

Rosh Hashanah 5770
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A Jewish “10-10-10”

Have you ever driven a familiar route and arrived at your destination and had absolutely no recollection of how you got there? It happens frequently. On the other hand, and I thought about this on one of our family’s lengthy drives this summer, if you were called on to think about everything that you had to do to drive a car from one place to another – heck, if you had to think about every single muscle-twitch and activated nerve ending that had to fire just so to walk from here to there, you would likely freeze right in place. We are not designed to absorb our lives in such sharp detail moment to moment. You know the worst thing to do when you are standing over a golf ball is to think about all the things you need to do to hit it straight. But sometimes, if we are fortunate, time seems to slow just enough that we catch a glimpse into the inner workings of that clock, to see a moment in its component parts, and even to consider the blessings hidden within it.

How we make the most of our individual and necessarily compact journeys is the motivating question behind any religion worth its salt, though some throw more salt into the brisket than others do. It is also the top question that almost every self-help book seeks to answer, with titles like Getting Things Done! The Power of Now! and Excuses Be Gone! One such book caught my eye this year. It is written by Suzie Welch and it’s called 10-10-10, which as you may know is a kind of formula for how to face decision making in our lives. It teaches its proponents to think about how a particular choice they are confronted with will affect them 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now, and 10 years from now. She writes about many who have been helped by weighing the relative importance of the options they consider, and if it helps people to prioritize and think about more than just the immediate future then that is great.

And I think it is a fine book. I have no complaints about her system of decision making, and it seems to have helped a number of people. It has helped Antoine, whose story she tells. Antoine decided to change the way that the welfare office of the city of Philadelphia treats those who come in to apply for aid. He knew, because he worked there himself, that at a time when people were at their lowest they were often treated by those staffing that bureaucracy as something lower still. And he decided that he would change that by going to his supervisors with a plan to increase the humanity of the office, by recognizing the humanity of the applicants, by implementing protocols that would treat them more sensitively, more individually, and with greater patience and compassion. This, he knew, would take a lot of work, and a lot of time, and it wouldn’t be easy.

I guess he had heard Suzy Welch talk about 10-10-10 because in deciding whether he wanted to take this on, he started applying its principles. In ten minutes, he knew, there would be “hell to pay” – I hope I can say that in a family service. His co-workers would hate him or laugh at him or both, and he would be seen as someone rocking the boat, looking self-righteous, and implying criticism of his colleagues’ attitudes. But in 10 months – actually, he knew that in ten months they would still not care for him and his

ideas very much. But he also knew that if he didn't speak up now, in ten months he wasn't sure he would be able to live with his own decision to keep quiet. And in ten years, if we was successful or even if he wasn't, he knew that taking all the heat they could throw at him would have been worth it.

So he did it. He brought his plan to his supervisors, who had apparently not read the book 10-10-10. Sensing trouble, they immediately transferred Antoine to another office.

Suzy Welch writes of many other people who she says were helped by thinking about their decisions using 10-10-10 as a guide. I appreciate that she's not fanatical about it – she knows at the end of the day it's not a math problem, it's your life. She knows that some decisions have to be made impulsively and sometimes those will turn out well. And she knows that the time frame that she suggests for these decisions means very little unless the decision-maker considers very carefully what they want their life to be about, what their most deeply held values are. In her words, 10-10-10 “gives us decisions we can trust...as long as we affirm the values that we hope to live by.”

While I have no problem with 10 minutes, 10 months, 10 years, and I certainly have no issue with the suggestion that we make good long-term decisions in a way that helps us to build lives of meaning and value, I think there is a different formula for what I would call Jewish deliberation on decision making. I could also call it 10-10-10, but these 10's stand for different periods of time.

The first 10 is 10 seconds. In ten seconds I can say words that hurt or that comfort, that connect in genuine warmth or shut out with harsh coldness. I can greet you, as our tradition teaches, b'sever panim yafot, with a cheerful smile, or I can walk right on by with barely a nod. I can make a first impression, and you know that we only get one chance to do that. In ten seconds we can build up and we can tear down. We can offer a compliment as we recognize the good in anyone we come across, or we can string together some choice words that can ruin a day, or even ruin a relationship. We can say a blessing that partners us with God, we can say Sh'ma Yisrael, we can take a deep breath and give thanks for our gift of life and of that very breath. All that in ten seconds.

