

Holding On and Letting Go
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Imagine for a moment that the earth's rotation slowed down by four percent, suddenly creating one more hour each day?

You've got one more hour. Every day. How will you use it?

C'mon there are a lot of options. You could use that time to exercise. You could tweet or update your profile. You could read. You could play with your kids. You could hang out with your spouse, or with friends. You could play video games. You could spend an extra hour catching up on work or school assignments. You could volunteer. You could sleep.

Would you use that extra hour just like you use the twenty four that you already have?

If yes, then it means one of two things: you either are living your dream, or you don't know what your dream is.

If you would use the extra hour for something different, why is that something not part of your life already?

The great Rabbi and author, Milton Steinberg, delivered one of his most famous sermons after coming back from a lengthy treatment for a heart condition. After his brush with death, he had an experience that you and I have every day, but which, on this occasion, moved him so profoundly.

The experience occurred when he stepped outside for the first time in months and felt the sunlight hit his face. It was an especially clear January day, with a faint wind, and the golden glow of the sun's rays reaching everywhere. He felt the brilliance on him, "with friendship, with warmth, with blessing."

He looked around, and saw other people going about their day, unimpressed, and unmoved by the profundity of what he was experiencing in that moment. And then he remembered how he himself had been unmoved so much of the time.

Steinberg knew, in his heart, that the first chance he got, he had to share the revelation about the great preciousness of life. When he got back to the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City where he was the Rabbi, he gave a sermon in which he spoke about the importance of holding the world close, of never being casual with our good fortune. This is what he said:

I wanted to say to husbands and wives who love one another: 'How precious is your lot...Do not be, even for a moment, casual with your good fortune. Love one another while yet you may.' And to parents: 'How precious is the gift of your children. Never, never be too busy for the wonder and miracle of them. They will be grown up soon enough and grown away, too.' We human beings, we frail reeds...how precious are our endowments—mind to know, eyes to see, ears to listen, hearts to stir with pity, and to dream of justice and of a perfected world. How often are we indifferent to all of these."

Steinberg turned for words to the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, who wrote: "O world, I cannot hold thee close enough."

Think about a time when you had a moment like Milton Steinberg described. A time that was just yours, when you felt filled by the universe. It may have been with the sunlight on your face. Or perhaps it was on a mountainside, or maybe at a birth. Or a wedding. A moment when you did not take anything for granted, but felt a profound sense of blessing, and gratitude and appreciation for everything, and you just wanted to hold it all close, and not let go. Take it all in. Hang on to the moment. Let the feeling last forever.

But nothing lasts forever

Milton Steinberg knew that the message was deceptive. It was only a half-truth. Because he could not hold on to the sunlight. It would slip out of his grasp. The sun would set. The moment would be over, and "[he] would have been left disconsolate, embittered, convinced that [he] had been cheated." He continues, "it is not only the sunlight that must slip away—our youth goes also, our years, our children, our senses, our lives. This is the nature of things, an inevitability. And the sooner we make our peace with it the better..."

We can't hold the world so close, because it will always slip away. So much of what we are given has an expiration date. The moment of childbirth is short, and children grow every day, each precious stage of development passing away, never to return. The bliss of the wedding ends, and married life begins. And one spouse almost always leaves before the other.

We would do well to accept that nothing we value will last. We cannot hold on.

And so here we are, stuck in the middle, pulled in two directions. This is the dialectic within which we struggle. Judaism is a faith of great tension. A faith of "for me the world was created" and of "I am but dust and ashes." A faith of "grab hold and never let go" and of "let everything go, for nothing lasts."

The Rabbis expressed it well. "He who would die, let him hold on to life," they say. And then in the same breath, "One cannot hold on to life unless he is ready to die."

Are both possible? Can one both hold on and let go? No, it would seem. But Milton Steinberg points to a third force, one that enables us to live in the tension.

That force, of course, is God. "For, given God," he writes, "everything becomes more precious, more to be loved and clung to, more embraceable; and yet at the same time easier to give up. Given God, everything becomes more precious."

This was the conclusion of a man who had faced the angel of death, and been given a short reprieve. For it would be just a short time later that Milton Steinberg would pass away, at the age of 50. He concludes by sharing that

only with God can we ease the intolerable tension of our existence. For only when He is given, can we hold life at once infinitely precious and yet as a thing lightly to be surrendered. Only because of Him is it possible for us to clasp the world, but with relaxed hands; to embrace it, but with open arms.

I dare say that most of us, most of the time, neither feel that sense of holding on with all our might, nor the sense of letting go. But if we strive for lives of meaning, if we yearn to

encounter God, if we hope to relate to one another with our whole beings - this is a consciousness towards which we must reach.

Open up to the world, take it all in. Treat every day as if it is the last.

Spirituality is being conscious of the infinity and the nothingness of the moment, while feeling the Presence of God.

There is no day on the Jewish calendar that invites us to do this more than today, Yom Kippur. A day for embracing infinity and nothingness.

The Avodah service is the poetic reenactment of the worship of the High Priest in the Temple. It tells how he would prepare and perform the atonement ritual on behalf of the entire Jewish people.

The ritual captured this tension of holding on to life while being ready to give it up in an instant. When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he knew that the entire Jewish people were all counting on him. In seeking their atonement, he did everything he could to hold on to life. When he was successful, he threw a party in celebration and gratitude.

At the same time, he knew how ephemeral life was. He knew that if he made a mistake, he could be struck down in an instant. That is why his attendants tied a rope around his waist - so they could drag out his corpse, just in case. He faced his own mortality every year, as he prepared to conduct the rite. He also knew that if he failed, the people who counted on him to achieve their atonement would themselves face death.

