

Measuring a Year

Erev Yom Kippur, 5771
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The California state deficit is currently at twenty billion dollars. The budget deficit for the U.S. is at 13 trillion dollars. The NASDAQ closed ten points lower. The current prime rate is 3.5%. Unemployment is at 9.6%.

These are the numbers that we follow, numbers that have impact on our lives. And there are other numbers that we count, as well. How much we earn, how much is or isn't in our pension accounts, the amount of our debt, the number of our billable hours. We also count the square footage of our homes, the gigabyte size of our computers and hand holds. The amount of our frequent flyer miles.

But we can also count time, as well as money. When we're pregnant, we count down to our due date; when we're dating, we count the minutes until he or she calls or texts us back. Some count the days to vacation or retirement, to a forthcoming move or to a wedding, we count the seconds to finish the game in victory.

Tonight, for us Jews, also begins a time of counting. But what we count this evening is very different than our usual count.

Tonight and tomorrow, all through the day, we are asked to take an accounting of our lives, a chesbon hanefesh, an examination of our souls. We stand before God and ourselves, to count. But we will not count dollars, miles, or square footage. Instead, we will measure and be accountable for the quality of our time.

The song from the musical, *Rent*, poses to us the vital question: "Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes, how do you measure, measure a year?" For indeed, there are five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes in a year. If we take away from that the time we are asleep, we arrive at roughly six thousand waking hours in a year. How then, did we use the precious six thousand hours we were given this last year? How do we measure what we did? How do we determine whether we made them count?

The song from *Rent* suggests that we need a different calculus than the one we usually employ: How do we measure a year? "In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in laughter, in strife. In truths that are learned, in times that one cried, in bridges that were

burned or the way that one died." That's how we measure a year.

When our Patriarch Abraham died, the Torah says of him: "Ba bayamim", which is usually translated as: "He came into his days", that is, he grew old. But our rabbis read these words a different way. "Ba bayamim", they taught, can also be read as meaning: "his days came". And they told the story that when the end of our life comes, our whole life literally does pass before us. Each one of our days comes and presents itself for scrutiny. On this Yom Kippur then, the hours from the past year will come before us for review, if our hearts and souls are open to receive them.

And though there are other times of the year that could have been chosen for this accounting, it was chosen to take place on precisely the day that we are to recall that there is not infinite time before us, that the time we have is so short and so precious. Yom Kippur was chosen for this accounting, because on it, we pretend that we are dead. Traditionally, we dress in white, since the dead are wrapped in shrouds. We don't go to work, or eat, because the dead do not do this. We spend time in the afternoon, remembering our loved ones who are no more... Yom Kippur comes to proclaim to us: "See how much time has quickly passed! It will pass even quicker as you continue to age."

You all know the joke which states that all of Jewish history can be summarized by three points: they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat. So, too, the High Holy Days can also be succinctly summed up but in two statements. The first one I talked about on Erev Rosh Hashanah: Fix your mistakes. The second one is: We don't live forever. Make the most of your life.

6,000 waking hours. Never to be repeated. Never to be ours again. How did we spend them? Have we grown in Rachmonis, compassion towards others? Have we grown in Tzedakah, giving our funds to help others in need? Have we grown in Gemilut Chasadim, giving of our time to help? In Edelkeit, in kindness? In Kedusha, allowing more of the sacred and precious into our lives?

6,000 unique, never to be replaced waking hours. How did we spend them with our family members? How many hugs? How many smiles? The number of times we said, "I'm sorry" or "thank you"? The number of family dinners we've had together? The number of kids' games and activities we've attended? The number of times we've said "I'm proud of you", "I love you"? If you said, "I love you" for two seconds once a day, every day of the year, it would still

amount to less than a thousandth of one percent of our waking hours.

Yes, we should measure in sunsets: How many sunsets did we stop to watch this year? And if the answer is zero, we had better ask ourselves why. How many moments of sheer beauty did we experience this year that took our breath away, that stopped us in our tracks and humbled us?

