

The rabbi, cantor and president from a prominent congregation were flying together on the president's corporate jet to a meeting with the leadership of the Argentinean Jewish community. Deep over the Amazon jungle, their plane experienced engine failure, forcing them to make an emergency landing in a remote part of the jungle. Soon they were found but were taken captive by members of an unknown tribe. They were taken to the tribal leader who viewed their presence as a threat to his tribe's sovereignty. So he sentenced them to death ... but not before granting each person one last wish.

When asked what his dying wish would be, the rabbi said, "I've been working on my masterpiece Rosh Hashanah sermon for the past thirty years. I was hoping to deliver it to my congregation at my final High Holy Days; now I won't have that opportunity. Please, sir, let me deliver this one last sermon before I die."

The tribal leader granted his wish. "Cantor, what is your final wish?" the tribal leader asked. "With your permission, sir, I have been working on an arrangement of *Kol Nidre* that is sure to stir the soul. It is an arrangement that is so long, complex and beautiful, that I can only sing it once. Since I am about to die, please, sir, I implore you, let me sing my rendition of *Kol Nidre*." The tribal leader granted his wish.

He looked at the president and said, "Sir, the rabbi will deliver his sermon, the cantor, his *Kol Nidre*. What is your dying wish?"

"Kill me first!"

There are many reasons why sanctuaries are filled at this time of year. We come to hear cantors and their choirs sing the beautiful and intricate melodies of the High Holy Days. We come to hear the messages that rabbis choose to share for a New Year, sermons that are intended to uplift, inspire, and yes, sometimes agitate. As George Zimmerman shared in his bulletin article last month, we come to see our friends and acquaintances, some of whom we haven't seen since last year's High Holy Days.

We come because it is what Jews do. We participate in the sacred rites and rituals of the Jewish people. We observe the commandment from the Torah: "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you will observe a sacred occasion: you should not work at your occupations. Observe it as a day when the *shofar* is sounded." (Num. 29:1-2) We come here with different needs.

Some of you have experienced pain and heartache in the past year and are looking to the liturgy and melody of our tradition to uplift you. Some are looking to enter into the new

year with a clean slate, prepared for new opportunities. Some of you have experienced great joy and success and are thankful for your abundant blessings. We should all be here to be renewed and refreshed as we consider the past and look to the future with optimism and hope.

If we are in a good mindset, we come to this sanctuary, on this *Yom Teruah*, this day of the *shofar* blast, prepared to reflect upon the year that has passed and to prepare for the year ahead. We let the sublime beauty of the liturgy and the transcendent quality of the music penetrate our hearts, minds and souls. We enter into a state of mindful awareness that will inspire us through these days of awe.

Mindful awareness--an ability to recognize, and stop to praise the miracles that occur each day – is a key to approaching the High Holy Days. But too often we are so consumed by the demands of work, family, school and more that we deny ourselves even the possibility of taking pleasure in the ordinary and extraordinary events that are all around us. When we do that, we diminish ourselves and our place in this world.

When every moment of the day is woven into an intricate choreography where just one misstep could derail the entire piece; when we fail to stop simply to inhale a moment of wonder, when these moments feel like an imposition rather than an opportunity for blessing for the day, we miss out on life. The following is a story of missed blessings on a remarkable January morning in a Washington D.C. Metro station:

“He emerged from the Metro at the L’enfant Plaza station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket,” writes Washington Post journalist Gene Weingarten. “By most measures he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

“It was ten minutes to eight on a Friday in January,” Weingarten continues. “For about forty-five minutes the violinist performed six classical pieces. In that time, eleven hundred people. . . passed by. Each passerby had a quick choice to make; do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past? Do you throw in a buck just to be polite? Does your decision change if he’s really bad? What if he’s really good? Do you have time for beauty? Shouldn’t you? What’s the moral mathematics of the moment?”¹

How many people do you think stopped to behold this beauty? Very few, notes Weingarten. And how many people didn’t even hear it? A violin is not a *shofar*; its sound isn’t going to startle easily. Yet on this day, a renowned musician played from his heart to a long line of men and women deaf to chords of beauty. Their souls were closed to the miracle in their midst.

¹ *Pearls Before Breakfast*; Gene Weingarten; “Washington Post Magazine”, April 8, 2007

I wonder what would have happened if the great twentieth century theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, or if Moses, had been walking through that Metro station. Had they been, there I'm quite sure they would have stopped for several moments to behold the beauty in their presence. Why them and not others? Heschel and Moses were keenly aware of the miracles and blessings revealed in the "mundane" moments of every day.

