

Growing, In Love

Kol Nidrei, 5779

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Every night, I read my sons a story, sing a song, recite Shema, hug them tight, and let them drift off to sleep. Over the summer, my three-year-old, Amitai, became obsessed with a book called *The Wonderful Things You Will Be*, by Emily Winfield Martin. He wanted to read this book, and ONLY this book, every night for about three week straight. It's only a few pages long, but somehow it still manages to put words to the hopes and dreams and love I hold for my own children:

*When I look at you, and you look at me,
I wonder what wonderful things you will be.
When you were too small to tell me hello,
I knew you were someone I wanted to know.*

*For all of your tininess couldn't disguise
A heart so enormous and wild and wise.
This is the first time there's ever been you,
So I wonder what wonderful things you will do.*

*Will you stand up for good by saving the day?
Or play a song only you know how to play?
Will you tell a story that only you know?
Will you learn what it means to help things to grow?*

*Will you learn how to fly to find the best view,
Or take care of things much smaller than you?
I know you'll be kind and clever and bold
And the bigger your heart, the more it will hold.*

*When nights are black and when days are gray-
You'll be brave and be bright so no shadows can stay.
Then you will discover all there is to see,*

And become anybody that you'd like to be.

*And then I'll look at you, and you'll look and me,
And I'll love you, whoever you've grown up to be.*

The book is all about looking into the future and seeing, with joy and excitement, all of the wonderful and amazing things this child might have in store for them. I often think about the incredible things I want to happen, not only for my own two children, but for all of the people I have the privilege, right here in this community, to watch grow and change while they live through life's highs and lows and discover new worlds each day.

Many of us have a sense, however, that at some point, we will have reached "it", some place where we have become, in Ms. Martin's words, "the wonderful things we will be," where we will have grown up into mature, adult versions of ourselves. At the same time, I would argue that most of us are not quite there, not living up to all of our potential. But how do we get there? Will the passage of time shepherd us from where we are to a place where we will have become ourselves? Are we each merely the sum of our experiences, being passively shaped throughout the years, or do we have the agency to create our best selves?

Tonight, we come together to ask for this year we have just begun to be a great one. On this Yom Kippur, we will look back upon the vows we have made and broken and will try to make amends; we will look forward

expectantly to the infinite possibilities that await us. Tonight, I want you to think about who you are, right at this moment. Where are you on the path of your life?

We have all heard that life is a journey, and no one person's life in our Jewish tradition exemplifies the fantastic and often complicated nature of that journey more than Abraham, whose story we read about on both days of Rosh HaShanah, and who was told לך-לך, "Go out, journey from your home and land to make something new!". There is a line toward the end of his story (Genesis 24:1) where it says:

וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַיִּבְרַךְ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם בְּכָל:

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham in all things.

The Yalkut Shimoni, a 13th Century compilation of midrashim and explanations on Tanakh, picks up on the unique language in this verse, noting that Torah here describes Abraham as both "old" as well as "advanced in years" and says, "Aha! These must mean two different things. What is the difference between being old and advanced in years?" So, here is the answer the midrashist developed:

There are people who have elderliness (זקנה), but not [length] in days (באו בימים), and those who have [length in days] and not elderliness, but here, maturity is not the same as length of days and vice versa.

In essence, the Yalkut Shimoni reminds us that growing older does not necessarily mean growing wiser or more mature. Some of us, myself included, still have times when we react to things as we did when we were children. Oftentimes, we do not utilize the wisdom we have gained from the cornucopia of our life's experiences in order to do what is right, but instead, use our ego as a crutch in order to do what is easy or comfortable or convenient. The midrashist is making the case that Abraham should be a model of how to go along one's life journey, in that he is a person who attained both maturity (זקנה) along their way toward a long life (בא ימים).

So, how do we gain maturity? What does it look like? I have often heard people of all ages come to me and claim that they are too set in their ways, too used to their habits to make real or significant changes. One of these people might be the three year old who lives in my house; "I can't" is one of his favorite phrases, even when he's attempting a feat, like putting on a shirt, that he has literally done thousands of times.

