

## **GRIEF, LIFE AND THE CURIOUS NATURE OF TIME**

WHEN DEBORAH AND SUZANNE ASKED ME IF I'D BE WILLING TO SPEAK TO THE CONGREGATION FOR ROSH HASHANAH, MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS **NOT** POLITICALLY CORRECT. NOW, FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO KNOW ME WELL, THAT IS NOT TERRIBLY SURPRISING. A LARGE PART OF MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE IS DEDICATED TO BEING POLITICALLY INCORRECT, AT LEAST IN MANY PEOPLE'S EYES.

BUT IN THIS CASE, THE POLITICALLY INCORRECT THOUGHT I HAD WAS THIS: BOY, THOSE HIGH HOLIDAYS SPEECHES AT MY TEMPLE WHEN I WAS GROWING UP WERE AWFUL. GOSH – I HOPE I DON'T GIVE ONE LIKE THAT!

IF YOUR TEMPLE GROWING UP WAS ANYTHING LIKE MINE, ROSH HASHANAH WAS PART FASHION SHOW, PART SLUMBER PARTY (THE PART THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE WOMEN'S BATHROOM), PART JEWISH MUSIC, AND PART HEBREW CHANTS THAT NO ONE UNDERSTOOD BUT EVERYONE KNEW (THE LONGEST PART, IN MY OPINION.)

AND THE SERMONS – THE SERMONS WERE VERY OFTEN A FINGER-WAGGING LECTURE AT ALL THOSE MEMBERS (THE VAST MAJORITY, I'M SURE) WHO ONLY CAME TO TEMPLE ON THREE DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS IN THE FALL, AND THEN WERE NEVER SEEN AGAIN UNTIL THE NEXT YEAR.

THESE ARE JUST SOME OF THE REASONS THAT BETH CHAI HAS BEEN SUCH A REFRESHING AND MEANINGFUL ALTERNATIVE FOR ME.

ART'S INSIGHTFUL, CHALLENGING, HIGHLY ENGAGING SERMONS ARE A PARTICULAR HIGHLIGHT FOR ME. AS IS THE MUSIC. AND THE CHANCE TO HEAR FROM FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION WITH SPEECHES SUCH AS THIS.

SO I STRUGGLED TO COME UP WITH A TOPIC FOR TODAY'S COMMENTS... A TOPIC THAT WOULD BE MEANINGFUL AND INTERESTING AND RELEVANT – AND ABOUT WHICH I HAD SOMETHING UNIQUE TO SHARE. I ALSO WANTED A TOPIC THAT MADE SENSE AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, WHEN IT IS NATURAL TO THINK ABOUT BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS, TO THINK ABOUT THE CYCLE OF SEASONS AND OF LIFE...

AND THE TOPIC THAT CONNECTED ALL THOSE DOTS, FOR ME, WAS THE LOSS I HAVE SUFFERED THIS YEAR WITH THE DEATH OF MY WONDERFUL AND INCOMPARABLE HUSBAND.

I HOPE IT IS MANY YEARS FROM NOW BEFORE YOU WILL BE FORCED TO SUFFER SOMETHING AS SHOCKING AND PAINFUL, BUT I KNOW THAT EACH

OF US SUFFERS A LOSS OF THAT MAGNITUDE AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES.

AND I WISH THAT NONE OF US EVER HAD TO SUFFER THE *UNTIMELY* DEATH OF A LOVED ONE, SUCH AS A YOUNG SPOUSE OR SIBLING OR – EVEN WORSE – A CHILD.

BUT THAT GOT ME TO THINKING ABOUT TIME.

FOR STARTERS, IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A “TIMELY” DEATH? IS IT EVER TIME TO DIE?

I HAVE TALKED TO A LOT OF PEOPLE THIS YEAR WHO HAVE LOST LOVED ONES AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES, AND WE ALL SEEM TO AGREE THAT NO MATTER HOW “READY” WE MAY BE FOR SOMEONE TO DIE, WE ARE NEVER TRULY PREPARED.

