

Our Soul/Sole Task
Kol Nidre 5768
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Shana Tova dear friends. I hope that these Days of Awe, the time between Rosh Hashanah and now, have been meaningful and that you've created time and space to engage in genuine self-reflection.

Lately, I have noticed that when I ask someone how they are doing, they often reply, "busy." I'm not sure when this answer became an accepted norm, but it is so common these days that when the question is asked of me I even find myself replying, "as busy as can be."

On a recent Friday night I greeted people and consciously made a note of how many responded to this inquiry, with something resembling, "Oh, I've been way too busy." To be honest, there were so many **responses like this** that I eventually lost count. And this was on Shabbat!

We were so busy thinking about how busy we were that we couldn't even rest on the Day of Rest itself.

When was the last time that you ran into someone whom you had not seen in some time, asked how they were doing, and got a response like: "Well, I've been really relaxed lately. I've been sitting around doing very little and taking time for myself and those I care about. I've been setting my work aside so that I can sit and contemplate my life."

What in the world would you even say to that? I know that I would be incredulous.

Our society has made it commonplace, expecting us to be ceaselessly moving and perpetually busy. In fact, we encourage working 24/7/365. As we are an extremely industrious society, our lives seem to get busier and busier and busier. While we are easily able to fill time, it is a much more arduous task and seemingly impossible to sanctify time.

In recent years, the concept of "multi-tasking"—of juggling multiple things at the same time—has become one of the dominant characteristics of our culture. Even though the very word wasn't even in dictionaries published just six or seven years ago (I checked), the term—and even more frighteningly, the behavior-- is now everywhere, and people "multi-task" wherever they are, in all sorts of places: at work; at home; in school; even (perhaps especially) while driving. We don't just do the one job we have before us. We do two—or three-- or even more things at once. And we wear our multi-tasking skills as a badge of honor.

In today's fast-paced world, anyone who wants to be considered a bright, energetic, competent person **has** to be able to multi-task, right? Even the want ads say it: "Must have good verbal and written communications skills, and *must be able to multi-task*." How else are we ever going to have enough time to do everything we have to do in this hurry up world of ours? Whether we like it or not, Multi-tasking has become a societal value.

What's more, we actually act as if it's a virtue! Being able to multi-task enables me to get so much more work done in a day. And I'm good at it too. I can be talking on

the phone, writing a memo on my computer and listening to a staff member standing in my office all at the same time.

Recently, a well-meaning congregant was coaching me on purchasing a device called a Treo. “Look, she said, it’s my most valuable possession. With this you can talk on the phone, check on someone’s address, put an appointment in your calendar and email the information to your assistant, all at the same time! If you want to become an ultimate multi-tasking warrior you definitely need one of these. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Yikes..... Time out! Let’s take a moment to recalibrate with some lessons from our spiritual treasury.

Whenever we return the torah to the ark we sing these words, *Hashiveinu Adonai, V’nashuva Chadesh Yameinu Kekedem (Lamentations 5:21)*

“Return us to You, O God, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak asks: what is the meaning of these words?

They suggest a moment of teshuvah” (Gen.R. 21:6).

What does that mean? “...each and every Jew must believe with complete trust that in each and every moment she receives vitality/life force (*chiyyut*) from the Blessed Creator. This is what the Sages taught on the verse,

“Let all that has breath praise God” (Ps. 150:6)

“with each and every breath praise God”” (Gen.R. 14:11)

Do we believe that our breath can renew us? That each breath can be an opportunity to start afresh?

According to Levi Yitzhak, that belief is essential: And I quote “...each moment the Holy Creator sends renewed vigor. Every person has the capacity to experience teshuvah. In the moment that a person transforms himself through teshuvah he also believes that he has become a new creation. On that basis the Holy Creator, in God’s great mercy, does not recall his earlier transgressions. But, if a person does not believe this, that he or she is made new each moment, then his or her teshuva is ineffective.

Our yearnings generate life. Our desire animates us. In our zest to live each day to the fullest, we often choose to press ahead without slowing down to catch our breath. We delude ourselves into thinking that just because we can do several things at once, we are saving time and accomplishing more. Actually, recent studies debunk this pervasive myth.

Scientists at Carnegie Mellon put subjects in an M.R.I. machine and asked them to listen to complicated sentences at the same time that they mentally rotated geometric shapes. The two tasks activated different parts of the brain, but each region was operating at a sub-optimal level. Here, then, was high-tech confirmation of the common-sense wisdom of Publilius Syrus, a Roman philosopher from the first century B.C., who warned, "To do things at once is to do neither." (Publilius also came up with "Better late than never" and "A rolling stone gathers no moss").