We have little control over the length of our days. We can exercise, eat a balanced diet, de-stress, and try to be healthy, but ultimately, our time in this world is not our own. Each of the days we are granted are a precious gift from the Holy One of Blessing. Rabbi Akiva, the great Sage of the Mishna, taught:

“Everything is given as collateral, and a net is cast over all of life. The shop is open, and the shopkeeper grants credit, and the accounting ledger is open, and the hand writes, and everyone who wants to borrow can come and borrow, but the collectors go constantly on their daily rounds and exact payment from each person- with their knowledge or without it.” (Mishna Avot 3:16)

If tomorrow, God forbid, were to be our last day alive, there is little we could do to escape it. What we do have control of, however, is what we do with our life in this world. We control how much of life we enjoy, and how we show gratitude for the blessings we enjoy each day, or how we don't. We control how we learn and grow and push ourselves to mature...or how we don't.

The brilliant author and thinker Rabbi Milton Steinberg developed a three-step formula that he felt could guide people toward maturity. The first step, he explains, is to simply be interested. Be interested in anything, in everything. Take up a new hobby or a new area of study. Realize that in our world there are always mysteries to unfold, beauty to behold, and moments that, if we were truly present and paid attention, would and should take our breath away.

Think about some of the greatest moments of your life, the moments where everything you felt was too much for words. The first time you fell in love. The last time you saw a sunset. The moment a friend who knew just what you needed when you were at your worst, and was just there.

If we are really and truly honest with ourselves, there is something in each day to which we could have paid more attention or for which we should have been grateful. Even on our worst days, most of us have food to eat, even things that are delectable treats. Even when we feel lonely or hurt, there is still likely someone you can turn to. And if you think I'm wrong, take a look at everything you have done in first ten days of this new year. What did you eat that you didn't even enjoy or appreciate? Did you drive your car, have plenty of clothes, go to work, go to school, have every opportunity for growth and learning and inspiration and success and new experiences and still think, "Oh man; I can't believe it's Monday! This stinks!"

If that sounds a little too close to home, don't worry, I've already had some terrible days in 5779 that broke me down to my core. But life doesn't have to be perfect in order for us to appreciate it. Terrible things happen, and all of us endure crushing wounds and losses throughout our lives. When we feel those hurts, we lean on those who care for us and, hopefully, we take the time to count the blessings that still remain in our lives each day. If even for a moment, we are able to see some small goodness in our day, it could anchor us to the incredible wonder of our world.

From this investment in our world, in moments and experiences comes understanding, knowledge, and connection. And once we are passionately entwined with the world, we need to build relationships with the people in it. The biggest task in our maturing, continues Steinberg, is “to realize that ‘they’, those nameless, faceless ‘others’, are like me. They have the same hopes, dreams, aspirations, the same stupidities and the same hurts.”

This is often our biggest obstacle. Each of us has trouble empathizing with others. Their experiences may not seem like our experiences, their stories quite unlike our own.

Many years ago, when I was in high school, I went to Washington DC on a program called Panim El Panim, a program then designed to teach students about the political process and how to be active participants in our democracy. The week-long retreat had a theme each year, and in the spring of 2001, the theme was homelessness and poverty. One of the presenters was a woman in her forties named Margie, who shared one of the most incredible stories I have ever heard.

She was an average person, living in the suburbs of Virginia, and had spent 8 years as a stay-at-home mom with a loving husband. One day, she came down with horrible pain that turned into a debilitating illness. She

was in the hospital for almost a year undergoing tests and treatments that eventually saved her life. But while she was there, her hospital bills piled up, her marriage was strained, and her husband divorced her. She left the hospital with a clean bill of health and a mountain of debt. Having not worked in almost a decade, it was nearly impossible to find a job, and she ended up living on the streets.

While she eventually was able to find some debt relief, save some money, and make her way back to some semblance of normalcy, living on the street, she said, changed her. The worst part for her was not the uncertainty, the physical discomfort, or the lack of access to what we all need to live. She said the worst part was how people didn't even treat her like she was a person, how people walked by and ignored her as if she wasn't even there, as if, because she had less money, she was somehow less human.

