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The Importance of Being. Present. Awake. Here.

It did not even occur to me.  
Until I started writing this sermon.  
Actually until I was lying in bed thinking about the fact that I needed to write this sermon.

I knew what I was going to write about but the opening 'hook' had not yet occurred to me.  
And then I realized.

I didn't even bother to ask for a sabbatical when I renegotiated my contract with the congregation last year.

It's a heck of a time to realize something like that. Lying in bed, worrying about my Rosh HaShanah morning sermon, and have THAT occur to me.

Of course, standing before the congregation with both my both my lawyer and my president, who are good friends, of each other and me, present ... let alone all of you, is not exactly the time to consider how that happened ...

And yet.  
It is.

Don't worry, Richard, I'm not going to renegotiate right now – after all, we don't do business on a holiday. But. How indicative of so much.

That fact. That I/we didn't even think about sabbatical time says so much about this life and world we live in.

And here it was DURING a shmita year, in which the Jewish world has been focused – or at least various parts of the Jewish world have been focused on shmita (the sabbatical year) and I/we totally missed the lesson and the ball.

Because we are not conditioned.  
Because we are completely trained.  
Because we cannot stop moving. Forward. To achieve, to attain, to be more. To have more.

But we need to be less. In order to become more.  
We need to own less. In order to have more.  
We need to work way less. In order to achieve way more.

Sabbatical. A 7<sup>th</sup> year rest. A hiatus. A gap-year. A gap-moment, day, month.  
Rest.

Not relaxation.  
Rest.  
Not just sleeping.  
Rest.  
Not just playing.

Rest. For the sake of nourishment, growth, new potential. Cessation. Transformation.

Not everything can and should exist and maintain in the relational setting that you have known it in ... and sabbatical affords that opportunity. And a sabbatical not to return to what was before but to transform into something higher, something different, something renewed.

To cease from your labors. To view the world in a new way. To recognize the old, the previous six years, six days as done and but not yet complete. Complete only when capped with rest/cessation/transformation.

God is good.  
The Torah is good.  
Our ancestors knew what they were doing in recording this text and keeping it alive over the millennia.

That whole idea of Shabbat/Shemita. Brilliant.  
Because it keeps our eyes not on the 6 days/years. But on the 7<sup>th</sup>. It's somewhat easy to get caught up in the 6 days. All the activity, the variety, the excitement, the balance, the light, the dark, the animals and the fish, the plants and trees. Everything according to its kind. So balanced. So wonderful. So true. So natural.

And then the game changer and show stopper is the 7<sup>th</sup> day. The 7<sup>th</sup> day. What can God do to out do God's self? Nothing. Exactly. NO.THING. And in so doing creates something even more beautiful, more fulfilling, more advanced ... than anyone/anybeing had ever done before.

So why don't we?  
Why don't we stop at the end of 6 days and rest?  
Why don't we stop at the end of 6 years of working in an intense setting and refuel our souls and our focus?  
Why don't we stop at the end of a moment or a project or a trial and just ... stop?

Some of us do.  
And some of us plan.  
And some of us consider.

But how easy it is to get caught up in the command and the endeavor and think we are totally right on and suddenly we are Abraham who was called to sacrifice his beloved son on the altar and we are totally willing to go through with the project to the point of raising

our hand with the knife while our beloved is already bound to the altar and it takes none other than God to call out my/your/our name for us to be shaken enough to say:

Hineini. Here I am.

OH. **Here** I am.

Here.

I.

Am.

Hineini.

I'm at this point in my life.

I'm here. I'm awake. I got it.

It's time to put the knife down.

It's time to unbind my son from the altar and let him go.

It's time to know my covenant with God is secure. I need not do this rat race any more.

I need to focus and refocus and consider.

What is right for the boy.

What is right for me.

What is right for the family.

What is right for the moment.

And so I can look up and see another option. Another ram, as it were, to sacrifice. It is not worth slaughtering the boy for my sake. Or God's.

And just say: Hineini. I am here. I am here. I am. Here.

Now.

In talking about being present, Leonard Felder writes in his book, "Here I Am" a list of statements that we hear from one another or use about ourselves all the time:

He can barely breathe – he's so over extended.

I'm swamped.

She's got too much on her plate right now.

He's drowning in the details.

I could really use a break.

She's afraid if she takes a moment to rest, the whole house of cards will come tumbling down.

He presents 8 steps for being present ... 8 very simple and logical means to recenter, to be healthy, to learn to let go and find peace and calm and new possibilities. He uses Jewish

wisdom to help us (re)find our focus and balance, which is the philosophy behind our ancestors' use of prayer and sacred timing: namely with Shabbat and Shemita.

Shemita is the idea of a year's rest for the land but as I preached on last year, the concept is a charge for us not only to watch out for the Garden that we have been entrusted with but it is a moment in time – a year's time – to consider our human health and the health of humanity as well as that of the earth itself.

I dare say, given this past year we are not doing so well. But we can't solve the global crises this morning in this space and what I want to turn our attention to is the reality facing many of our families and thus many of us with or without children. Because what happens to our children happens to all of us – of all ages.

Teens are having a hard time living in the moment. Tethered to technology and tied to preset expectations by parents and schools, teens are constantly being pushed by adults and the world around them into things and programs and projects that not only remove their freedom but remove them from even seeing the world around them.

And the irony of me giving this sermon this morning to all of you – only a handful of teens are present right now. Why? Because many of them are too afraid to miss school. Or preconceived ideas about 'what should be' has taken the place of what we 'want to be'.

School trumps presence at synagogue.

Why be present for the Jewish New Year when I have AP Physics, AP Calculus, AP Psychology that I can't miss?