It is similar to what the great American painter Georgia O’Keefe meant when she wrote, “No one sees a flower, not really. To look at a flower takes time, like having a friend takes time.” Multi-tasking shatters the time. Multi-tasking prevents us from fully entering into the present.

So why is it that everyday there seems to be a new innovation, some new gadget to make our lives more efficient and more productive; some new way to communicate *faster and faster and faster?*

Speed is seductive. Speed infers convenience and progress. Historian Stephen Kern writes: “The historical record shows that humans have never, ever opted for slower.

Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* quotes “Linda Stone, the technologist, who once labeled the disease of the Internet age as “continuous partial attention disorder.” Two people doing six things, devoting only partial attention to each one.

We’re so accessible, we’re inaccessible. We can’t find the off switch on our devices or on ourselves. . . . We want to wear an iPod as much to listen to our own playlists as to block out the rest of the world and protect ourselves from all that noise. We are everywhere — except where we actually are physically.”

American Buddhist teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn writes “The relentless acceleration of our way of life over the past few generations has made focusing on anything something of a lost art. Things come at us fast and furiously, relentlessly. These assaults on our nervous system continually stimulate, and foster both desire and agitation, rather than connectedness and calmness. . . .and, if we are not careful, they rob us of our time, of our moments. . . . So many of us feel trapped, yet at the same time addicted to the speed at which our lives are unfolding. Even our stress or distress can feel oddly satisfying or even intoxicating.”

Yes, I believe that many of us have become addicts of multi-tasking, even at those precious times when we don’t need to be. Even at those times, when it is neither necessary nor beneficial to perform multiple tasks, it still takes great effort to slow down and abandon ourselves to the moment at hand.

But that’s not entirely true. Take tonight, for instance. Jews around the world are gathered tonight for a purpose that seems to go deliberately against the grain. Yom Kippur is nothing if not slow. It’s long; it’s repetitive. We listen to Kol Nidre three times. We repeat the confession of sins five times. We spend an entire day in the synagogue, and there are no distractions here. No multi-tasking. No channel surfing. Just one screen, One text, one supreme soul/sole task.

Perhaps our ancestors devised this long and drawn-out day (it’s actually 25 hours long), with its deliberate tempo and enforced repetition, because they intuited an important fact: some things, to be done well, have to be done slowly. Character development, which is at the heart of Yom Kippur, can’t be hurried. You can’t grab it on the run. You can’t do it in your sleep. You can’t do it for ten minutes a day while you’re watching television or speed-read it while you’re working out on the stationary bike. Character development is the fruit of time.

And so our ancestors, architects of time, built a temporal structure for introspection and unhurried thought, and they bequeathed this structure to us. It is the structure we enter tonight; a structure the Torah calls “*Shabbat Shabbaton* – a Sabbath of complete rest.” And it is written: “*Mei-erev ad erev tishb ’tu shabatchem* – from evening to evening, you shall observe this your Sabbath” [Lev.23:32].

Yom Kippur goes against the grain. It is an act of revolt against the fast and the frenetic, the proliferation of choice, the acceleration of just about everything. It is an artifact of a counter-culture that values what is quiet and deep and true.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” wrote Thoreau of his famous journey to Walden Pond. “. . .I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” Thoreau speaks to a yearning that still rises up in us, albeit sporadically, in between the ringing of the cell phone and our other “handheld anti-boredom devices” [Gleick, p.181]. “Our life is frittered away by detail,” he wrote. “. . .Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? . . .Simplify, simplify.”

This is easier said than done. How can we keep ourselves from getting caught in the quick flow of life? How do we develop a life that is balanced?

Well, here is one secret formula in a word: BREATHE! when you find yourself engaged in multiple tasks, and you feel the sense of overwhelm creeping up – give yourself a breather; stop what you are doing. And take a deep breath. Become aware of your body’s natural rhythm.

You may want to sing a *niggun* or contemplate a line of prayer, such as the *Shema*, or the verse I mentioned earlier from *Hashiveinu*, “with each breath, I am renewed, I am made anew.” As we attend to our breath, we realize that each inhalation is a gift. With each breath, then, in each moment, we can revive our awareness that life is a blessing. It is hard to feel grateful when you’re breathless.

In Hebrew, the word *ruach* means “breath.” *Ruach* can also be translated as “wind” or “spirit.” Our ancestors understood the concepts were related: for if the wind gets knocked out of us, or if we run ourselves ragged it’s bound to affect our spirit, our mood, our very outlook. We can restore ourselves, purely by turning attention to our breath.

