

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
5771 / 2010
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Like you, I attended my fair share of birthday parties this past year. Like you, I paid occasional attention to the birthdays of politicians and celebrities.

The time eventually came for my own birthday and with that, the range of feelings that birthdays bring, that long spectrum we all know, which spans from simple joy on one end, to quiet considerations of our own mortality on the other.

It's no secret that as time passes we slowly move from one end to the other.

The rabbis of our tradition noted that when we're infants and toddlers our hands are almost always clenched, as if to say the world is mine, all is mine, there is no limit to what I can take, what I can do, who I can be. And when we're older, especially during those final months that can be so hard, our hands are open, lying flat.

If we're lucky we're able to say, or our hands are able to say: I did, I gave, *everything* I could.

There were two particular birthdays that really *grabbed me* this year. One was the actual birth day of my son, Elijah, who came screaming into this world during Passover. Instead of opening the door to see if the prophet had graced us with his presence, we went running out and rushed our way to North Shore.

The other was the birthday of my grandfather who in June turned one hundred and three.

This is a sermon about what happens on the spectrum, between these two birthdays. It's not really about the length of our days.

It's not about adding years to our life through magic pills and fad diets. And it's not about the outward appearance of our days: the sheer number of years, or how we looked during those years, the houses we lived in, the cars we drove, everything on the outside.

Rather this is a sermon about the *inner story* of our years, the real narrative that will be our life's tale once it is over.

In an age obsessed with age, in a time obsessed with youthful appearances, in a society fixated on the importance of perpetuating youth, this is a sermon about Judaism and aging, about Judaism's take on living a full life as we get older.

How do we ensure that our life does not become what Rabbi Michael Marmor calls a strip mall of obligations, this droning march of appointments and to-do lists day after day until, finally, there are no more days? How do we ensure that through each decade life stays full, *meaningful*, full of verve and vitality.

Just before my grandfather's birthday I asked him, as so many people have asked him: What's your secret?

He has a couple of stock answers, the kinds of answers we could predict: exercise regularly, eat in moderation, drink only in moderation, no smoking, regular check ups...

Those will probably help you live longer. And then you'll need two things after that he always says. You'll need these two things: lots of faith and lots of luck.

For him, leaving Germany as he did, when he did, I know that his has been a life of both much faith and much luck.

But he knew that the question he was answering with that reply was more "how do I live long?" and less "how do I *live*?"

After a pause he gave me an answer I had never heard him or any centenarian give. His voice has gone quiet. He doesn't have the strength he once did. His hands are almost always lying flat. He whispered to me the following, his secret to *filling up life* in ways that matter, his secret to aging as a Jew.

He said: Be interested. And be interesting.

Then he went back to sleep, dreaming, and I went on my way, very much awake.

Be interested. OK. Be interested in what? Be interested in family? That's easy. Of course we're interested in family and our immediate circle of friends. They're like family after all.

Beyond them, however, are we interested? Are we interested in other people? In this ever modern world, when everything comes to *my* fingertips, when *my* success is so crucial, when *my* story is the story, *my* status updates, *my* problems, *my* day, ipod, ipad, iphone, what about us?

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber believed we could in fact access God simply by acknowledging others in ways that are genuine. He said that existence is encounter. Our lives are not to be played out as extended monologues but rather as an on-going series of dialogues.

At home. At work. Life is meant to be lived with and vis a vis other lives.

Are you genuinely interested in other people? Are you ready to listen actively, to be there, to respond, is their pain your pain, are their needs your needs? Are you interested in the well being of your community?

Yes, I'm interested in my world but what about the Jewish world, the political world, this world of tragedy, this world out there of such relentless suffering?

Perhaps the greatest challenge we face right now, no matter how old we are, is finding a way, in spite of everything, in spite of our instincts, in spite of our ego-crazed society, in the face of flashy TV super stars and blinged out basketball players wearing their narcissism on their sleeve like a shiny gold badge, in the face of all of it, is finding a way to set aside my own self and take real interest in other human selves.

Be interested.

Be interested in Israel. Be interested in Iraq. In Afghanistan. In Darfur. In Haiti. In the Gulf. Be interested in world crisis, poverty. Be interested. Ask questions. Read the articles. Be interested in those on the other side of our globe and right here in our Temple globe and all of the precious and fragile globes in between, all of these souls out there with heartbeats and families and hopes and birthdays.

The meaning of their story will take on such meaning for you, will add such meaning to your days, in ways that no new gadget or new anything possibly could.

Be interested because taking interest is a decidedly Jewish thing to do. Be interested in the suffering of others and the good fortune of others and all of the impossible triumphs and tragedies that come our way at five hundred miles an hour. Take interest.

Actually don't just take interest. Live interested. It will give you and it will give your children strength and perspective.

Be interested because, according to my grandfather, maybe, it will help you live a longer, certainly a better life.