I am ashamed to admit that I have walked by people too. I would either be too caught up in my own day, or maybe too uncomfortable with the difference, the otherness, that I was being confronted with, to give someone the simple courtesy and compassion of a moment of my time.

I try to be more open with my words, my time, my kindness, and to offer what I have to those in need. Because I know that, but for luck or

chance or the grace of God, I, or any one of us, could be the ones asking for help, the ones in desperate need of aid from our fellow human beings. And I also am painfully aware of the times I have not chosen to stop and listen, the times that someone asked me for help and I ignored them, the times I was too busy to intervene or even pause what I was doing for a moment. Those memories haunt me, reminding me that these are real people, living real lives. They are more than just others like me; they are me.

Look around this room. The people sitting to your left and your right, in front of you or all the way in the back of the room are your people. They would be there for you in times of need, and if all else fails, I am here, Rabbi Arnow is here and we want you to grow and to thrive. The fact that each of you is here right now, both physically and as a part of this community means that you are never alone as long as you reach out and connect. But it also means that if you have really done the work to be interested in the world around you and have realized that these people here tonight are just as uniquely, fragilely human as you are, then it is up to you to step up and be there for them as well.

It is this concern for others that leads to Steinberg's last step: a devotion to service. If we truly care for one another and realize that not only

are your problems and hurts just as important as mine, but that they in fact affect me as well, we cannot turn away from service to others.

Not only are your hurts my hurts, but your deeds are my deeds. That is why we all stand up together on this day, Shabbat Shabbaton, the most intensely reflective day in our year, and we pound our chests, and say “Al chet shechatanu...For the sins WE have committed.” The wrongs in our world are our collective responsibility. If we want to live in a world where people are no longer victims of hate crimes, we can start by letting go of our hate for those who have offended us. If we want to live in a world where justice is employed and rights are respected, we need to start by respecting others around us, even when they say or do things we disagree with, even when they don't act in the way we would like them to, as the brilliant Sage Hillel teaches “Do not separate yourself from the community...do not judge your neighbor until you have stood in their place” (Mishna Avot 2:4).

A person who has fully realized each of these three steps can be counted as mature. If you have looked deeply into yourself and this world and cultivated appreciation and gratitude, if you have become deeply interested in the world and concerned for the people in it around you, and if you have committed yourself to helping those who need you, those whom

you are capable of helping, then you have matured into a deep, adult relationship with yourself and our world, no matter how old you are.

All you have to do is to start. And the best place to start in order to find awe and wonder is with yourself. To say it another way, you need to find the essence of yourself, rooted in a deep love of who you are right at this moment. YOU ARE NOT PERFECT AND YOU NEVER WILL BE. But you are amazing and precious beyond belief just the way you are. Only in loving and truly accepting yourself for who you are can you ever hope to truly grow and change. This is the great paradox of life. Love is both caring deeply for someone or something, while at the same time honestly and fully acknowledging the deficiencies we all have. Because only by loving yourself each moment, by caring so deeply about who you are, can you feel you are worthy of growth and better days in the future. In doing this, you force yourself to do the grueling work of self-reflection and inner-growth.

Take a minute right now. Think about that book again, *The Wonderful Things You Will Be*. This time, however, imagine that you aren't reading it to a child or a loved one or a friend, but to yourself. Say to yourself:

*When I look at you, and you look at me,
I wonder what wonderful things you will be.
When you were too small to tell me hello,
I knew you were someone I wanted to know.*

*For all of your tininess couldn't disguise
A heart so enormous and wild and wise.
This is the first time there's ever been you,
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*Will you stand up for good by saving the day?
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Then you will discover all there is to see,
And become anybody that you'd like to be.*

*And then I'll look at you, and you'll look and me,
And I'll love you, whoever you've grown up to be.*

You have an entire year laid out ahead of you. I know that every one of us has the power to grow and mature and do outstanding things for our world. Give yourself the chance, the challenge, to imagine what wonderful things YOU will be this year.

G'mar Chatima Tova.