Keeping Shabbat and being more Shabbat-like in our daily living is another answer. When we aren’t busying ourselves, many of us think a day off should be effortless, fluid, simple; that we need only give ourselves permission and we’ll enter a different head space, and that peace and relaxation will come flooding in.

But it doesn’t always work that way. For Shabbat and other times of rest to be real, we cannot simply wait for it to happen. We have to work to make it so. Rest and replenishment call for design. We continue to refine it throughout our lives

How will you design your Shabbat? Some of Shabbat may be private; find whatever it is that brings you peace and comforts your soul. But some of it should be shared, for Shabbat is about nurturing relationships that are precious to us.

On this day we don't squeeze people in, on the run; we seek out connections and give them the unhurried time they need. When Jewish parents lovingly bless their children on Friday nights, we show them with our words and our touch that they are precious to us -- that they matter to us infinitely more than our cell phones or our jobs. When the fixed anchor of our week is the Sabbath meal with the ones we love, we make a statement about our highest priority. When we celebrate Shabbat at the synagogue we form a bond with Jewish community and cultivate friendships of substance.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, taught that there are two human typologies portrayed in the two different Creation stories at the beginning of Genesis. In the first, human beings are told to master and rule the land, which represents our drive to (re)produce and transform, design and build, improve and control, achieve and accomplish. This mindset is an essential one.

In the second story the language and mood are markedly different. The story is softer, more gentle. There is nothing to do or accomplish. The garden is already planted and flourishing, and humans are there to enjoy it. Everything is provided: the rivers overflow, the fruit is ripe and ready to eat. In other words, part of being human is pausing to marvel and partake in all that is. We are to relate to the world in all its glory. (model a big deep breath) We are to breathe deeply, rest, lounge, and love. We are to **be** in the garden. This too is an essential, creative mindset. Together, these two creation stories teach that we are meant both to do and to be; and both require creativity. Creativity is more expansive than we had imagined. Just as work requires discipline and intention, so does relaxation.

Shabbat comes once a week. Our task is to bring mindfulness into our everyday. Mindfulness is an approach to life, an awareness that shapes how we view each moment. We do not become mindful once and for all. We return over and over to our intention, and we wake up again and again. This is the way of *teshuvah*, of return to the ways of God.

So, let's return for a moment to multitasking. The findings, according to neuroscientists, psychologists and management professors, as we can expect, suggest that we would be wise to curb this multitasking behavior, which has been shown to hamper performance and in some cases is just outright dangerous.

So, yesterday, I accidentally dropped my cell phone into a cup of steaming hot Earl Grey tea. It's ruined. And so, I've decided..... to buy a Treo. Because, there is a time and a place for everything. However, I commit to not using it on Shabbat. What habits are you willing to change in this new year?

Allow me to leave you with this postmodern vignette from Thomas Friedman's op-ed piece, *The Taxi Driver*.¹

"After I arrived at my hotel, I reflected on our trip: The driver and I had been together for an hour, and between the two of us we had been doing six different things. He was driving, talking on his phone and watching a video. I was riding, working on my laptop and listening to my iPod. There was only one thing we never did: Talk to each other."

At this season, and on this day of Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, we examine our lives. We remind ourselves of the Divine Truth: that every moment in our lives has a potential for *brakha*, blessing or *klala*, curse. We have the power to choose.

We have the capacity to become conscious of the Divine Truth deep within our hearts, and to live by this truth every day, not just when it's convenient or to our advantage. When we fail, when our habitual reactions lead us astray, when we are overtaken by passion or fear, we are still charged with waking up to the truth. We can slow down and recreate a moment of calm in our hearts. We can remember to be gentle and thoughtful and patient with ourselves, and with others. We can trust in our ability to make positive changes, to become all that we are capable of becoming.

Let this be our soul task. Amen.

¹ Author Thomas Friedman, in an Of-Ed piece entitled The Taxi Driver, New York Times, November 1, 2006 describes this scene, "A month ago I was in San Francisco and went for a walk. I was standing at an intersection waiting to cross the street when a man jogging and wearing his iPod came up next to me. As soon as the light turned green he sprinted into the crosswalk. But a woman driving a car — running a yellow light — almost hit him before she hit the brakes. The woman was holding a cell phone in her right ear and driving with her left hand. I thought to myself, I've just witnessed the first postmodern local news story, and I crafted the lead in my head: "A woman driving her car while speaking on her cellphone ran over a man jogging across the street while listening to his iPod."