, "Children, children, we've nothing to worry about any more; I've found an egg. And being a provident woman, I'll not eat the egg, but shall ask my neighbor for permission to set it under her setting hen, until a chick is hatched. For I am a provident woman! And we'll not eat the chick, but will set her on eggs, and the eggs will hatch into chickens. And the chickens in their turn will hatch many eggs, and we'll have many chickens and many eggs. But I'm a provident woman, I am! I'll not eat the chickens and not eat the eggs, but shall sell them and buy me a heifer. And I'll not eat the heifer, but shall raise it to a cow, and not eat the cow until it calves. For I'm a provident woman! And I'll sell the cows and the calves and buy a field, and we'll have fields and cows and calves, and we won't need anything any more!"

The countrywoman was speaking in this fashion and playing with the egg, when it fell out of her hands and broke.

Said our master: That is how we are. When the Holy Days arrive, every person resolves to do Teshuvah, thinking in his heart, 'I'll do this, and I'll do that.' But the days slip by in mere deliberation, and thought

doesn't lead to action, and what is worse, the person who made the resolution may fall even lower. Therefore every person ought to exercise great caution so as not to fall even lower, God forbid.

It is easy to hear this story and feel dejected. Every year before Rosh Hashanah, I come up with so many plans, and by Sukkot, they've fallen by the wayside. But I don't think this story is really about acting on our plans quickly. It's actually about remembering to live life slowly.

Famously, Abraham, in the Torah reading this morning, says "Hineni" as a statement of presence and readiness. Then he travels for three days before anything happens. Hineni, and then – wait three days. Hineni does not mean seize the day. Hineni means: I am here and present today to do what God requires, and I am open to the possibility that what God requires of me is slow, and not flashy, and not sexy, and not cool, and requires showing up and slowly building my character. We love quick fixes. We love life-hacks. And there's room for them.

But the fact is, living, truly living, with a sense of what is most important, is deliberate and slow. At the very end of her novel, Middlemarch, George Eliot writes: "for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

That is, the unhistoric acts that make up our lives – our ability to go slow, to notice and name the good in our lives, to give in quiet ways – this is the real matter of these holidays. That is what really matters at the end of our lives. The voyage for each of us is not about – did I have the right opinions on this issue? But rather, did I relate to the world around me with dignity and holiness and care?

As we prepare for the voyage of the next year, may we all think about what we want to take with us, and what we want to leave behind. What doesn't matter, and what truly matters. May the sound of the shofar and our prayers today bring us back to ourselves.