

Yom Kippur 5770
Rabbi David Englander

Back to the Beach

I knew it was going to happen. I just didn't know exactly when. But I knew that when it did happen it would be momentous, it would be great, and it would be life-changing. Yes, I knew that one day over course of the year that just ended, in all likelihood I was going to change my last diaper....Of course, the funny thing about changing your last diaper is that you don't know it happened until after the fact. Sometimes a last event is in our control – if you headed to the dealership to trade your clunker for cash then you knew that would be the last trip you would take in your gas guzzler. But for the most significant things in our lives, we rarely know what the last anything is. Some lasts we look forward to, and other lasts we seek to avoid. Our tradition offers some insight into the powerful idea of lasts, and the Jewish world embraced one of those this past year.

On the surface this event was not a “last”. Yes, it was infrequent, yes it was a bit odd, and yes it garnered more attention than perhaps it really deserved. It took place at sunrise on Wednesday, April 8th, the morning of the day of the first seder, because, I mean, who among us doesn't like to be at the beach first thing in the morning on the day of the first seder? It was an atypically cold morning here in our tropical paradise – I had to wear my warmest jacket, a golf pullover about as thick as your fingernail. A few hundred of us gathered on Delray Beach, with other segments of the Jewish community dotting or filling parking lots, parks, observation decks, coastlines, and even hot air balloons, all to recite a bracha, a blessing, that is said only very rarely. The blessing celebrates a spiritual anniversary, and each time it comes around it sparks some interest, and this time was no exception. What was it?

To review: you'll recall that according to the account in Genesis, God created the sun on the fourth day – to interpreters when God does something on the fourth day it means God does that at the first instant of the fourth day. As you also know from your experience in fourth grade astronomy or from watching Jeopardy, a solar year is just over 365 days – closer to 365 and a quarter days. So if the sun first shined first thing in the morning on the fourth day then the following year the anniversary of that moment took place a quarter of a day later, the following year, half a day later, and so on. So the only time that the anniversary of the sun being in the sky at the same moment of the same day on which it was first created is – there is a calculator under your seat if you need it – once every twenty eight years.

For many who attended and participated in what turned out to be a very beautiful and moving ceremony birkat hachama was a first, as in “I've never heard of this before, but I'll go and check it out.” Can I admit to you that I was in that category? We didn't cover this in school. It is not in the rabbi's manual. Me and the rabbi at the synagogue we partnered with didn't know what to expect, but to give you a sense of our projections he suggested we make 50 copies of the service. I was optimistic. I suggested we bump it up to 75. In the end well over 300 people came.

In the six months leading up to it there was a flurry of activity, materials, suggested readings, and detailed – if not always cogent – explanations of the mathematics that go into calculating this spiritual equinox. And worldwide, tens of thousands of Jews of all walks of life, levels of observance, backgrounds and interests gathered, many of them at sunrise, to bless oseh ma'aseh b'reishit, the One Who created it all. The best phrase I can come up with to describe the interest is that it touched a nerve.

Why? Most of us don't do esoteric, and even the occasional promised mystical experience can often fall short of expectations. Most of us don't head for the beach at the crack of dawn, and if we do it is for a walk and not a service. And when you get right down to it, we celebrate birkat hachama on the wrong date – the astronomical equinox was on March 20th, but the rabbis made their calculations at a time when that was pretty much the best they could do. So it was early in the morning, it was Florida cold, it was unfamiliar, it was the day of the first seder, and according to modern science it was wrong. So what was so compelling?

I want to suggest that whether you were there at the beach or somewhere else saying that blessing on that morning, or even if you weren't, birkat hachama touched a nerve in part because it was so unfamiliar and esoteric. It was mystical. Sunrise at the beach, even if you understand the science, even if you know the exact moment the sun will peak above the horizon, even if you know all about angles of refraction and equinoxes and orbits and rotations and revolutions, when those first rays of light appear you are renewed. It is a miracle that represents the renewal that is at the heart of all miracles. What miracle can you think of that doesn't somehow lead its beneficiaries to a newer and potentially better reality? I would turn that around and say that everything that leads us to a newer and potentially better reality is in its own way miraculous. Not just the Red Sea and Mount Sinai and Israel, but the continual availability of energy and possibility and hopefulness. What better symbol of renewal is there than the sun rising over the horizon. And if only for that, this odd ceremony drew crowds the world over.

But it wasn't only the lure of nature and the mystical qualities of a sunrise. It wasn't only because this was a “first” time most people had heard of this let alone attended or considered attending. The power of these moments was not just in the firsts, it was also in the lasts.

On a personal level, my daughter Yaffa came with me - we decided it would be best to leave the two younger ones at home. She was 7 years old at the time – she's now 8, and I'll get in big trouble if I don't point that out. And only standing there on the beach, partly as participant and partly as co-leader of the service there, did I realize that I was not standing on the sand so much as I was present in a moment of time representative of something much more powerful than I had been prepared for. This was my first birkat hachama, but it was the last birkat hachama at which she would be a child, that I would be the parent of a young child. We know this intellectually, of course – every parent knows their children will not be little forever. But that far-off prospect that usually takes a generation to unfold was happening in the instant of that morning's sunrise. Usually we

realize how fast it all goes in retrospect. There I knew it in my bones – because at the next birkat hachama, if all goes well, we’ll be standing together again – but she’ll be the age I was that day in April, and I’ll be age of my father, and that kind of concentrated time is both challenging to absorb and beautiful to experience.

