

**Turning 60
Yom Kippur 5772/2011
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Guess who turned 60 this year? Temple Beth Sholom, Israel Bonds, USY, and me. And for some reason, I seem to be taking it a lot harder than those institutions that share my birthday. For Beth Sholom it has just been one happy year of celebration, which culminated in our gala 60th Anniversary Dinner Dance. For me, the transition has been filled with a sense of ambivalence that I am still wrestling with. On the one hand, make no mistake, I am thrilled to be here. 60 years old and going strong - I am, thank God, healthy and happy. I have a loving wife, three children who have found beautiful life mates all who are a source of never ending pride, two grandchildren who are now the joy of our lives – we have so much to be thankful for - *todah l'el!* On the other hand - at 60 you can't help but notice the tick, tick, tick, of father time's relentless clock - "like sands through the hourglass...so are the days of our life." And at 60 one can't help but notice that there are more grains of sand in the bottom of the hourglass than in the top!

I shared with someone the fact that I had just turned 60 – "Happy Birthday!" they replied, "And how old do you feel?" The question caught me a bit by surprise – "How old do I feel?" A recent study by the Pew Research Center suggests it is not a silly question. The results of their rather extensive survey showed that most adults over 50 feel at least 10 years younger than their actual age, one-third of those between 65 and 74 said they felt 10 to 19 years younger, and one-sixth of people 75 and older said they feel 20 years younger.

At what age does old age begin? Most people in the survey said old age starts at 68. Are they kidding? That seems way too young to me. Not surprisingly, most people over 65 have a different idea about old age. Among those getting the senior citizen discount, most say old age begins at 75. Now consider the answer given by people under 30. Most of them think you're old by the time you hit 60!

I remember a poignant moment some six years ago watching my daughter Dina and Dan's wedding video with my mother – may she rest in peace – she was 93 at the time. We were watching the procession in the sanctuary and each time the door opened and a woman would step out my mother would say – "Is that me?" "No, that's so and so." "Is that me?" "No that is so and so" Finally – we said – "Mom – that's you!" She gasped, "That old lady is me?!" She was 93 years old – but did not yet see herself as an old lady. I believe the Pew Center Survey stumbled on a profound truth – it is not easy to accept the truth that we are growing old. But if Alcoholics Anonymous has taught us anything – acceptance and embracing reality has to be step number one in any attempt to deal with our real afflictions.

"Hi, my name is Alan Lucas!" "I am old!" Almost

I share these thoughts with you on this Yom Kippur day, because if you are like me, these High Holy Days are an opportunity to focus on the passage of time, when we feel the accumulation of years. It is a feeling that is captured beautifully in the prayer that we recite from the Mahzor:

"O' God, as the twilight of the old year fades into the night, that marks the birth of another year, we gather together in Your house with mingled emotions. You, O' God are without beginning and end. For You, time and change are nothing. A thousand years are like

yesterday when it is past, but for us, our years are numbered: every hour is precious, for You have set a limit to our days on earth. On Yom Kippur we become aware of the flight of time, the vanity of our possessions, and the uncertainty of life.”

Yes, these High Holy Days force us to focus on the passage of time and whether this year saw you pass from 59 to 60, 12 to 13, 20 to 21 or 79 to 80 it is indeed a time of “mingled emotions” in the words of our prayer book. And it is precisely these “mingled emotions” that I would like to spend a few moments exploring with you on this Yom Kippur day.

I debated speaking on this theme of getting older because some would dismiss it as a peculiarly 60-year-old preoccupation. Younger and older people tend not to dwell on it that much. As one colleague put it, “When we are young, aging seems like a distant cousin in the family. He may occasionally visit, but you don’t have to get emotionally involved or make that distant relative an every day part of your life. And if you are older, aging has already become a familiar companion. Still, I have chosen to speak to all of you about this because if you are young there are things you can do now to ensure that when this distant cousin comes calling, you will be prepared to welcome him into your home as a member of the family. And if you are older, I believe I might have some new ways to understand our companion, which can deepen our relationship with her.

