

**Living in the Moment**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**  
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**Rosh Hashanah 5768**

I have often remarked that I am my parents' favorite. I know this is a difficult statement to make on Rosh Hashanah, especially this year, since my older brother Jeremy is sitting right here in the front row and I see him giving me looks right now. The truth is it really doesn't matter. Whether that is a fact or not is irrelevant. What matters is that I think I am and I actually believe that I have been successful in giving my children the same impression.

I remember about 6 years ago, soon after Yasmin, our youngest, was born, I was sitting at Kiddush in my old congregation and holding her on my lap. Our babysitter at the time came over and I said to her, "Look at this child, is she not the most beautiful child you've ever seen?" She then scolded me, suggesting that if my other children heard me say this they would be upset. So, one by one, I called my children over and asked them individually which of the children is my favorite. Each one responded that they in fact, were my favorite. Each had their own reasons for the preference, but there was no question they were my favorite.

Years later while interviewing for this job, and over the course of the weekend, I taught a number of different texts. With each new text I introduced, I began by saying, "This is my favorite text." By the end of the weekend a number of people had heard me speak a few separate times and one woman asked, "I have attended a few of your classes over the weekend and each time you begin with the same introduction, 'this is my favorite' so which is it?" I thought for a minute and then responded, "We have a number of children and I love them all dearly. Whichever child is on my lap at the time or whichever child I am talking to--that is my favorite... that must be why they fight for my attention. Whichever text I have in my hand that is also my favorite...and that is true of how I do my job." Often I am asked, "What is my favorite part of my job?" To which I respond, "Whichever one I am doing." And I truly mean it. If I am counseling, then that is my favorite part. If I am in a committee meeting developing our program, then that is my favorite. If I am writing then that is it. If I am preaching then that is it or if I am teaching then that is my favorite part. I don't have to be having fun, but I am truly satisfied in my work, no matter what I'm doing. We all have things that fight for our attention.

Our Torah reading for today is one of the most painful moments in all of the Torah. Though it is ultimately about the birth of Isaac, who will be the subject of tomorrow morning's reading, it's really about those who feel cast out, those who feel abandoned. Many of us know the story because it's a story we learned in our childhood. When Sarah gives birth to Isaac, she realizes that competing for Abraham's attention and inheritance, Ishmael is born to Hagar. Sarah, the ever-protective mother, forces Abraham to cast out Hagar and their son Ishmael. Doing as his wife instructs, Abraham gets up early in the morning and gives Hagar and Ishmael bread and a bottle of water and then sends them on their way.

We are pained by this cruel treatment. My heart breaks for Hagar and her son. The story reaches its crescendo, "As the water and bread were spent, she laid the child down and walked away." She could not bear to see him die and she cries. "God hears her crying and sends an angel to her who says, "*Al tir'iy ki sh'ma elohim el kol hana'ar ba'asher hu sham.*" "Don't be afraid because God has heard the boy where he is."

My God, the power of being, knows where someone else is. God's response wasn't to send water, though God certainly could have. God's response isn't to magically transport them to somewhere else. God's response is to be with them where they are. "*Ba'asher hu sham*" – where they are. Can we do the same? Can we stay in one place? Can we focus on the one thing before us without trying to multitask all of the time? Can we live in the moment?

A chassid of Reb Moishale Kobriner once visited the Kotzker Rebbe. Different Rebbes were known for different things. Some excelled at chesed, others at tzedaka, others at davening. The Kotzker asked this chassid, "What is your Rebbe's greatness?" The chassid answered, "My Rebbe's greatness is whatever he is doing at that moment." The Kotzker was so incredibly moved by this answer that he would often repeat it. Imagine, always being present in the moment, that truly is greatness.

There's a wonderful revival my wife and I saw about five years ago at the American Airlines Theater in New York. At the time Chris O'Donnell starred as "*The Man Who Had All the Luck*" a play by Arthur Miller. The title character, David Beeves, a young Midwestern automobile mechanic, discovers he is blessed with what appears to be almost supernatural good fortune which allows him to overcome every seemingly insurmountable obstacle that crosses his path, while those around him fall in defeat. Like Midas, everything he touches is tinged with gold, leaving him to wonder if and when his luck will change will he to be forced

to deal with life's tragedies. Eventually he realizes that his good heart, hard work, and quick thought have been responsible for his success, far more than luck. Although that seems to be what the play is about, I believe there is a subtext that is equally as powerful. Beeves spends his entire life waiting for the other shoe to drop. He can't enjoy his personal or professional success because he is always waiting to see what is going to go wrong next. His hard work overshadows the great joy he could be experiencing. He misses out because he doesn't appreciate the skills he has. He misses out because he is always worried about what will be. He doesn't live in the here and now, choosing only to live in "the what was" and "the what could be" and I dare say we are no different.

