

This past summer, I felt the passage of time with unusual intensity.

Another school year has just started. Camps are over. Visitors have all gone home. There is something about the fall that forces us to slow down, even if only for a moment, and realize, once again, that the seasons do not ask our permission before they change.

Usually, when we speak about this sacred season, we focus on the sweetness of a new year. We think about repentance and forgiveness. The ways we have succeeded. The ways we have fallen short. The ways we hope to do better.

Those are worthy reflections.

But woven through all of them, like an unspooling thread, is time.

It is hard for me to believe that this is our fifth Rosh Hashanah together.

I think about the many simchas we have celebrated together. The moments of extraordinary joy. I think of the honor of sitting with you through hardship and sorrow. I am humbled by the growth and learning that I continue to receive from this community, day by day, month by month, and now, year after year.

My family and I are so incredibly blessed to share this sacred community with you.

In my first Rosh Hashanah sermon, I spoke about how I think the spiral may be the most Jewish shape. Part circle, part vector. Returning again and again, but never quite to the same place. Always moving forward.

And perhaps that is what every Rosh Hashanah makes visible.

We return to the same prayers. The same melodies. The same sacred season. But we are not the same people who stood here last year.

When it comes to time and change, we do not have much choice in the matter.

Change is woven into existence itself. Water carves out canyons. Children get older. Relationships deepen. Ideas develop. Everything we know exists because something changed.

And for me, there is something profoundly divine in observing the process through which the universe is perpetually becoming.

I find it beautiful.

And completely overwhelming.

Because if everything is becoming, then everything is also passing.

We exist for a while. God willing, for a long while. A beautiful while. A meaningful while.

But still—

only a while.

This is Rosh Hashanah's lesson:

Rosh Hashanah not only asks us to consider how we might change, it reminds us that we already have.

The new year asks whether we took the time to notice. To appreciate. To wonder about the ways in which we have changed.

And within that reminder, I find hope.

Because even if we cannot stop change, we can perceive it. We can use these strange and wonderful senses we have to become aware, more aware.

To see the sunset. To feel the warm embrace of a loved one. To smell the ocean air. To taste good food.

And every once in a while, with a little mindfulness, a little awareness, maybe we can actually stop and smell the roses.

I know.

“Be present.”

It sounds like something printed on a mug at a yoga studio. Every self-help book in the world tells us to live in the moment, and sometimes the language around it can feel a little phony.

And yet, within the cliché exists a truth worth highlighting.

We yearn for those moments when we were truly present. A moment when time seemed to stand still.

The moment you leaned in for the first kiss. The moment your child came into the world.

Or maybe you were just sitting on the porch on a lazy Sunday afternoon with nowhere you particularly needed to be.

You were just there.

Really, really there.

And at some point you looked up and the streetlights had come on. Hours had passed. And you barely noticed.

Every part of us immediately wants to ask:

How do I put that in a bottle?

How do I hold onto that?

How do I make that moment stay just a little while longer?

And, of course, we can't make it stay.

We can't stay in the moment forever...

There are bills to pay. Emails keep coming. Life keeps happening.

We want to hold onto these moments as they pass, but they only slip through our fingers.

And of course there is the strange catch-22 to all of this.

Often, we do not really know that we were fully inside a moment until we begin to notice it.

And by then, it is already changing.

It is like seeing your breath on a cool fall morning.

For an instant, it hangs there in front of you.

And the second you see it, it is already changing, already dissipating into the air.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom that we read on Sukkot, at the end of this sacred season, Kohelet looks at the passing of time with almost uncomfortable honesty.

Again and again, it uses a Hebrew word:

hevel.

The word is often translated as "vanity" or "futility," but literally it is something much closer to vapor.

Breath.

Mist.

Something you can see for a moment, but cannot hold onto.

Hevel havalim, Kohelet says.

Vapor of vapors.

Everything is hevel.

Everything is like a breath that will soon dissipate.

Not because life is meaningless.

Not because nothing matters.

But because everything is passing.

Everything is real, and precious, and impossible to hold.

Kohelet looks at a world in which generations come and generations go. A world in which there is a time to be born and a time to die. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A world in which everything we build will someday belong to someone else.

And right there, in the middle of all of that, Kohelet says:

“Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime.”

I love that.

Because Kohelet does not solve the problem.

He doesn't tell us how to stop time.

He doesn't promise us that if we are spiritual enough, disciplined enough, successful enough, or mindful enough, we can make any of it last.

He says:

You can't.

So just be here.

Enjoy yourself.

Do what is good.

Love somebody.

Look them in the eyes.

Drink the coffee while it is still warm, or maybe let it get cold while you get lost in the pages of a great book.

Sit on the porch.

Let the streetlights tell you what time it is.

Because maybe the point is not to make the afternoon last forever.

Maybe the point is not even to capture every moment before it disappears.

Maybe the point is simply to have really been there for it.

To recognize that it was passing and to love it anyway.

So this year, I don't think I want to wish for us to make every moment precious.

That sounds exhausting.

Some moments are boring.

Some moments are hard.

Some moments are just Tuesday afternoon.

What I wish for us is something much smaller.

May we notice our lives while we are living them.

May we become a little more susceptible to those ordinary afternoons when, for no particular reason, everything else fades away and we realize:

This is happening.

Not merely how to notice a moment, but how to make peace with its passing.

To understand that its impermanence does not make it less meaningful.

That joy does not require time to stop.

May we enjoy ourselves.

May we do what is good.

And may we learn, just a little more each year, that

the secret of life is enjoying the passage of time.