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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781

Middlebury College

Shana Tova and Shabbat Shalom to all of you. I'm so glad you are here and that I have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you on the occasion of the New Year.

When it began to become more and more apparent that we might close campus and go remote last spring, emotions of all sorts swirled through the campus, and through each of our individual minds and hearts. Naively, thinking this would only be a month or two at most, one of my emotions was curiosity and excitement. "I could use two weeks to finish unpacking the boxes in the basement" I remember saying. I wasn't the only one. The idea of a few weeks of stand still, of time spent at home, of time to catch up with our lives had an incredible pull. My colleagues and I at the Scott Center often talk—both amongst ourselves and publicly--about the value of slowing down, of being in the present, or creating time and space to connect with ourselves and others. We know how hard that is in our busy world and on our busy campus. We know this not only because we are watching students and faculty and other staff run around from class to meeting to project assignment, but also because we ourselves struggle to slow down, to carve out time for the spiritual practices we are on campus to share, to spend quality time with our own families.

So the idea of pressing a gigantic pause button on life as we know it—of not going anywhere for a little while—seemed promising despite the horrific reason it was happening. The one truly hopeful thing at that moment in March was that even the earth was experiencing a pause—the air was clearing, the canals of Venice were full of fish that you could actually see through the newly clear water. But I say I was naïve on two accounts. Yes, I thought this would be just a short period where we would all go into quarantine for a few weeks and come out the other side. But the bigger naivete was that we could actually slow down. The initial couple of

weeks, when the college was on an early spring break, did seem a little quieter, but the days were full of regrouping, setting up new office spaces at home, and helping my kids figure out what life would be like now that they no longer left the house to go to school. Then the Zoom meetings started, often back to back, and they were a thousand times more exhausting than in person meetings. Passover was coming, and while I began to turn my attention to cleaning the physical space of my home kitchen, which was beautifully grounding, the Jewish world seemed to be on steroids. The amount of high-quality virtual content that was produced for Passover was in itself simply overwhelming. The task I had—of just curating some of this amazing content to pass on to the campus Jewish community—took days of clicking and scrolling and sifting through webinars.

Meanwhile, *The New York Times*, which I was now reading compulsively every day, trying to understand and connect to the trauma that was happening in the city of my birth this past spring, seemed to think that everyone had all the time in the world and the home section of the paper was ripe with ideas of how to fill it—movies and shows to watch, bread to bake, museums to tour virtually, books to read. It was a stark contrast to the upper part of the news screen, which was reporting the sickness ripping through the city, the fear and exhaustion of healthcare workers, the problem of how to bury all those dead bodies who were each connected in love and relationship to still living people.

Why was I surprised? Why did I think, that even for a second, we could allow ourselves **to do nothing. To just be.** To just stand still and witness the loss and the grief, and the beauty of the unfolding spring and the sparkling blue sky. To really witness it without just noting it and then moving on to the next thing. To even allow ourselves to be bored while we were standing still, or to be sad. To even allow ourselves to do nothing.

I had to recalibrate my own expectations around how quickly I wanted us to slow down. Why would we be able to just stop? A nation of workaholics, addicted to productivity, rooted in the Capitalist philosophy that more was always better. How could we just turn on a dime *even*

when it was what so many of us were longing for, what the earth was so deeply craving and needing? Even when we could now see how much we needed to pause, it didn't necessarily mean that we knew how to do it. This would take patience. This too would take time.

Time is a major component of Jewish practice. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his masterpiece, The Sabbath, that "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern." (Heschel, He notes that Judaism's crowning achievement is not a great work of architecture, but rather the observance of Shabbat, the 7th day when the materialistic concerns of the work week give way to the spiritual and physical pleasures of a day of rest.

The movement of time is described in the Jewish calendar through the holidays, with their progression of tunes and liturgy and special foods. We are now entering the New Year, a time of renewal and mending our ways, resolving to do better. At Sukkot we will celebrate the joy and relief at having been able to tell the truth about those ways to ourselves, even just a little bit. At Simchat Torah we will celebrate the Torah scroll, which contains the stories and laws that mark the progression of the year each Shabbat, as we make our way through the reading of the scroll, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. In the spring will come Passover and Shavuot, another time of renewing ourselves through cleaning out the old, and of recommitting to the love and study of Torah. Shabbat itself is the most powerful time marker. It happens weekly, and this past spring and summer the rhythm it provides has been a lifesaver. It demands from us that we stop on a regular basis, that we don't wait until we are over exhausted and absolutely depleted. It reminds us, weekly, that as human beings, connection—to ourselves, to our friends and family, to the earth, to God-- is the most important thing. Not productivity. Not external recognition. Not answering all the emails, or reading all the news, or even solving all of the world's problems—as urgent as they are.

We have choices to make. This will mean giving some things up. We are getting better at that. We have given a lot up involuntarily these past 6 or 7 months. We will continue to be forced into giving things up as the pandemic and the climate crisis and any number of phenomena that have been set in motion, partly through human actions, continue to take their course. And we can start making different choices now. We can start slowing down. We can, as it says in the Torah in Deuteronomy “choose life, so that we and our descendants may live.” (Deut. 30:19)

This semester, this year, think about how you use your time. Bring intention to it. Create limits. Keep boundaries. Say no to some things even when they sound fantastic. Say yes to other things and really commit to them. Have the time to give those things your all. Say yes to people, to friendship, to turning-in a less than perfect essay or work assignment in order to be a listening ear when a friend needs it. Or say no to an extracurricular activity in order to commit yourself to a class that you love. Practice making choices.

Let’s also mark our time this year. Let’s really notice the seasons by taking in the cues of the natural world. Let’s immerse ourselves in the Jewish rhythm of the week that ends in Shabbat, in the fall with Sukkot, in the winter with Hanukah and Tu b’shevat, the spring with Passover and the summer with Shavuot and Tisha B’av.

We have been told all our lives that accomplishing more is better, that idleness is laziness, and that creating time between our obligations is a form of waste. This is the year to interrogate those notions. There are numerous books written about how doing less actually increases productivity. We know that humans can’t actually multitask and that the quality of our work or our attention to another person goes down when we try to do that. I’m not suggesting that we abandon work all together or stop trying to make the world a better place. I myself have been working overtime these past months and weeks, in some very difficult personal circumstances, to reinvent the High Holidays in this remote version. I consider most of it a labor of love. And yet I wonder if part of the learning we will need to do, in order to reconnect with the

shared humanity we have with each other, and to salvage our planet, is to learn not just to do with less, but to do less.

I wish us all a year of careful assessment and discernment about where our priorities will lie, not just this year, but in our collective futures for generations to come. I wish us a respect of time and what taking the right amount of time for our work, and for ourselves, and for each other will gift us. May this careful reflection and new relationship to time bring with it increased health, and an abundance of love and joy and blessing in this New Year, 5781.

Shana Tova.