YES, PEOPLE TRY TO COMFORT US, OR WE TRY TO COMFORT OURSELVES WITH WORDS OF “BEING OUT OF PAIN,” OR BEING IN A BETTER PLACE, OR BEING AT PEACE. BUT, AS MY SISTER SAID, “IS HE IN A BETTER PLACE? NO! A BETTER PLACE WOULD BE SITTING HERE IN THE KITCHEN, TALKING TO US.”

I DON'T KNOW IF THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A TIMELY DEATH, BUT I DO KNOW THAT TIME TAKES ON A CURIOUS AND COMPLETELY ERRATIC QUALITY WHEN A LOVED ONE IS DYING. **MOST DAYS**, YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE ON A RUNAWAY TRAIN, BARRELING DOWN THE TRACKS, COMPLETELY OUT OF CONTROL. OTHER TIMES, TIME ALMOST SEEMS TO STAND STILL, AND EVERYTHING SEEMS UNREAL. MAC WAS ONLY SICK FOR 8 OR 9 MONTHS, AND YET IN SOME WAYS IT SEEMED LIKE A LIFETIME OF DOCTORS VISITS AND EMERGENCY ROOM TRIPS AND INTENSIVE CARE UNITS.

WE HELD THE MEMORIAL SERVICE HERE ON MAY 2. HUNDREDS OF OUR FRIENDS, INCLUDING MANY OF YOU, WERE HERE TO PAY TRIBUTE TO MAC – AN INCREDIBLY LOVING, STRONG, SUPPORTIVE, INTELLIGENT AND INTERESTING MAN... AND TO HELP SUPPORT ME AND MY DAUGHTERS. THAT DAY WAS ALMOST EXACTLY A YEAR AFTER MANY OF THE VERY SAME PEOPLE HAD GATHERED HERE TO CELEBRATE TRINA'S BAT MITZVAH. THAT WAS A JOYOUS HIGH-POINT IN OUR FAMILY'S LIFE, AND WE HAD NO IDEA THAT MAC WAS SICK, OR THAT IN ONE SHORT YEAR HE'D BE GONE. I CAN TELL YOU THAT TIME LOOKS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LOOKING FORWARD AND LOOKING BACK.

MAC HAS BEEN GONE FOR ALMOST FIVE MONTHS. SOME DAYS THAT SOUNDS LIKE A VERY SHORT TIME, AND OTHER DAYS IT FEELS LIKE AN ETERNITY. WE WERE MARRIED FOR 17 YEARS AND I CANNOT TELL YOU WHETHER THAT IS A LONG TIME OR A SHORT TIME. I'M SURE THERE ARE MARRIAGES THAT HAVE LASTED HALF THAT TIME THAT SEEMED MUCH LONGER TO THE PEOPLE IN THEM.

DO NOT RUSH THROUGH YOUR DAYS. I BET EVERY ONE OF YOU HAS SAT IN A CLASSROOM (OR A BOARDROOM) AND WILLED THE CLOCK TO MOVE FASTER. AT THE TIME, IT DIDN'T SEEM TO WORK – BUT MAYBE IT DID. IN OUR BUSY, OVERSCHEDULED, WORK-CENTERED SOCIETY, IT'S VERY EASY TO WISH AWAY DAYS OF THE WEEK, OR WEEKS OF THE YEAR. WE LOOK FORWARD TO OUR NEXT VACATION, TO FRIDAY NIGHT, TO SPRING BREAK. BE CAREFUL NOT TO WISH AWAY TOO MANY OF YOUR DAYS.

BECAUSE THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS “SAVING TIME.” SURE, THERE ARE MORE EFFICIENT WAYS TO DO MANY THINGS, AND IT'S OFTEN FUN TO FIND THEM OR INVENT THEM – BUT DID YOU REALLY SAVE TIME? I MEAN, THE TIME PASSED, REGARDLESS OF WHAT YOU DID WITH IT. THERE IS NO WAY TO SAVE IT UP IN A BOTTLE AND USE IT LATER, WHEN YOU NEED IT.