There was a book I once read that was quite memorable, it was called Einstein’s Dream, it was written by Alan Lightman. The premise of this work of fiction is that when Einstein was working on his theory of relativity in 1904, he became obsessed with the nature of time and began dreaming of other worlds, worlds different from ours, worlds in which time functioned differently than it does in our world. Of these various fantasies, there was one I found relevant to our subject. In our world - time is uniform at all places, at all times. In this other world, time moves differently depending on your altitude. The higher you go, the more slowly time passes. It is a fascinating world that Lightman concocts - as you can imagine, in that world, the higher you go, the more expensive the real estate as everyone wants to live where time passes more slowly. But the most interesting part of this world is that if you go high enough, time stands still. Lightman describes the lives of those who live in that part of the world in which time stands still.

“At the place where time stands still, one sees parents clutching their children in a frozen embrace that will never let go. The beautiful young daughter with blue eyes and blond hair will never stop smiling the smile she smiles now, never lose the soft pink glow on her cheeks, will never grow wrinkled or tired, will never get injured, will never unlearn what her parents have taught her...will never know evil, will never tell her parents that she does not love them, will never leave her room with the view of the ocean, will never stop touching her parents as she does now. At the place where time stands still, one sees lovers kissing in the shadows of buildings in a frozen embrace that will never let go. The loved one will never give back the bracelet of memories, will never journey far from his lover, will never fail to show his love, will never become jealous, will never fall in love with someone else, will never lose the passion of this instant in time.”

As you get older, the image of this kind of world, in which time stands still, becomes more and more alluring. This past year we celebrated two weddings – Ari to Talya, our baby Michal to Uri and the birth of our second grandson to Dina and Dan – I remember when we took Ari away to

college and we informed Michal that we were putting our foot down. She was not permitted to grow up, she was not permitted to leave home - we had decided that there was too little upside in it for us. I remember thinking, "this passing of time thing has just got to stop." – and this year she got married. So much for putting our foot down.

Yes, a world in which time stands still is only for works of fiction. Our real world, finds the passage of time inescapable, inevitable, uncontrollable - each of us completes each day one day older, each of us completes each year, one year older. I knew a man who used to say: "I set a new record today." And you would inquire, "What new record did you set?" And he would respond – "I have never, in my entire life been as old as I am today!"

Now in my research on this subject I found something fascinating. I found that some writers and thinkers found this fact, that you have never been as old as you are today, some found it depressing, while others found it exhilarating.

Last night, I introduced three ways of looking at the world: one optimistic, one pessimistic and one I called the Jewish way. I am going to suggest that there are similarly three ways to approach this aging thing.

There seems to be an optimistic view of aging and a pessimistic one – and I have problems with them both.

The pessimistic view lurks in the consciousness of almost all of us. It is this view of aging that sees life as a downward spiral: life is ultimately about loss - a loss of purpose, a loss of energy, a fading of one's physical strength, one's beauty and sexuality. It is a life of regret about past opportunities squandered. It is about forgetfulness and the ultimate fear of permanent memory loss. It is a loss of control over our bodies and our lives symbolized by surgery, chemotherapy, a technological intrusion as hospitals and doctors dominate too much of our lives. In the book titled: On Aging: Revolt and Resignation by Jean Amery, we meet aging as the enemy, as he writes with a black realism about the consequences of growing older. He explains that we revolt against aging because behind it is death, and because death is inevitable, there is no realistic choice. Accept defeat and resign yourself to the process of aging. Amery originally wrote his book in 1968 when he was 55 and as if to put his words into practice, he committed suicide at the age of 63.

In sharp contrast to this pessimistic view, is a much more optimistic view of aging which stresses the truth that more than getting older, we are getting better. With age comes the possibility of different associations - possibilities such as growing wisdom, insight and perspective, an opportunity to mentor and nurture others, a more perceptive sense of the subtleties, paradoxes and complexities of life, a sense of measure and balance in our lives, the richness of years of shared history with those closest to us, children who become peers, an ability to define ourselves by what WE want rather than to be defined by the expectations of others, the opportunities to explore new roles and possibilities beyond what we have previously done as parents or professionals, grand-parenthood, a freedom to be ourselves and to give a little back to the world of what was given to us. In her book, New Passages by Gail Sheehy we meet the optimistic view of aging. She writes:

With luck once Baby Boomers pass 45 another whole lifetime lies before them: thirty, forty even fifty years. To engage in successful aging is actually a career

choice. Your job is to revive your life energy to make the next passage. Successful aging must be a conscious choice with a commitment to continuing self-education and the development of a whole set of strategies. Let's don't call it aging anymore. The very word carries pejorative baggage. Research projects supported by the National Institute on Aging have swung the balance toward the new view that there may be no end in sight to the ever increasing human life span."