You may have already figured out that there was an even more spiritually and emotionally charged part of that morning. While I stood with my daughter and expected, with God’s blessings, to be able to do that again, grandparents stood with grandchildren and knew it was the last time. We rarely know the last time we will experience something, but this time we did. How we face that inescapable fact of utter temporariness that is so present in a once-in-a-generation happening is what motivates so much of what is meaningful in our lives. If we lived for eternity, to paraphrase my teacher Rabbi David Wolpe, we could always go on a diet starting tomorrow. Or we could strive to become a better person a hundred years from now, there is no rush. In fact the very word rush wouldn’t exist if our timeframe was eternity. It is our finite stay in these frail bodies of ours that deep down propels us forward, in at least a metaphorical rush, for as *pirkei avot* teaches, the day is short and the task is great.

People deal with this foundational fact of existence in different ways. Many, and many here, devote themselves to constructing their lives like Abraham Joshua Heschel prescribed, as a work of art to which we add brush strokes each day. Many in this room also suffer from a particular pre-existing condition, and I do too. That affliction is that we are human, and because we are human our time is sometimes simply passed instead of effectively spent, it is only marked instead of being carefully invested. We can be forgiven for such sins, I think and hope, because the same God who put each of us on the clock also planted within us the ability to recognize the challenge this presents us with. And so he gave us the capacity to go about our business day to day while hoping we would also put up our antennae to tune into the grander majesty that is unfolding around us at every moment. At no place or moment were those antennae more in tune than watching the sunrise on that morning in April.

If you happened to be with us here on Rosh Hashanah, you heard my suggestions for what I called a Jewish 10-10-10 perspective on time. If you weren’t, it will be posted on the B’nai Torah website in the near future. As the holiday unfolded the first three bits of feedback people shared with me were these: one person thought the idea that living within the 10 second framework to keep a closer watch on our words and our actions was very helpful. A second said that they had been married 10 years and wanted to explore the impact of that time frame further. And a third said that hearing the longer-term perspective of generations upon generations suggested by the developments of our tradition that are ten centuries long reminded him that not everything that calls for our attention today is important enough to expend the time and energy on it that we do.

Yet, some matters that call for our attention today are inescapable. They are weighty and they are by any responsible standard important. Our meeting our obligations to ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our community, our patients, clients, partners, employees, customers, shareholders, and our members helps to define us. We seek to

meet those responsibilities in a time where uncertainty is more the norm than predictability. While its not the first time in history, or even American history, that this is true, it is the first time for many of us in our lifetimes that we feel that maybe, just maybe, that working hard – or being willing to work hard – and to live within our means and to save what we can and to give meaningfully may not lead to the outcome of the kinds of security we had previously hoped they would. More than one person commented to me after Rosh Hashanah that they felt more people were wearing last year's clothes, there were less of the – can we say it – ostentatious displays of couture and high fashion that the holidays sometimes bring out in our community.

Maybe we are turning inward, toward the values that make us who we are and away from the things that come and break and go. Maybe this turning is temporary, or maybe it is part of a reconsideration of values and priorities. I'm not a prognosticator of global or national trends. I don't know about monetary policy or inflation or deflation or the effect of trade imbalances, tariffs, embargoes, or how to fix health care. I don't even know whether Israel should bomb Iranian nuclear sites or wait for diplomacy to run its course, which puts me in the minority I'm sure. I only know that living for today without concern for what might be tomorrow is generally speaking a very bad idea. I know that even a fierce defense of individualism must be balanced by the both Jewish and American idea that "we are all responsible for each other". And I know that Israel has the right to live in both security and in peace, and that neither can truly exist without the other.

I want to end by telling you something else I know.

I know that in this room right now are 900 souls that both give and need nourishment. No two of these souls are the same but each is priceless and irreplaceable. It is only in recognizing one of the earliest teachings of the Torah, that the first person and every person since was created in the image of God, that we can identify most fully with our own self-worth, the equal worth of everyone else here, and everyone we meet as we go about our lives. It is through connection to a community that defines its success by how well it transmits a tradition that has seen a people through times better and worse than we face today that we find this nourishment, whether we refuel a few times a year or every week or every day.

Connecting once every twenty-eight years will not charge anyone's batteries, that is for sure. But that once-in-a-generation happening did strike a deep chord, not so different from the notes that are sounded on this very day. This message is felt on a beach at sunrise and facing God and ourselves in gathered community. We are renters and not owners, we are stewards and not landlords, we are subjects and not sovereigns. Yet we are of infinite worth, each and every one of us. We are receivers and also givers not only of nourishment but also of great blessing, never more so than when we identify and then live our most deeply held values. We are so blessed to not have to discover values of eternal worth all by ourselves. For that we have the Torah, we have the collected wisdom of our tradition, we have our memories of those who came before us, and our hopes for

those who will follow. May it be a year of longed for and happy firsts, and a year where any lasts we encounter are met with adequate courage, patience, and strength.

G'mar chatimah tovah.