

The first night of Rosh Hashanah, 5759/1998

--Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

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The early Hasidic masters, in Eastern Europe almost two centuries ago, used to go to any means possible to bring the wisdom of the Torah and of Judaism to the people in their communities -- and there was no tool that was considered off limits for doing so. The hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav took the popular Eastern European folk tales of his day and transformed them into texts for conveying Jewish wisdom. Other masters borrowed freely from whatever songs, whatever music was popular among the people -- they would get the people to sing these songs together, songs they already knew, and THEN the Hasidic masters would use these songs as vehicles for teaching the greatest ideas in Judaism.

If these early Hasidic masters were alive now, I have a feeling I know which piece of popular music they would choose today to teach about Rosh haShanah. It's a song from the Broadway musical called RENT. I'm sure many of us here, if not most of us, are familiar with the song. So feel free to join in.

"525,600 minutes 525,000 moments so dear  
525,600 minutes  
How do you measure, measure a year  
In daylights - in sunsets in midnights -  
in cups of coffee in inches -  
in miles in laughter -  
in strife  
525,600 minutes How do you measure a year in the life"

And now I imagine the kinds of Jewish insights that the early Hasidic masters would cull from this song.

First, they would say, the song reflects an ambivalence that we have about the passage of time. We don't usually think about how many minutes make up a year. Just the mere mention of the number makes us pause in reflection and introspection. At first, it sounds like a lot -- almost an infinite supply. But then we remember how quickly each of these minutes passes. And we look back on the year we have just completed and we say, "So I've been given my allotment of some 525,000 minutes this past year. It seemed to go so fast. Have I used them wisely?"

And second, the Hasidic masters would comment on how the song lists various criteria by which we each take an accounting of our year. The IRS encourages to take an accounting of how much money we have made. If we're in school, we're supposed to keep track of how much we have learned. Our doctors may be concerned with how much weight we've gained or lost.

There are so many different ways to keep track of what has happened over the past year - so many ways to account for each of these minutes. So many ways to measure a year. But so few of them are particularly noteworthy or ultimately consequential.

And so - like the song - Judaism tells us that there is only one real way in which we measure the year that has just passed. "How about love? Measure in love." - how have we each affected the quotient of love in the world? How much love have we demonstrated for our families and friends? How willing were we to perform acts of hesed, acts of lovingkindness, for other people? Because long after all the other achievements have faded away, the love will endure.

Two years ago, I spent the year teaching Talmud at a Jewish high school in New York. And there were 6 important words that I would hear from my students just about every day - they are probably the six most commonly heard words in any high school. They are as follows: "Will this be on the final?"

Teachers tend not to be too fond of this question. But certainly, my students had no aversion to learning something extra. However, they trusted the process of evaluation that I was going to conduct for the class-- They trusted that the "final exam" - was going to cover the most important aspects from the course. So they would ask, repeatedly, "will this be on the final," so they could structure their study time most efficiently.

Well, one of my colleagues, Rabbi Andy Sacks of Jerusalem, reminds me that it's possible to ask that same question about life itself -- and it's one of the primary questions we ask ourselves during the High Holidays. According to Jewish tradition, what's going to be on the final?

There are a number of traditional Jewish sources which speculate about what questions each person is called upon to answer after death. Now it's important to note that Judaism has a very non-dogmatic perspective on the specifics of what happens after we die. All of these opinions that I am going to present are, from a literal point of view, pure speculation. But from a poetic perspective, each of these quotes is saturated with wisdom. Each of these quotations is nothing less than an assertion of what is the most important way to measure one's life. It is nothing less than a guideline about which of one's life achievements are enduring and which are ephemeral - which are irrelevant and which are ultimately meaningful.

I would like to share with you four of these sources this evening.

First - a statement from the Talmud:

Raba said, When a person is led in for Judgment, he or she is asked a few questions:

#1: Were you honest in your business dealings?

#2: Did you establish fixed times for study, for growing in wisdom each day?

#3: Did you live a life of optimism, expecting and hoping that the world could be improved, even perfected?

Second, a statement from the Midrash:

In the world to come, each person will be asked: How did you occupy your time?

If the person says, "I fed the hungry," then the angels say to him: This is the gate of Adonai; those who feed the hungry may enter.

If the person says, "I clothed the naked," then the angels say to him, "This is the gate of Adonai, those who clothe the naked may enter.

And similarly with those who raise orphans, and those who give charity, and those who engage in deeds of lovingkindness.

Third: The story is told of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great rabbinic leader of Germany in the 19th century, that towards the end of his life, when he was in frail health, he decided to go on vacation in the Swiss Alps.

This seemed like a somewhat strange and impulsive thing for such an eminent rabbi to do. So his students asked him - why are you making this trip? His response: I have this feeling that after I die, and I am called in before God, I'm sure one of the questions that God will ask me is: So nu, Shimshon - you lived so close to my Alps - did you ever get a chance to see them?

And finally, the story is told of the Hasidic master, R. Zusya of Hanipol, who told his disciples: When I die and am brought in for judgment, I will not be asked, "Why were you not Abraham" or "Why were you not Moses." I will be asked, "Why were you not Zusya?"

So in Judaism - how DO we take an appropriate accounting of the 525,600 minutes of every year? By acting such that we give the best possible answers to these questions, every day of our lives.

Have we planned time into every day to keep learning, to keep growing? Have we fed the hungry, visited the sick, attended to the dead? Have we taken time to appreciate and love the world? And have we taken time to love ourselves, to continually learn how best to be ourselves?

I hope so.

But if not, we each have another chance, starting tonight.

May your next 525,600 minutes be full of happiness and health laughter and friendship satisfaction and fulfillment contentment and peace.

Shanah Tovah!!

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