It is hard to believe that Amery and Sheehy are talking about the same thing! They are worlds apart from each other and we are left scratching our heads - is growing older a wonderful thing or a terrible thing? A time of "shrinking days and drying up of life" as Amery sees it, or a time where, "every day is an awakening where you never grow old, you just keep growing." as Sheehy sees it?

From my perspective, as a 60 year old, I can state that I find both descriptions equally true and equally unsatisfying. While I have sensed the truth in each of these perceptions I don't believe that growing older means I can only look forward to a future of decay and decline - nor do I embrace the notion that I now stand in the doorway to a Peter Pan universe in which we never have to grow up and grow old.

I am not sure whether growing older is a good thing or a bad thing - but it is a thing - an inevitable thing, a reality, which we must all confront and learn to deal with. And more important than whether we like it or hate it is how we are going to deal with it- and on this subject I have something to say, on this subject, Judaism has something to say.

If we embrace life rather than fear it - if we understand it rather than run from it, if we are not overly optimistic or pessimistic about what lies ahead - it can yet yield its choicest fruits. The optimist sees only opportunity in what lies ahead, the pessimist sees only the downside of our remaining years, but the Jew sees that in every rite, in every transition some ties are loosened to free us for new attachments. If we approach life's transitions correctly and the rituals of our sacred faith enable us to do just that – approach life's transitions correctly - we become like aerialists on a swinging trapeze, letting go of one ring to catch hold of another. Something old is loosened and something new is discovered in the transformations that are marked through *sacred rites of passage*. At my Bar Mitzvah, I am no longer a child. I have assumed new responsibilities and obligations that I did not own before. At my wedding, I transform my syntax from "I" and "mine" to "we" and "ours". But so many of us bypass the ritual richness of our faith. Ceremony is regarded as extraneous, unnecessary, a burden: so a birth without benediction, a wedding without sanctifying rituals, a funeral without *Kaddish*.

But we moderns who have abandoned the wisdom of our sacred tradition approach the transitions of life - like an aerialist who is afraid to let go - the fear of letting go keeps us stuck to the old ways and the old places. Or we leap too soon, too eager are we to part with the past and attach ourselves to something new and we loose our connection with all that came before. We fear growing older - so we hold tight to youth - long after we should let go. We pay fortunes for surgeries that promise to make us look young, we dress in clothes that instead of making us look fashionable make us look silly (age-defying panty-hose?!) - as we strive to maintain our youth at any and all costs. If we would only learn the secret of letting go, we would find that another moment presents itself for us to grab onto - one even more beautiful than the one before - but we cannot grasp the new moment until we release the old one.

I read an interview with a trapeze artist once - and the interviewer remarked how frightening must be that one moment when you have let go of the one bar but not yet grasped the other one - that one moment when you are in the air, high above the earth, attached to nothing, held by nothing - at that moment, asked the interviewer - what are you thinking?"

The circus artist smiled - and said. "That is not a moment for thinking - that is a moment for being - it is my job at that moment - just to be where I am and trust that my partner will have the next bar where it is supposed to be. If I think, at that moment, I am doomed - if I think, I will either, not let go of the first bar out of fear, or grab too soon for the next bar which has not yet arrived - so it is my job to just be there, to embrace the moment and trust in the future."

My friends, that is ultimately our job as well, to just be here, to embrace *this* moment and to trust in the future. My friends, most of us think too much, we fear too much loosing the past or we are too eager to embrace the future - and as a result we either hold on to things of which we should let go, or we grab too quickly for things that are not yet there.

How many of you are familiar with Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town? It is set amidst the ordinariness of life in a small town in New Hampshire at the turn of the century – a place called Grover's Corners. The play begins with a few typical days in the life of the town: The doctor delivers a baby; the editor puts out the newspaper. Women make bread and conversation; kids fight and do their homework. Eventually the story focuses on two young people, Emily and George, neighbors who in the first two acts of the play grow up, fall in love and settle down in the community.