Our new mahzor introduces the Avodah service with a beautiful reading by the ethnographer and Yiddish playwright Saul Ansky, who wrote the play *The Dybbuk*. It is based on a sound recording of a Hassidic d'var torah that he collected.

We'll read it later on in our services, but I would like to share some of it now. He describes how, "at a certain hour, on a certain day of the year... [the] four holinesses met together." The holiness of space, in the Holy of Holies. The holiness of the person of the High Priest. The holiness of the day of Yom Kippur. And the holiness of the name of God.

Ansky describes the coming together of place, person and language in a single instant in time: "And if [the High Priest] invoked God's name in purity, all of Israel was forgiven."

But then Ansky expands the metaphor:

Wherever a person stands to lift up eyes to heaven, that place is a Holy of Holies

Every human being created by God in God's own image is a High Priest.

Each person's life is the Day of Atonement.

Each one of us can face God with the language of the heart.

Each one of us can be forgiven.

Each one of us can achieve atonement and be made pure in the eyes of God.

When I hear really insightful people talking about God, even though they describe things very differently, it often seems that they are really saying the same thing.

Ansky's bringing together of the four holinesses is the same as Milton Steinberg's holding on with open arms. When Steinberg felt the sun's rays on his face that day, he was the High Priest in the Holy of Holies speaking the language of his heart.

It is possible for us to experience the coming together of the four holinesses, but it is a thing easier said than done.

To step into the Holy of Holies, we have to be able to stare the angel of death in the face while embracing life.

We tend to not do either of these things well. We don't accept our mortality, and we aren't really open to the world around us.

We are scared of death. We avoid the word "cancer." We are obsessed with looking young. We don't want reminders that every day brings us closer to our end, that every moment is a mini-death.

We also don't hold on to the world as tightly as we should. We are not there for the people we love. We don't do everything we can to end human suffering. We don't really look at each other.

But on this day, we have a chance. This day, when we recreate and re-imagine the ancient rituals, when we accept our mortality, when we wear white to remind us of our burial shrouds, when we acknowledge that our destiny in the year ahead is out of our control, that we may die.

In a few minutes, we will turn to the Yizkor service. Yizkor conveys the tension of holding on and letting go so explicitly. The memory of our family members and friends who have died forces us to acknowledge that we are destined for the same fate. We too will have to let all of this go. And yet our ability to remember them, and bind their lives to ours demonstrates how we have not let go. That the essence of who they are, their souls, if you will, are Eternal. We hold them close with open arms.

But it is all so fleeting. We are brought back to our distracted existence so suddenly.

Maybe wisdom of this nature, this kind of spiritual consciousness, is only possible for someone who is really forced to face their mortality. Milton Steinberg had just had a heart attack, and surely felt death approaching. Perhaps that is why the sunlight affected him so.

Another person who was able to hold the world close with open arms was my friend Matt Fenster, from New York. Matt passed away about a month and a half ago at age thirty six, leaving a wife and four young children. He had been diagnosed with leukemia less than a year and a half previously.

Through a website called CaringBridge, Matt kept and shared a diary that was followed by thousands of friends. His entries were always upbeat and positive, always honest, and always realistic. He wrote about his feelings for his family and friends. He wrote about his fears and his beliefs.

Two days before his first bone marrow transplant, Matt wrote about his deep faith in God, as always, with open eyes. "The concept of faith is not without criticism," he wrote. "After all, for every 100 cancer patients with faith that they will conquer their disease, some percentage of them will no doubt succumb to it. But that is a false criticism, because the utility of faith is not its ability to promise end results, but rather, its ability to get us through the tough times. Paradoxically, faith can only exist in an uncertain place, but where there is faith, there is security."

Matt continued to share through the end. When he passed away, his wife Jenn sent a final message that Matt had written a couple of weeks previously. It was his personal commentary interspersed with the words of Psalm 23. I would like to share it with you. As you will hear, these are surely the words of someone who has loved the world and has let go, knowing that his soul, and everything he holds dear, are Eternal.

Psalm 23, a psalm of David.

God is my shepherd, I shall not lack.

[I never have lacked.]

In lush meadows He lays me down, beside tranquil waters He leads me.

[This year I have been able to feel a peace that I had not previously known -- in Hebrew, "*nachat ruach*."]]

He restores my soul

[which I believe is eternal].

He leads me on paths of justice for His name's sake.

[I can only hope that I have followed these paths more often than I have shunned them.]

Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

[Throughout this ordeal, I have never been afraid. Perhaps it is because I am a person of faith? Or maybe I am too simpleminded to recognize the magnitude of the loss that I am facing?]

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

[I interpret God's "rod" and "staff" to be my family and friends, respectively.]

You prepare a table before me in view of my tormentors.

[I think about the tables in my life. . . my childhood dinner table . . . breakfast before school with my kids at a cafe table . . . the seder table . . . the table from which I read the Torah in synagogue.]

You anointed my head with oil

[I was brought up to believe I was special and could accomplish anything that I wanted],

my cup overflows

[a phrase I have uttered to myself each Friday night before the words of Kiddush].

May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of God for eternity.

[Although I am saddened by what I will miss, the days with which I have been blessed have been full.]

A final thought: Walk with your God. Identify what is most important to you, go after it, and when you have tasted success, be thankful for it.

Shalom.

Matt

So what would you do if you had an extra hour each day? How would you make it count? How would you make that extra time a blessing - knowing that the world is so precious, and so transitory; that the religious life compels us to want to grab it all and hold it close, while being open-eyed about having to leave it all behind?

Of course, the earth is spinning on as it always has. We don't get a gift of an extra hour this year. But, the twenty four hours that we already have are just as much a gift as a twenty fifth hour would be. This year, how will we use them?

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life.