I HAVE ONE PIECE OF BORING PRACTICAL ADVICE, CONSIDER THIS A COMMERCIAL BREAK IN TODAY'S PRESENTATION:

A VERY VALUABLE THING THAT MAC AND I DID WHEN HE GOT SICK WAS TO SIT DOWN WITH A NOTEBOOK AND WRITE DOWN ALL THE ACCOUNT NUMBERS AND PASSWORDS AND USER ID'S OF ALL THE BANK ACCOUNTS, EMAIL ACCOUNTS, ONLINE ACCOUNTS, CREDIT CARDS, INSURANCE POLICIES, IRAS, ETC. THAT WE HAD.

MAYBE SOME OF YOU ARE ORGANIZED ENOUGH TO ALREADY HAVE ALL THIS WRITTEN DOWN AND IN ONE PLACE. BUT I AM A PRETTY ORGANIZED PERSON AND I DID NOT, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT CAME TO MAC'S ACCOUNTS. I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY PEOPLE, MOST OF THEM WOMEN, I HAVE TALKED TO SINCE MAC DIED, WHO HAVE CONFESSED THAT THEY WOULD BE TOTALLY LOST WHEN IT CAME TO THIS KIND OF THING, IF THEIR HUSBAND WERE TO DIE AN UNTIMELY DEATH. TAKE THE TIME TO DO IT NOW.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS SPEECH, I LISTED A FEW THINGS THAT I LOVE ABOUT BETH CHAI – THE RABBI, THE MUSIC, THE PARTICIPATION. BUT ONE OF THE THINGS I **STRUGGLE WITH** ABOUT HUMANISTIC JUDAISM IS MY FEAR THAT HUMANISM MAKES US FEEL MORE IMPORTANT THAN WE REALLY ARE. WE BECOME THE HEROS, THE SUPREME BEINGS, THE LAST GREAT HOPE, THE SALVATION OF THE

WORLD. SUDDENLY, MERE MORTALS TAKE ON MYTHIC PROPORTION – WHICH SEEMS TRULY IRONIC FOR ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS.

BUT I SUPPOSE THAT HUMANISM SPEAKS TO ME BY CONNECTING WITH MY INTENSE VALUE OF LIFE AND LIVING. IF EACH HOUR IS PRECIOUS, AND EACH DAY MUST NOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED, THEN PERHAPS OUR TIME HERE REALLY DOES MATTER, AND PERHAPS WE NEED TO TAKE MORE SERIOUSLY OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO THE WORLD, TO OUR ANCESTORS AND OUR DESCENDENTS, AND TO THE PEOPLE IN IT TODAY.

WHICH BRINGS ME BACK TO THIS CONGREGATION. OF ALL THE THINGS I VALUE ABOUT BETH CHAI, I SAVED THE BEST FOR LAST: AND THAT IS THE INCREDIBLY SUPPORTIVE AND LOVING COMMUNITY OF BETH CHAI. THAT HAS BEEN MORE VALUABLE AND HELPFUL TO ME THIS YEAR THAN I CAN POSSIBLY EXPRESS, AND I'D LIKE TO THANK ALL OF YOU FOR THAT, ON BEHALF OF ME AND MY 3 DAUGHTERS.

I'D ALSO LIKE TO THANK MY DAUGHTER TRINA, FOR EDITING THIS SPEECH AND TAKING OUT MUCH OF THE CLUMSINESS (WHATEVER WAS LEFT IS DUE TO MY STUBBORNESS) – BUT ALSO FOR REMINDING ME THAT SOME OF YOU SITTING HERE TODAY HAVE ALSO SUFFERED A PAINFUL LOSS THIS YEAR. WE ARE CERTAINLY NOT THE ONLY FAMILY GRIEVING.

OUR HEARTS GO OUT TO YOU AS YOU STRUGGLE TO LET TIME HEAL  
YOUR WOUND.

IN CLOSING, I'D LIKE TO SHARE WHAT SOME OTHER PEOPLE, SMARTER  
AND MORE ARTICULATE THAN I, HAD TO SAY ABOUT TIME. I'VE CHOSEN  
QUOTES THAT I FOUND THOUGHT-PROVOKING – I HOPE YOU ENJOY THEM,  
TOO....