Consider Moses. What made his encounter with God at the burning bush so extraordinary? It wasn't that he noticed that a bush was burning. It's that he paused. He stopped long enough to realize that, in fact, the bush was burning but was not consumed. Moses recognized the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Of Rabbi Heschel, legend has it that he would begin the first class of each year with his new cadre of rabbinical students by asking a simple question: "When was the last time God caused a miracle?" The students, eager to impress their teacher, would search the vaults of their rabbinic knowledge, trying to extract the right Talmudic tale about miracles and divine intervention.

After a few minutes of this exercise, Heschel would proclaim animatedly, "Boys, (they were all boys in Heschel's day) did you see the sun rise today? Did you see the sun rise today? If that's not a miracle, then what is?" Remember, it was Heschel who famously said, "Miracles happen every day; we just walk sightless among them."

Ask yourself: Do you have the capacity of Moses or of Heschel to stop and see the miracles that are with us every day? Do you have the capacity, as Rabbi Steven Leder has written about, to recognize the extraordinary nature of ordinary things?

I ask myself that question every day. I have the capacity. So do you. But do I act on it? Not always. Too often, we apprehend so little of what we see. We are prisoners to mind-numbing routine; the chores, errands, appointments, all carefully calculated and choreographed so that we almost have to schedule a moment of wonder and transcendence. Is that what we've become?

Weingarten's story continues. "The musician did not play popular tunes, whose familiarity might have drawn interest. That was not the test. These were masterpieces that have endured for centuries on their brilliance alone. . . [He played and] three minutes went by before something happened. Sixty-three people had already passed when, finally, there was a breakthrough of sorts. A middle-aged man altered his gait for a split second, turning his head to notice that there seemed to be some guy playing music. Yes the man kept walking, but it was something.

In the three-quarters of an hour that [the violinist] played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for one minute."

“It was all videotaped by a hidden camera,” reports Weingarten. “You can play the recording once or fifteen times, and it never gets any easier to watch. Try speeding it up and it becomes one of those herky-jerky World War I-era silent newsreels. The people scurry by in comical little hops and starts, cups of coffee in their hands, cell phones at their ears, ID tags slapping at their bellies, a grim *danse macabre* to indifference, inertia and the dingy, gray rush of modernity.”

Don't Weingarten's observations describe our lives more accurately than we'd like to admit? Aren't we often times one of the faceless persons in the crowd, another solitary driver snaking our way along the 405, just trying to get from point A to point B?

We dart from one place to the next, unable to offer more than a passing glance at the bush that is not consumed, or the violinist in the subway station. We pass by quickly, immune to the splendor in our midst.

In 1982, film director Godfrey Reggio compiled video of Americans going about their ordinary business and sped them up to resemble a fast-moving assembly line. Commuters entering and exiting subway trains, office workers filing in and out of lobby elevators, business people ascending and descending escalators. Minimalist composer Philip Glass provided the music that accentuated the discordant nature of this film, called “Koyanisqatsi,” a Hopi Indian word for “out of balance.” Isn't this the way many of us live? Koyanisqatsi—Out of Balance? What does it take for us to change, to slow down and to look at life differently?

Sometimes people take control of their own lives. They relocate, leaving the overcrowded city to move to smaller and slower-paced towns. Talk to these folks and most are very content. But at other times, life forces us onto a different path. A sudden catastrophic jolt knocks us from our routine and forces us to pay attention in a different way. An accident debilitates us, the death of a loved one stuns us, or a job layoff cripples us. As the writer Joan Didion wrote eloquently, “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant.” (*Year of Magical Thinking*). How we respond to these changes can shift our lives into sharper focus. If we have faith and resolve, such events can provide opportunities for remarkable spiritual growth.

Consider this active, athletic and energetic working mother. She worked full time, volunteered in her spare time, was raising a child and maintaining a home. Then she was diagnosed with a debilitating condition that has sapped her energy. Now she requires frequent hospital visits and trips out of town for treatment. Life changes fast; life changes in the instant. This is her new reality. What are her choices? She could remain in constant state of despair and anger. Or she could be appreciative, for her dedicated doctors, for the ability to live fully, albeit differently. For the different type of time she spends with her son and husband. That cliché comes to mind—when life throws you lemons, make lemonade.

Another woman I know, I'll call her Rebecca, was diagnosed last year with an aggressive form of cancer. A difficult surgery was followed by rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. She has endured much and will endure more. Through this ordeal, Rebecca's loving children have provided their mother with extraordinary care. They've drawn closer to one another.