We do the same. We say we must work hard to prepare for the future. We tirelessly throw ourselves into our careers so that we can insure a future retirement. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

[The Talmud (Chagiga 11b) tells us that if a person dwells on four things – what is above, what is below, what was before and what is after – it would have been better had he not been born. A person whose only concern is what was and what will be, loses what is. And since the present is all that is, it would have been better had he never come into the world. ]

In the musaf amidah, which we will offer momentarily, we will say the words "*Ha'yom harat olam.*" Today, the world was created. Clearly a reference to the idea that on Rosh Hashanah the rabbis believe the world was created--but it can mean so much more. Today we can create worlds. If we live today, then today the world is created. Our world, our very existence, only finds meaning and purpose if we live in the *yom*, we are present in the today. When we are doing homework with our children, but our mind is still at work, we aren't there. When we are at work and our mind is at dinner with our spouse, we aren't there. When we are in shul and our mind is watching a game, we aren't present. If we aren't able to live in the moment then we have nothing because we aren't in either place--where our body is or where our mind is. For an entire year, I have written a weekly email column asking people to add one more blessing to their lives each week. Each bracha, every blessing we offer, asks us to pay closer attention to one more detail in our lives, one moment in time. My wife and I do this all of the time. If one of our children is doing something special, unique, adorable, or funny, we will nudge each other and shoot each other a glance, never wanting to ruin the moment but recognizing it just the same.

[ Just one last theory. If I were living in the time of cavemen I would never have survived. I have no skills for hunting whatsoever. In many ways they were more equipped for survival than I am today. The truth is, I have very few marketable skills at all not to mention I don't think I could catch an animal if I had to. I know necessity is the father of invention, but I don't think I could have figured it out in time to catch dinner. The only reason we have survived as a species is because we are smart. You see, as far as animals go, we aren't particularly fast, we are not all together so strong – our teeth aren't really all that lethal. I think the main reason we have survived is because the only thing we are really good at is worrying. Given the fact we aren't particularly good hunters, we have a lot to worry about. You see, worrying is just another form of planning. Worrying, the process whereby we try and figure out what is the worst possible thing that can happen, then we plan for it. The caveman worried he wouldn't have any food – so he planned. He saved food up. He collected, he gathered. He set traps hoping something would come to him because there was no way he could outrun a gazelle. On that scale, I would do very well. I am a terrific worrier. Not warrior, I would have been a terrible soldier, but I am a great worrier. I know you think this theory is crazy, but I still think there is something to it. ]

My father retired from the rabbinate this past June. There were celebrations and there were tributes. For the past 41 years I have only known my father as a rabbi. It is how he defined himself, it is who he is in his core. For months prior to his actual date of retirement, his family and friends wondered aloud about what he would do next. All the while he would not talk about it. “When it comes time, I will deal with it,” he would say. He would remind us, “I have sermons to give and people to visit. I have classes to teach and articles to write.” And we would reply, “He is living in denial.” This is the guy who breathed the rabbinate either in preparation or in execution, everyday for nearly half a century. What would come next? We set up projects--and he focused on his work. He would say, “I'm going to finish in the same way I've been for my entire rabbinate.” I would plead with him to come up with a plan and he would chastise me for forgetting what we, as rabbis, are put here to do and that has nothing to do with retirement and it has nothing to do with careers and it has nothing to do with legacy, it has to do with doing the work of God and that can't wait for tomorrow.

We must be alive in the moment. As a child he would wake me with the words of our tradition, “*Kum la'vodat ha boreh,*” “Wake up – it's time to do God's work. If nothing else, the shofar we listen to today says wake up and live, be alive in the moment. The shofar says listen, be alive in the moment – wake from your slumber and be alive in the moment.

I would like to conclude with a poem my father used to read every Friday night at services.

Listen!  
Judaism begins with the commandments  
Hear, O Israel!  
But what does it really mean to “hear”?

*The person who attends a concert  
With a mind on business,  
Hears – but does not really hear.*

The person who walks amid the songs of birds  
And thinks only of what will be served for dinner,  
Hears – but does not really hear.

*The man who listens to the words of his friend,  
Or his wife, or his child,  
And does not catch the note of urgency:  
“Notice me, help me, care about me.  
Hears – but does not really hear.*

The person who listens to the news  
And thinks only of how it will affect business,  
Hears – but does not really hear.

*The person who stifles the sound of conscience  
And thinks, “I have done enough already.”  
Hears – but does not really hear.*

The person who hears the Hazzan pray  
And does not feel the call to join in prayer,  
Hears – but does not really hear.

*The person who listens to the rabbi’s sermon  
And thinks that someone else is being addressed,  
Hears – but does not really hear.*

On this New year, O Lord,

Sharpen our ability to hear.  
Right now - listen to your heart beating, know you are alive right now!

*May we hear the music of the world,  
And the infant's cry, and the lover's sigh.*

May we hear the call for help of the lonely soul.  
And the sound of the breaking heart.

*May we hear the words of our friends,  
And also their unspoken pleas and dreams.*

May we hear within ourselves the yearnings  
That are struggling for expression.

*May we hear You, O God.*

For only if we hear You  
Do we have the right to hope  
That You will hear us.

*Hear the prayers we offer to You this day, O God,  
And may we hear them too.*

*Jack Reimer and Harold Kushner (adapted)*  
Shana Tova