When will we have courses like AP Meditation or AP Lunch or AP Farming?

I mean can you imagine if cooking and understanding the chemistry and artisanship of food and food sourcing was what our children learned ... or how to be present was the lesson and not how best to reach an Ivy League school?

And why are only a handful of teens present right now? Well, first off, our synagogue only has a handful of teens – such are the demographics of Forsyth County, NC – but as we look across the country the challenge with youth engagement is huge.

The challenge is huge because kids today are pushed by parents and institutions that only want perfection toward academic achievement rather than wholeness of soul and conscience. Our "love" can serve to strangle rather than strengthen, as cited so powerfully in an article that appeared this past summer in the NY Times, titled "Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection," it will be available to you after services.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>. The number of suicides among 15-24 year olds has steadily increased over the last ten years and counseling services on campus are witnessing a constant increase in students dealing with psychological problems ranging from anxiety to depression.

The article notes: “The existential question ‘Why am I here?’ is usually followed by the equally confounding ‘How am I doing?’ In 1954, the social psychologist Leon Festinger put forward the social comparison theory, which posits that we try to determine our worth based on how we stack up against others. In the era of social media, such comparisons take place on a screen with carefully curated depictions that don’t provide the full picture. Mobile devices escalate the comparisons from occasional to nearly constant.”

And so we have less time to think about why am I here ... than HOW to be HERE and how I will be HERE because we are busy reading about how everyone else is in their being HERE and how successful and accomplished and perfect and ...

I suffer from it as well.

I see my colleagues and their blogs and posts and achievements and what they have learned and who they have taught and travelled with and I risk spending more time thinking about what they are doing rather than what I can do and where my talents lie.

There is a film which some of you may have seen. It has been screened here in Winston-Salem more than a few times. I would like to arrange a showing if possible. It is called: “Race to Nowhere”. ([www.racetonowhere.com](http://www.racetonowhere.com))

Again, I will have resources for you after services if you want to learn more. But what a brilliant, and yet tragic, film. We are killing our children, it turns out. And I’m not just talking about my usual thread of environmental disasters (water, food, chemicals, and such). No, this time I’m talking about curricular decisions and over medicating, from the all-too-powerful soccer tournaments to the all-too-relaxed expectations on behavior... Our kids and our society are in need of a serious dose of mindfulness.

When 5<sup>th</sup> graders are intimidated by the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Not the big bad 6<sup>th</sup> graders who are better at playing basketball or have to eat lunch with the 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The 5<sup>th</sup> graders are intimidated because they’ve been told how much work there is. HOMEwork.

When a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader worries about EOGs and doesn’t want to go to school as a result ...

When a parent holds his child back thinking about how his daughter will fair in applying to colleges because when she was born in the academic year.

We have to stop and say in our most articulate form: HUH?

God did all that work in 6 days but blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> because what matters just as much as the work and the Creation is the time spent in holiness and in mindfulness and in meditation and in gratitude and in focus and in remembering that pausing makes the music ... just as much as the notes.

Pausing makes the music. Just as much as the notes.

Shabbat is a reminder to enjoy the world as it is. Not as you keep trying to make it. Shemita is a reminder to enjoy the world as it is. Not something to be milked for your benefit alone.

Stopping is a critical part of life and if we fail to stop appropriately, indeed, the whole house of cards will come crashing down.

Harvard. Princeton. Tufts. Dartmouth.

All rather significant, important, beautiful, established institutions.

Recognizable names. Names that represent importance and make grandparents very proud when they say their grandchild is attending.

Each of these schools promote the idea of high school students taking a break between high school and college to find themselves.

I'll take it one step further: I not only promote the idea, I encourage it. I know how immature I was at 18 walking into college. I was in my junior year before I woke up to where I was for my undergraduate degree. And I take it one step further than that: I don't think every high school student needs to go to college. And I can tell you a secret that many people don't necessarily like to talk about. I see about one in ten of our temple kids ... WHOM I FIND OUT ABOUT ... who struggle mightily in college – one in ten who winds up taking a semester off, taking a year off, not completing college, winding up in the hospital for psychological healing. 1 in 10 that I know of. And that is with nearly 15 years of watching our Temple Emanuel kids go through the high school to college pipeline.

And this could not strike closer to home given the reality of my own children: Eitan is a high school senior and Harli an 8<sup>th</sup> grader.

But whether we have children or not, whether we are with young kids or grandkids. This is the world we live in.

And what happens to our children effects us all. And we are all in need of knowing the importance of stopping, ceasing, noting, appreciating, valuing. And not just trying to achieve and accomplish.

For our high schoolers and their families, yes, I have resources for you as well.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Avram Mandell who sent an email out about 2 weeks ago with an outline for this sermon because he knew that not all rabbis around the country finish their sermons in July. And he heads a new program he started called: TzedekAmerica, which is a gap year program designed for Jewish kids looking to find out more about themselves and do intensive social justice work in our country.

There are Jewish gap year programs in Israel and in the United States to help young Jewish adults take time to decompress and solidify their identity and live in the moment...an oft repeated phrase but one which hearkens back to Abraham, Jacob and Moses who all uttered:

Hineini.  
Here I am.

I am here. In this moment. Awake to what is and who I am.

It is our task to wake up with the shofar. To wake up to the moment. To set down preconceived ideas or expectations and listen to that small, still voice within us, that is the voice of God, that demands we say: Here I Am.

Ready.  
To listen.  
To transform.  
To be transformed.  
To become.  
To breathe.  
To be.

(Closing w/ Eitan singing and playing:

Elohai n'shama she'natata bi, Tehorah hi, Tehorah Hi

Awake My Soul

In these bodies we will live, in these bodies we will die,

Where you invest your love, you invest your life.