Emily dies in childbirth at the young age of 26, and the third act is set in the cemetery. Gazing at the living, Emily asks her fellow dead if she can return to re-live one day in her life. The dead try and dissuade her, but Emily persists. So Emily is allowed to return to live a day fourteen years earlier – an ordinary Tuesday, but this time she notices how beautiful everything is, Mr. Morgan's drugstore, the livery stable, the white fence around her house, the offhand conversation in the kitchen between Emily and her mother on a cold winter morning. Emily is overwhelmed by how casually they address one another. She knows the tragedies that will befall them in the next fourteen years and she cannot bear to watch how they are going about life all wrong. Only Emily is aware of the preciousness of the passing time. It is almost more than she can bear, and though they cannot hear her she cries out: "Momma, Just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Fourteen years have gone by - I am dead. But, just for a moment now we are all together. Momma, just for a moment we are all happy. Let's look at one another!"

But no one hears her, so she says: "I can't go on with it! It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another!" And she breaks down and cries. The scene fades away into the past and she is, once again, back in the graveyard, and she says: "Do any human beings realize life while they live it, every every minute?"

"Now you know", chides one of the dead. That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance. To spend and waste time as if you had a million years...that's the happy existence *you* wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.

The tragedy of Wilder's play is that Emily did not learn this truth until she was dead and it was

too late to incorporate the insight into her life - but what about us? We, who are still living. We who stand here on this Yom Kippur Day, at this Yizkor hour and pray to God for another year of life. And what will you do if God grants you your wish? Will you waste it by moving about in a "cloud of ignorance"? Will it be another year of "ignorance and blindness?"

We turn 60 or 50 or 70 - and we spend our time worrying about dying. We worry about all the wrong things. It is not dying we should fear - it is "not living" that should worry us the most.

Too many of us are going about life all wrong. We spend our time desperately trying to hold on to the past or fearing the future and as a result totally ignoring the present.

It is my humble belief that the goal of religion, certainly the goal of Judaism and the purpose of the rituals of transition is to teach us how to let go of the past gracefully, to help us learn how to trust in the future and to guide us to embrace the miracle of each moment as it presents itself to us.

There was a recent cover article in New York Magazine that was the source of considerable conversation in our family. Written by Lisa Miller it was titled "Is She Just Too Old For This?" And was an article about the upswing in new parents over 50 – what the magazine called, "child-rearing's final frontier". But what really was the focus of our conversation – maybe you saw this as well – was the cover photograph which featured a grey-haired 63 year old woman, pregnant and naked, illustrating and drawing attention to the article. Well, it certainly drew our attention. The first thing we debated was whether or not the photograph was real or photo-shopped. Well, it appears the picture is not what it seems; they used another model who was nine months pregnant, and used her belly and just put it onto the body of a 63 year old. I don't want to get into a debate over whether 63-year old mothers are a good thing, or a bad thing – I will leave that for your dinner table conversation tonight. But I will say this: "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" – these are of course the words of Ecclesiastes – who in his wisdom was trying to teach us that there is a time to be young and a time to be old. Too many young people waste their youth trying to be older. Too many old people waste their mature years trying to stay young, when all of us should embrace who we are.

Let me tell you how I decided to spend my 60th Birthday. It was very different from my 50th. For my 50th I begged Edy not to make me a party so that people could come over and pat me on the back and tell me to, "cheer up". So instead, we took a trip to the Canadian Rockies and spent time hiking around Banff and Lake Louise. My motive then was not to prove I could still climb mountains but I felt that what I needed was not consolation, but rather celebration. I remember one glorious morning as we were beginning a hike up to the Tea-house at Lake Louise - we began at the sparkling aqua marine glacier lake that is Lake Louise, the sun was shining, the snow covered mountains in the background - I cannot imagine a more perfect moment a more magnificent view - and I quietly said to myself the traditional blessing recited upon seeing nature's marvels.

...oseh maaseh b'reishit - "Praised are You, Lord our God, who created the universe." And for just a second, the beauty was frozen, the moment was embraced.

Ten years later, I celebrated my 60th with precisely the kind of party I didn't want when I was 50. I did not climb any mountains – but surrounded myself with family. And once again, I found myself reciting a bracha, thanking God for the blessings that were mine. Ten years ago, I stood

on a mountaintop, ten years later, I surrounded myself with family – but each time I tried to embrace the moment.

By noticing, by reciting a *bracha*, I was able to hold on to that moment rather than to have it vanish. To recite a blessing, to have a ritual which can mark an important transition in our lives, allows us to be extraordinarily attentive to a moment that otherwise would pass us by too quickly.

