

Gaining A Heart of Wisdom – Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5780

I have listened to many parents' speeches at B'nai Mitzvahs. I love them. You hear a whole range of things. Sometimes, parents kid their children, tell embarrassing stories, or refer to family in-jokes. Most parents tell their child how proud they are. The worst, though, is when a parent starts talking about his or her own Bar or Bat Mitzvah. At B'nai Mitzvah rehearsals, I actually warn the parents that if I hear anything about their own Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they will feel a piece of candy hitting them in the back of the head. I tend to think that the parents' speeches are one of the better parts of the service. And I have found that, if you listen closely enough, you can learn a tremendous amount about parenting.

At a recent Bat Mitzvah, I heard something particularly profound. The mother of the student explained a dichotomy in parenting, one that I have felt strongly in my heart. She explained that she looked forward to the next stage in her child's development, the next step in her becoming an adult. At the same time, she felt sad seeing the end of a stage, one to which her daughter would never return. I have felt this mix of feelings many times. Looking at pictures of my daughter is a complicated experience for me. I first revel in how cute my daughter looks in the picture. I get excited that we successfully got through whatever stage Chloe is experiencing in the picture. However, I feel a sharp feeling of sadness. I know those days will never come again. I will not feed Chloe from a bottle again. I will not hear that same giggle she would make as a baby. More and more, she is less quick to fall asleep in my lap. I do enjoy her new verbal abilities. I love hearing about the firsts she has: the first movie at a theater, the first time going to the zoo, the first time trying ice cream, the first time seeing Sesame Street Live. But I find that I still mourn about what has passed and will not return.

The odd thing is that I did not particularly enjoy some of these past phases. I cannot tell you how many nights I spent significant time making formula before Chloe started eating solid food. Her not sleeping through the night was not fun at all. I hated that we could not ask her what was wrong when she got upset. No matter how much the media says it, not all of parenting is fun. But, still, I feel like something is being lost as the days click by. New doors open, but others close at the same time. As a side note, I do not know how my wife Deborah would feel hearing that I have nostalgia about the stages that have passed. I cannot tell if she would want to laugh or slap me.

The question this all leads to is how do we experience time passing, not just in terms of parenting? Is it opening up to us, beckoning us to new possibilities? Or does it feel like it is slipping away, passing through our hands like sand we cannot hold? Perhaps, it actually feels like both at the same time. We find ourselves anticipating the future, hopefully looking forward to it. However, we also feel like we are losing something as the years pass. We may look forward to the next stage, but we may also be aware of our own mortality and that nothing lives forever. How do we understand the time that we have on this earth? How do we handle the two competing impulses: looking forward to the passing of time while also mourning its

going by? More importantly, does our tradition present us with any wisdom about how we experience the passing of time?

There is a famous expression from Psalm 90. It is verse 12: **Leemnot yameinu kain hodah v'navoh l'vav chauchmah**. It means "Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart." I want to suggest that this verse has much to teach us about how we view the passage of time.

For some background information, the Book of Psalms appears in the third section of the Jewish Bible, the Writings. It is basically poetry written by humans expressing their emotions, their conflicts and their relationships with G-d. The tradition suggests that most of the book was written by King David, though this may not be true. Interestingly, Psalm 90 is not attributed to King David, but rather Moses. For context, it stresses the massive difference between G-d's eternal existence and the fleeting amount of time people are alive. Basically, one of the ways the tradition understands time is to compare G-d's eternity to our small life spans. To G-d, a thousand years is like yesterday that passed, just a watch of the night. The psalm also talks about how we are concerned about G-d's anger toward us, particularly since G-d is aware of all of our sins. Our lives last seventy or eighty years, much of the time in trouble and sorrow. The psalm makes the point that no one can know the extent of G-d's anger. Then, the psalm gives us our key phrase: "Teach us to count our days right, that we may obtain a wise heart." Next, it concludes with a section asking G-d to turn to us with mercy and express G-d's favor toward us.

I want to go back to our verse: "Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart." First of all, it starts with the word teach. Properly understanding the passing of time is not intuitive. It is not something that we just know. We are not born with it. We have to ask for help from G-d to learn how to do it. It takes effort, or at least our attention, to learn how we are to properly view our days in this world. We might have to practice something to do it right.