I saw Rebecca recently. It had been a while since our last meeting. She was scared; she is afraid to die. She told me that all she can see in front of her is an empty grave at her feet, and she sees herself in it soon. What do you say to a person in this state of despair? I suggested, "Instead of looking down at your feet into the grave, look instead up into the sky. Don't consider each day one closer to death, but rather a blessing and a gift from God. Try to feel the beauty through your pain, experience all that life can offer, and appreciate the loving care and devotion you receive from so many."

Rebecca and her family had illness throw their lives out of balance. But by looking up at the sky and not down at the grave, she has taken more control of her life, and she may even recognize the blessing of each day. An attitude of gratitude, I believe, will help her manage her illness. It can help us too.

Some of us are in the midst of a crisis. But most of us aren't. Yet all of us should take time each day to bless the gift of a new day, and to live in a state of awe and wonder, if only for a few moments.

Every morning, traditional Jews perform an intricate ritual of morning blessings. These blessings force us to pay attention. They instruct us how to wake up and greet the day by giving thanks to God. We approach each day with an attitude of gratitude. Most of us wake with the alarm and begin our day without considering the miracle it is just to wake up. A traditional Jew, however, will greet the day with the prayer "*Modeh ani l'fanecha, melech chai v'kayam, she'he'che'zar'ta bi nishmati, b'chemla, rabba emunatecha*—I give thanks to you, ever living Sovereign, that you have restored my soul to me in mercy; how great is your faith." If you have a loved one who slipped quietly into death in the middle of the night, you know just how poignant *Modeh Ani* and the blessings for the new day can be.

Our sages teach us to recite one hundred blessings each day; Jewish tradition provides blessings for the most transcendent and the most mundane events. Our morning blessings, in which we thank God for opening our eyes, for clothing us, making us strong and much more help us recognize the extraordinary nature of ordinary things. Our tradition even has a prayer for going to the bathroom. We thank God for maintaining our vital organs and enabling all paths to remain open while also asking God to help us heal should one of them become blocked. This blessing, too, is poignant, and the need to find God's presence through the pain can be considerable. Above all, this prayer, be we broken or whole, transforms an everyday act into a holy act.

When the British author, John Lane, who writes about the loss of appreciation for beauty in the modern world, viewed the video of the violinist in Washington, he remarked to the reporter that this experiment may be symptomatic of that loss, “not because people didn’t have the capacity to understand beauty, but because it was irrelevant to them. . . This is about having the wrong priorities,” Lane said. If, as Weingarten notes, “we can’t take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that, then what else are we missing?” Or, as the Welsh poet W.H. Davies observed; “What is this life if, full of care/ We have not time to stand and stare.”

You may be wondering . . . who was the violinist? It was Joshua Bell, one of the preeminent violinists of our time. When he plays, people listen. Yet on that January day, just seven people stopped for more than a minute. And only one person recognized him. She had paid good money to see him the previous week; that January morning she stood eight feet from him, in a subway station, jarred from the banality of a morning commute by this extraordinary sight. Bell remarked to Gene Weingarten, the journalist who came up with this experiment, that he was mystified by only one thing. Not that he wasn’t drawing a crowd during rush hour, but rather that nobody paid attention, as if he was invisible. That’s what is most depressing about this episode; to have something so extraordinary and beautiful on display and for so many people not to notice it. How tragic is that?

Tomorrow morning we will hear the blasts of the *shofar*. Will they stir us from our inertia and ennui? Can we adjust our priorities and be open to more moments of splendor and beauty? Can we act spontaneously, or just stop for a moment to acknowledge God’s presence and God’s miracles that abound? Rather than looking down at the floor, can we look into the eyes of another, and into the far reaches of the horizon, to see the miracle of the everyday? Can we live with an attitude of gratitude that will help us endure?

We have an opportunity and a responsibility to live each day with blessing and praise. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to be grateful for the gifts endowed to us by our creator; the natural and majestic beauty of our environment, the inner beauty of a loving family; and friends who care about us and shower us with love. We have an opportunity and responsibility to be thankful for each day, even when faced with crises and the unknown.

May we live each day with fullness of life and a spirit grateful for the gift that each day offers, for the attitude of gratitude that inspires us to live for another day. As we begin the year 5768, may we resolve to open our eyes to the beauty of the day. May we walk, full of sight and insight, aware of the miracles of every day.

Amen.