This year I will have the honor to celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah with many families who are sitting here today. Let the ritual and brilliance of Judaism work for you. At that moment when you will stand at the foot of this bema to place a tallit on your child and recite the *bracha* of *shehechyanu*, - embrace the moment. Understand that yes, something is being lost, but something is being gained as well. Let go of the past, have faith in the future and embrace the moment. This year, I will have the sacred privilege to stand with many of you under the *chupah* - as your son or daughter will be married. We will say a *bracha* over the wine, and they will share with their beloved a taste of the sweet wine and what will you be doing? Yes, you may cry - something is being lost - but you must also smile because something is being gained - learn to let go of the past gracefully, have faith in the future and above all embrace the moment.

And this year - I will come to some of your homes to guide you through the process of death and mourning when a loved one will die. That is unfortunately as certain as the Bar Mitzvah's and the weddings. When I come - I come with the sacred wisdom of our tradition. Allow it to work for you. Allow shiva and kaddish and all the other life affirming and sacred traditions that have been developed over the generations to do their healing work. Here too, we will help you cry - for indeed much is being lost, but here too we will help you to laugh - because even here something is being gained. At this most critical of moments, Judaism can teach us how to let go of the past gracefully, trust in the future and embrace the moment.

But Judaism is about much more than these significant moments of transition - Judaism can help us sanctify and embrace every day and every moment. Maybe this is why I love Shabbat so much.

Alan Lightman in his book, Einstein's Dreams, had to create an imaginary world where time moved slower, but Judaism has created a real world technique to accomplish the same thing and it is called Shabbat. Every Shabbat, I am able to embrace a day where time slows down and virtually stops for 24 hours. Because the normal routines in my life are broken, so is the hectic nature of my life, which rushes me blindly through every day at a speed that forces me to miss so much, too much. Because of the beauty of the meal, the opportunity of the family to sit down together at the dinner table, the uncharacteristically unhurried conversation of the evening and day, all of this allows me a glimmer of a world in which time passes more slowly, and the sense of a day when it feels as if there is plenty of time, all the time I need. In his beautiful book, *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel described the Sabbath as: "eternity uttering a day". Except for a vacation, it is the only way I know of slowing down time for a whole day. And the advantage of Shabbat is that it is less expensive than a vacation and it happens every week. And even more importantly, it gives a sacred dimension to time, which makes it feel like a friend at our side rather than an enemy creeping up from behind.

I went out Lord. Men were coming and going, walking and running.
Everything was rushing: cars, trucks, the street, the whole town. Men were rushing not to waste time. They were rushing after time, to catch up with time, to gain time.

Good-bye sir, excuse me I haven't time. I'll come back, I can't wait, I haven't time. I must end this email - I haven't time. I'd love to help you but I haven't time. I can't accept, having no time. I can't think, I can't read. I'm swamped, I haven't time. I'd like to pray, but I haven't time.

You understand, Lord, they simply haven't the time.
The child is playing, he hasn't time right now...Later on...
The schoolboy has his homework to do, he hasn't time...Later on...
The student has her courses, and so much work...Later on...
The young man has his sports, he hasn't time...Later on...
The young married couple has their house, they have to fix it up. They haven't the time...Later on!
They are dying now, they gave no...Too late! They have no more time!

And so all men run after time, Lord.
They pass through life running, hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, and they never get there. They still haven't time.
In spite of all their efforts they're still short of time,
Of a great deal of time.
Lord, You must have made a mistake in Your calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere. The hours are too short,
The days are too short, Our lives are too short.

But, You who are beyond time, Lord, You smile to see us fighting it.
And You know what You are doing, You make no mistakes in Your distribution of time to man.
You give each one time to do what You want him or her to do.

Yes, I turned 60 this year. I say that with a hint of sadness, because I do understand that something has been lost, something I shall never have again and it is not easy to let go gracefully, but I am going to try. But there is also a sense of joy in turning 60 - because I have so much yet to do, so many places yet to go, so many people yet to embrace.

Lord, I have time, I have plenty of time, All the time You gave me,
The years of my life, the days of my years, the hours of my days,
They are all mine, mine to fill, quietly, calmly, but to fill completely, up to the brim.

Come let us fill them together.