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Yom Kippur Sermon
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Your Presence Is My Present

For many years now, my brother Todd calls me once a week, always from his car, either driving to work early in the morning or driving home from work in the evening. A few weeks ago, my phone rang at 10am and I saw the name of the person calling— Todd. My visceral reaction to Todd’s name on my phone at 10am was fear: Something must be wrong. I quickly answered and heard my brother’s voice. He said, “everything is okay, I’m fine.” With relief, all I could say was “good.” Todd then went on to say, “I certainly had an interesting morning. I went for an early morning bike ride. It was a little wet out. My tires were kind of old. And I fell. But I’m fine. Although I am still sitting off to the side of the road because I think I pulled my hamstring. And by the way, I have to admit—I was on my phone when I fell.....”

The National Safety Council reports that cell phone use while driving leads to 1.6 million crashes each year. 1 out of every 4 car accidents in the United States is caused by texting and driving. Nearly 330,000 injuries occur each year from accidents caused by texting while driving. Even though there is loads of evidence that doing more than one thing at once is suboptimal, and sometimes dangerous, we can’t help ourselves. At a company I used to work for, texting during meetings was so rampant, we had a whole company-wide initiative aimed at getting people focused on the task and the person at hand. We called this initiative: “Be Here Now.” And we know this doesn’t just happen while we are on the road or at work. It happens at home too. How difficult, and rare, is it to have everyone home for dinner, at the same time, and to have no one check their phone once during dinner?

We seem to always be busy, even for the things that matter most. A friend of mine, Brent, just dropped off his oldest child, Rylan, at college for the first time. A father and son could not be closer than Brent and Rylan. Right after dropping off Rylan, Brent

called me and said the words of Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle" were ringing in his ears:

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon
When you coming home, dad?
I don't know when
But we'll get together then
You know we'll have a good time then

Well, he came from college just the other day
So much like a man I just had to say
Son, I'm proud of you
Can you sit for a while?
He shook his head, and he said with a smile
What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys
See you later
Can I have them please?

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon
When you coming home, son?
I don't know when
But we'll get together then
You know we'll have a good time then

We are always doing so many things, we are always busy, and we often say, "You know we'll have a good time.... then."

What does this have to do with Yom Kippur? Everything. The essence of Yom Kippur is “Be Here Now.” The essence of Yom Kippur is “presence.” Everything about Yom Kippur is getting us to be present, once a year, for about 26 hours. We strip away everything possible that could be distracting us—no eating, drinking, bathing, driving, cooking, watching TV—even no using our phones!

What are we present for? Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, tells us. On the surface, one might say that Leviticus is the least relevant book in Torah, a record of archaic, barbaric traditions—killing of animals, blood, and sacrifice in a place that was destroyed 2,000 years ago.

Rambam, Moses Maimonides, taught that these animal sacrifices were very relevant then—they were a concession, a way of getting people away from human sacrifice. This explanation makes perfect sociological sense but it leaves us, or at least me, asking a big theological question—how can Vayikra, Leviticus, speak to us today?

I think there is a completely different way of looking at Leviticus that is very relevant today, perhaps supremely relevant. Leviticus is at the center, literally of Torah, the middle of 5 books. On the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, we read from—of all of the books of Torah—Leviticus—the “central” book. And we read from almost the “center” of Leviticus, Chapter 16, about the Cohen Kadosh, the Great Priest, going into the Holy of Holies, the center of the temple at the center of Jerusalem, which is according to our tradition the center of the world.

Leviticus 16 is very specific, sensual, hands-on. We learn about Aaron, the first Cohen Gadol, the first great priest, and what he did on this holiest day of the year, almost in slow motion—how he washed and dressed, so carefully, and then in great detail, how he slaughtered 2 bulls and a goat and let another goat free....We hear about incense, glowing coals, fire, smoke, screens—and blood, lots of blood.

I reject that our tradition tells us all of this, at the center of center of centers, so we can be revolted and disgusted, or bored by reading about ancient practices that have nothing to do with us today. I listen here not to the voice of Rambam, Maimonides, but to the voice of Ramban, Nahmanides, who vehemently disagrees with Rambam. Ramban tells us that animal sacrifice is not about escaping human sacrifice, nor is it about feeding food to a hungry God. Instead, Ramban tells us, the “pleasant smell” that God encounters in the holy of holies is not the smell of burning flesh, but the greatest of happiness from seeing Aaron, the Cohen Gadol, and all of the people—present. God is happiest when God has our fullest attention. While I certainly find animal sacrifice abhorrent and irrelevant, I can’t imagine anything more relevant than—presence.

Mary Douglas was one of the great 20th century Anthropologists. She calls Leviticus a book about “gifts to the palpable presence....” My brother almost lost his life because he wasn’t present. My friend Brent, and Harry Chapin, are sad either because they weren’t present enough for their sons, or because they are afraid their son’s won’t be present for them. Woody Allen tells us that showing up, being present, is 80 percent of life. With great focus, Yom Kippur reminds us that Woody Allen was wrong. Being present is not 80% of life. Being present is life.

I remember with great respect and love, my Grandpa Jack who gave me the gift, so many times, of his complete and undivided attention. Grandpa Jack always brought me and my brother Todd a present when he saw us. And when he gave us these gifts, he would declare with solemnity and love, what our gift was, in return to him—“Your presence is my present.”

On Yom Kippur, our tradition gives us a gift and we give God the gift of our presence. On this day, may we ask the supremely important, everlasting questions inspired by the center of our tradition—In the coming year, what and who will I be fully present for? And for whom can we say, with love, your presence is my present.