We should measure the silence: How much stillness did we have in our life? Moments of total quiet in which we did absolutely nothing but breathe slowly and savor just being alive? Moments of stillness in which the presence of a transcendent Other could brush against us?

We should count the number of times we put ourselves out to help another, the number of times we volunteered our time, how often we kept our word, the quality of our commitments. We should count the number of times our hand was outstretched to give as we shared our good fortune with others. And we should examine how often did we turn our heads away, avert our eyes, and pretended we just didn't see?

We do need to measure whether we have grown in Torah. That is, have we continued to learn? How much time did we spend learning something new? How many hours this year engaged in a class, a discussion, on-line learning? How many books opened and read? One hour a week, spent in focused, serious study, learning something new, is just 1% of our waking hours.

How was our time spent in the company of others? Did we take them for granted, or did we truly appreciate our time with them?

And we should count the number of our pounds that is registering on the bathroom scale, and the number of our heartbeats and the cholesterol count. We do need to count how often we've been to the gym or for a run or on the court.

What did we do with our 6,000 hours that brought joy or excitement to our lives? Did we live fully in the world or did we walk blindly, habitually, indifferently through it? Did we take advantage of the pleasures that the world has to offer us? Did we travel? Did we savor new tastes and textures? What kind of fun did we have this year? How much laughter? Adventure? Risk?

Methuselah was the longest living man in the Torah: 969 years, but that's all the Torah said of him. There are those who have longevity but the time they spend on earth is an indifferent one; sleep-walking through life. And yet, there are others, who live but two short decades, who

are able to embrace, with fervor, what life has to offer. How did we spend the hours and minutes, in the poet Mary Oliver's words, of "our one wild and precious life"?

Were our waking hours filled with meaning? Were we able to be true to ourselves? Has what we've done with our life counted for something? What difference have we made in the world?

When one of the great Chasidic rabbis, Reb Zusya, was dying, his disciples came to his deathbed and he told them that he was greatly worried. He said that when he died and stood before God, he was afraid of the question he would be asked. God would not ask him why wasn't his life like Moses, why wasn't he like Abraham or like Joseph? Rather he was afraid that God would ask him: "Why weren't you more like Zusya? Why didn't you live up to your own potential, why didn't you fully use all the gifts that you were given?" We need to take stock of whether we've measured up to ourselves, whether we have fulfilled the dreams we have had, whether we have used our gifts and capabilities wisely to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

And what was the measure of our time as we dealt with the death of loved ones and friends? For we have had that as part of our year, too. Some of us with heart-wrenching losses that we still can't fully get our heads and hearts around. We have lost children, and parents, wives, siblings, cousins, and friends. For many of us, this year has been filled with numbness and loneliness. And what was the measure of our time in rendering comfort? How often have we been there for support when those around us have suffered loss?

And yes, we also need to measure the number of evasions, the number of sarcastic comments, the number of times we rolled our eyes, the number of times we put someone down or ignored them. The number of times we cut someone off with words or with our cars. The number of times we broke appointments or were late for them.

We are asked to consider the number of bridges that we burned, the number of relationships weakened, ended through our neglect or indifference. The number of times we didn't fully tell the truth or outright lied. The number of times we cheated or stole. The number of that we broke trust with another.

All of the dozens of prayers we will utter during these next 24 hours, are for one purpose: to help us do a self-inventory, to measure the quality of our lives. And if we find - as all of us will discover if we're honestly willing to recount our days - if we find that we've fallen

short in some categories, the next 24 four hours present us with the possibility of vowing to do better.

Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes, 6,000 waking hours. How did we spend them? May we resolve in our hearts that this coming year, we will use our hours wisely. May we vow to increase the number of sunsets, the laughter, the learning. May we examine and take an accounting of our days so that we may get ourselves a heart of wisdom, so that we may make some meaning of our lives. May the hours of this next year be filled with more love, more compassion, more trust, more honesty, more giving. May our waking hours be full, be fruitful. May we see more sunsets, give more hugs, reach out more to others. May our hours be truly full of blessing, contentment and peace.