The second ten is not ten minutes or even ten months, it is ten years. You may have come across Malcolm Gladwell's book Outliers: The Story of Success that explains that successful people are not always those who are naturally the smartest, that luck and circumstances and the old adage of being in the right place at the right time, including the place of one's birth, all have a major effect on the odds of becoming a so-called “big deal”. But mostly what creates great expertise, especially when coupled with the right circumstances, is hours and hours and hours of repetition, practice, and study. It takes, according to Gladwell and other researchers, about 10,000 hours to become truly expert at anything.

What is ten thousand hours? Well, it's an hour a day for um, 27 years, but most people don't develop expertise like that. It is two hours a day for 13 years, or, in the way that some people who become truly good at something quantify it, it is about ten years of

diligent practice. If you like the news anchor Anderson Cooper, and I do, in discussing the Gladwell book he reflected on it and realized that yes, it was about 10 years until he actually felt comfortable being a television broadcaster – now he looks like he was born doing that.

I think Jewish tradition bears this out, and not because it takes ten years to learn to hit a consistent draw or to sketch a bowl of fruit or feel comfortable behind the camera. It is ten years from the time many of our kids start school until they mark their Jewish growth and their first individual Jewish commitments at the onset of their teenage years at their *bnai mitzvah*. It is ten years from that time until they are more or less done with school and are called on to make their own personal Jewish commitments as they face independence for the first time. When some of the older folks around the synagogue would ask me how long I've been married, it was only after our tenth anniversary that they would respond with an approving nod instead of an "oh that's cute." Because in ten years we grow and we change. If we're not paying close attention, in ten years we can wake up next to a loved one who has become someone we don't recognize because we failed to pay attention to the person they were becoming, because we failed to fully value their capacity and their right to change.

At some point during these holidays you'll probably walk the halls or at least head out the doors for a brief respite. You'll see the montages of pictures that were such a good record of happy congregational celebrations that we stopped making them. Funny how that works. Most of them are more than five years old, and some go back almost ten years. You may find yourself or someone you know in one of those pictures. I'm in some of them and I barely recognize myself in the old ones. Not just because of the glasses I no longer wear, or the lack of any gray hair in those snapshots. But because the last ten years have been momentous years of growth, blessing and challenge for me as a husband, a father, and a rabbi. It was ten years ago that I became a part of this *B'nai Torah* family and as always I take these moments to share my gratitude for your commitments to insuring the spiritual and physical health of this place that means so much to so many.

What's the last ten – beyond ten seconds and beyond ten years, that we're called on to keep in mind when we are faced with the important choices we each make in our lives, when we face options that will reinforce or weaken the ties of covenant, peoplehood, and shared history that still bind us? To my thinking that last ten is nothing less than ten centuries. According to traditional calculations of Jewish history it was about a thousand years from Abraham to King David. It was about a thousand years from King David to the beginning of the discussions that would produce the Talmud, a thousand years from those conversations to the height of the Babylonian Judaism that would look very familiar to us, including the establishment of the basic outline of the prayer books that we still use. And it has been a thousand years from that era to us.

In each of those extended periods, individual Jews, not so very different than you and I, decided that this enterprise was a valuable one, worth not only continuing but contributing their own voices as well. Because of their dedication, we are here. And

because of ours, if we so choose, a thousand years from now our story will be part of this miraculous narrative of what a people is capable of if ancient values are translated into the most modern of places.

The year just ended is unlikely to be remembered kindly if it is measured by all the problems and challenges that are being acted out on the world stage. Some of those challenges have invaded our own living rooms, and they have weighed on our resilience and on our conscience. But mostly, our lives are not lived out on the world stage, nor do they need to be.

We live our lives 10 seconds at a time, and in that time frame we can be mindful of each other, and of ourselves, as we each try to increase the amount of goodness in the world.

We consider our lives 10 years at a time, thinking about hoped-for milestones to come, thinking even about the person that we want to be, and what kinds of commitments we can make that will help make those moments, and will help make that person, a reality.

To keep our perspective, to affirm our most deeply held values, to get through a rough patch in our lives or to more fully celebrate our peak experiences, we place ourselves humbly and gratefully on a chain of tradition that has been stretched and tested but never broken. If we see ourselves as descendants of those who lived generations ago, and as ancestors of those who will live generations from now, some of the choices on the long list of decisions we'll be asked to make in the coming year can be seen in a new light. Our path might be lit just a bit brighter. Out of those considered choices will grow lives worthy of blessing. May those blessings be as numerous as the stars in the eternal sky and the sand of the ever-flowing sea, for us, for all Israel, and for the world.

Shanah tovah.