What is fascinating is the verb that is used to describe what we are to learn. To count. We are to learn how to keep track of the days of our lives. It is necessary to pay attention to them. We need to be aware of them to count them. We cannot do what we so easily do. We cannot let them slip by without being aware of time passing. It is so easy for us to live our days without marking their importance or value to us. We surround ourselves with so many distractions that it is possible for us to lose days. What did you do yesterday? Oh, nothing. I watched some TV. Unfortunately, it is natural for us to let days go by without much attention or focus. But our tradition compels us to do more. To be aware of the days as they pass. The tradition is masterful at making sure that we do not treat every day the same. It fills the calendar with special days, even a holiday of Shabbat every week. In Judaism, one day is not the same as the next.

Also, by counting we have to keep in mind that the number of our days is not limitless. Counting forces us to think about how much time we have left. We do not know the exact amount of time we will be alive, but by counting we have to deal with the fact that we do not

have infinite time. There is a certain sadness to this. Once we have counted a day, we can realize how many are in the past. They will never come again or be available to us. We cannot replay them. We cannot redo the mistakes we made. The opportunities they offered may have passed by. They are gone.

At the same time, this realization brings a sense of urgency to our lives. We are reminded that if we do want to accomplish things in our time here, we had better to get to them. The relationship to be repaired. The love to be shown to another person. The wrongdoing for which we have to atone and make right. The need to make sure our loved ones are secure. The places that we need to see. The institutions we have to help build. Counting our days motivates us to take advantage of the time we do have. It pushes us to work for the things that are meaningful to us. It helps us to choose to make the most of every day. Our tradition points out to us that we have a choice. We can let days go by like the passing of a breeze, or we can grip onto them with purpose and intention as we push ourselves to fulfil what feels most important to us.

Our tradition specifically marks these High Holy Days as a time to count our days. We celebrate the start of a new year. We reflect on our deeds of the year that has past. Our tradition calls out to us to not let time just let time pass by. It demands of us to be more intentional, more aware, more plain alive.

What are we to accomplish with this counting? What's the goal? We are to count so we may gain a heart of wisdom. You should know that this also can mean a mind of wisdom, since our ancestors often thought that the heart, not the brain, was the source of thought. We are to pay attention so we can develop wisdom. Our goal is to learn from the time that goes by. We are supposed to develop into wiser individuals. The days that are past are not meaningless. If we have paid attention, we have grown in our understanding of the world. We have become better and more capable of making the right decisions in the present.

This view of how people experience time is incredibly optimistic. We are not meant to walk blindfolded through our days. More importantly, we are not condemned to remaining the same day after day. This worldview sees us as creatures continually developing and improving. Now, the psalm could be interpreted to say that the wisdom we gain is how to follow G-d's instruction better. But it could mean more than that. Our goal is to develop into something better. Wiser people. Wiser people who can get better at making choices of how they use their time. We talk about the importance of having a growth mentality in business and life. This verse is all about a growth mentality.

It also speaks to a fear that is prevalent in the culture of our American society. The fear that time is passing, that we are aging. We are so focused on youth. Youth is often prized over wisdom or experience. The whole cosmetics industry is based on the idea of preventing anyone else from being able to count our days. No one should be able to tell how old you are. We are not even supposed to say how old someone is after they have reached something like the age of 25. We try to stay forever young. But our tradition tells us that youth is not everything. Living

brings knowledge. It allows us to learn more and more. We grow wiser over time. Age deserves respect because it is a sign of wisdom. Growing older is not easy, but the tradition says that it brings along wisdom and a greater perspective on life. Fear does not have to be our primary emotion when thinking about aging. We can look forward to becoming wiser and better versions of ourselves.

So, I have to say that I look at the pictures of my daughter differently now. I still find her incredibly cute. I am still excited about all she has to learn in the future. However, I understand that the past is gone. But that's okay. Though I can be sad that she will never be the same child again, I can know that she is growing into more. That she is hopefully becoming wiser about the world in which she lives. I can hope and pray that my wife and I will teach her to view her time as valuable, not to be wasted away in mere distractions. To count her days that she may obtain a heart of wisdom. In the process, I can also wonder if I am growing to be a little wiser too. And maybe an even a little better at being a parent.

L'shanah Tovah!