For one very practical way of doing this, I should note that we are about to enter year two of our Hear Our Voices program here at the Temple. This program, primarily through one-on-one and parlor meetings, allows us to hear one another in the congregation more fully. What bothers you about the world? What keeps you up at night? What would you change for yourself, your family? Not theoretically but in the most real and immediate of ways. Is it health care? Is it bullying? Is it underage drinking?

I invite you to join the Hear Our Voices campaign, to bring your interest to action, or how about our Social Action Committee or our Caring Committee, all of which work in the name of helping other people, teaching our children the importance of turning every now and again from me to we.

And be interesting my grandfather said. Be interesting. This one's tricky. In addition to making it to work, driving carpool, all of the obligations, games, appointments, events, you want me to be interesting too?

In short: Yes.

It cannot just be about the daily grind. It cannot be home then work then home then work with an occasional vacation. It cannot be window to window to window. Because it will be grind grind grind right into the ground.

You have to make your story colorful. Maybe through a cause, maybe right here at Temple, maybe through one daily *mitzvah*, to be a Jew is to make your story a holy story, to rise up from routine and craft a story that will echo in the ears of all those who know you and all of those still to come.

Those hands that will go on doing, those hands that will one day take up the message of your hands, once your hands are lying flat.

I hate to say it but the truth is we're all aging. Every one of us. No matter genetics or anything else.

Think of all the iconic cultural figures who will soon be turning seventy: Bob Dylan, Martha Stewart, Pete Rose, Paul Simon, Barbara Streisand, Paul McCartney, Stephen Hawking, Chevy Chase, Robert Deniro and, dare I say, Mick Jagger.

Of course we are living longer than our ancestors would have thought possible. In colonial Virginia life expectancy was twenty five years. Now the current world average is 67.2 years with great variations found across geographic, racial, and economic backgrounds. If you live in Japan you can expect to live about 82.6 years, Israel 80.7 years, the United States 78.2 years.

And if you are a resident of Swaziland, at the south eastern edge of Africa, your life will likely be around 31.8 years long. For a multiplicity of reasons they have the lowest life expectancy on the planet.

The fact remains however that no matter where we live or how famous we are, no matter our race or religion, no matter how stressed or active, no matter how we feel about plastic surgery, age is going to happen.

Even mythic Moses, plucked from the Nile, his childhood spent in Pharaoh's lavish palace, this splitter of seas, climber of mountains, leader of the Jewish people, in constant conversation with none other than God, a biblical superhero if ever there was one, even Moses, eventually found himself...older, hardly the young boy he once was.

And as the Torah ends, with the Promised Land off in the distance, he breathes his last atop Mt Nebo. He dies content we are told at the ripe age of one hundred and twenty. Maybe it's because in addition to so many other factors he was interested. And he was interesting. To the very end.

He never quite said so, but his actions did. He constantly took interest in the life the people, pleading for them, providing food for them, ushering them from the emotional torture of slavery to the theological freedom of Israel, never sitting idly by, never, ever a bystander.

Born with physical limitations, burdened with the expectations of a nation, he rose up. He said, in this symphony that was his life, he said I'm going to make my life different, I'm going to change the trajectory, reach beyond the cards that I was dealt, reach beyond myself, reach higher than everyone is thinking I can, for me it's not going to be generic, it's going to be a life that will echo, echo off those sandy desert walls, through the long tunnels of history and hardship, in ears forever, as an inspiration.

And it has. It's echoing now. His life was 120 years but the mark he left is forever.

Actually, we could compare Moses' life to the longest life ever lived by any animal. He's still alive in fact. And he is...a clam. It's true. The oldest living animal is a clam. Off the coast of Iceland there is a clam that is believed to be approximately four hundred and eight years old. It is a marvel. It is a miracle.

Four hundred and eight years he has lived. But, then, of course, he's a clam. And thus he's totally shut off from society, barely any interaction with any other clams, let alone snails.

Yes, he achieved great age, but at what cost? What have his 148,920 days of life really been like?

Immersed in murky waters, his shell almost always closed, it is a life so totally insulated and so totally dark, we could wonder whether it was really a life at all. He is alive but is he living?

Now we are not the clam. And I don't say that because clams are not kosher. I say it because we are Moses. We are all Moses. We are Moses.

And we can age as he did. Never in his shell, never hiding in the depths of vanity, but exposed and honest and giving, eager to open himself to those around him, to help those around him, to better the world around him.

Yes he came from the waters and yes he had his fair share of darkness and introspection but all in all his was a life for people.

We celebrate him not because of the number, not because of the 120, but because of the number of good deeds, the number of times he demonstrated such compassion, *was* compassion, the number of times he set aside ego and envy and with his own two hands he reached out to those young hands with clenched fists and to those hands open and wrinkled from their decades of wandering and toil. With might and with love he reached out to them.

Maybe he reached out to us too, through time, willing us to remember who we can be. Urging us to remember that profoundly Jewish message: that even if we cannot live forever, and we can't, even if our time is too limited, and it is, our actions can endure.

What we did, who we were, can endure forever in the hearts and in the souls of our children and their children and theirs. And in this way we can survive.

We can survive eternally and beautifully. Amen.