

“After The Hurricane”

Part One

“What Have You Been Up To?”

A Sermon for the Eve of the New Year 5766

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Once again – L’shanah Tova Tikatevu!

My dear friends and gentle hearts,

“It was a dark and stormy night.” No, I’m not referring to August 29th, though I will speak of it throughout our Holy Days. Nothing feels quite the same after the hurricane, does it? But again, “It was a dark and stormy night.” That line opens an 1830 novel by Paul Clifford, a now-forgotten author. Perhaps you remember that the *Peanuts* cartoon beagle, Snoopy, perched on the roof of his doghouse, always used to “borrow” those very words for the opening line of his great American novel. Did you know that there is an annual contest to see who can write the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels? In 2003, Marion Simms won with this entry:

They had but one last remaining night together, so they embraced each other as tightly as that two-flavor entwined string cheese that is orange and yellowish white, the orange probably being a blend cheddar, and the white probably mozzarella, though it could possibly be provolone.

I think that Miss Simms deserved her prize, don’t you? Well, here’s the point: how we start matters, whether when creating a novel or any piece of art, and especially this brand new year. Who could have imagined my being here in this pulpit for Rosh HaShanah Eve?

- Many of you wonderful members of B’nai Israel wouldn’t have believed you’d be crowded by all of us evacuees.
- There are a whole lot of New Orleanians here who still can’t figure out where they are when they wake up in the morning!
- Oh yeah, “it was a dark and stormy night” all right, and then the levies broke and the world went haywire for so many.

Right before my home and my life went berserk, I felt eerily secure, having come along nicely in the preparation of my High Holy Days Sermons. Like everything else in our lives, those have been recast, but not completely.

Fortunately, from late spring throughout the summer, I busied myself reading, researching, and writing. But something felt different this year – perhaps a mere premonition, but above all else, I wanted to address you – speaking personally with a depth never before reached.

I want to draw you – each one of you, one by one – into an intimate conversation. I wish I knew all of you equally well. But, having been through something traumatic and dramatic, we the rescued and the rescuers, we cannot help but draw our hearts closely together.

1. With the hurricane behind us, let's strip away the superficiality, the triviality, and the fantasy of invulnerability that once suffused our society.
2. Let's stop performing and try to understand our real feelings here – our pains and our fears; our doubts and our struggles; our regrets and our failures; our dreams and our successes; and both our tears and our joys.
3. Joan Rivers would say, "Can we talk?" Can we talk about our essence, not at the surface, but at our very core? If we don't this year, when will we?
4. So, I aim these conversations at our emptiness, our hunger for meaning, and at our confusion.

So tell me, after the hurricane, what have you been up to? What sense do you make of time? It's still an important question to pose on this night when we all turn a year older on the Jewish calendar.

What year were you born? Start there. Now, what was the Jewish year when you were born? I was born on September 24, 1948 on the 20th of Elul, 5708. Tonight, we have just welcomed the year 5766. So, "what have I done with those years?" How well do you even understand them? St. Augustine – by no means a fool – readily admitted.

I know what time is, so long as nobody asks me.
Because if anyone asks me, I don't know what
to tell them.

Charles Lamb puts it so well, noting that:

Nobody sees the passing of the old year and the
beginning of the new year with a sense of
indifference.

Do you feel indifferent? I don't. Indeed, we don't if we stay in touch.

Okay, so let me ask for your opinion: is time our friend? In some sense, of course, I suppose it is. How would we live without the notion of time – the arrival of birthdays, anniversaries, celebrations, and seasons?

The poet Phillip Larkin asks:

What are days for? Days are where we live. They
come; they wake us time and time over.

We live and find our meaning in time.

Meaning: that's another reason why time is our friend. Because time heals, don't you think? It blurs and softens our wounds and pain. Says the great Nathaniel Hawthorne:

The greatest of all mortal consolations is that this too, shall pass.

After the hurricane, many of us count on that!

Yes, we like time when it reminds us that everything fades and passes. That includes the daffodils of spring and the gold and crimson leaves of fall. It all passes, and as it does, it gives life poignancy and purposeful depth. Everything we own is stuff that can be ours today and gone tomorrow. We know that now!

Time prepares me and I suppose it prepares you, too. I, for one, spend a lot of time in nursing homes. And I've concluded that endless time – more and more years – is not always a gift of heavenly grace.

In his new book, Bill Moyers notes:

...it is currently estimated that of all the human beings who have ever lived, half are currently alive. And with the baby boomers turning 50 years old, by 2010 there will be as many seniors as there are people under the age of 20.

Henri Amiel once observed:

To know how to grow old is the masterwork of life and the most difficult chapter in the great art of living.

Time comes between us and our end, but when we are young, we feel immortal. I've watched young fellows in their 20s turn and strut in the gym with their flat stomachs and their steroid-inflated muscles. But, you know what else I've noticed? When the light shines just right, you can see the beginning of a bald spot. I never have the heart to tell them. These days, young couples who were well on their way to the hard-earned success for which they dreamt, experience a bitter, bitter pill. We lose it so fast. Like the bread in the morning, life must be made again and again.

You know, at 35 and 40, we say, "I've hardly begun." At 50, we assume we've got a whole lot of years ahead (and we probably do), but they zoom by so quickly when we don't savor them. At 60 or 70, we continue to blissfully deny what's coming to us. Though, let's face it – realistically, the road stretches shorter. It's hard to make a case for middle age at 60. Raise your hand if you have a friend who's 120 years old (not counting Moses)?

I just saw a cartoon that showed a man sitting across the desk from his doctor, who studies the guy's chart and says, "You're 57 years old. I'd like to get that down a bit."

Existentialist writer Albert Camus says that we hate death, because "it makes the lie definitive." And, of course, the lie is that we'll enjoy endless time.

Remember how W.H. Auden put it in his well-known verse:

As I walked out one evening, walking down Bristol
Street, the crowds upon the pavement were fields of
harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river, I heard a lover sing
under an arch of the railway: 'Love has no ending...'

But all the clocks in the city began to whirr and
chime: O let not time deceive you, you cannot
conquer time.

Well, no, we can't – not with a personal trainer, nor with a low-carb diet, nor with a miraculous plastic surgeon and some genetic mazel. We might forestall the inevitable, but we cannot conquer time.

What sense do you make of time, then? It is a non-renewable commodity – so mysterious and so precious

Listen, maybe we should amend that earlier judgment and declare time our friend, if (and it's a big if), we clearly understand its potential to deceive us.

I want you to pack this to-go thought to take home with you on this Yom Tov evening. Does time deceive us, and if so, is it really our friend?

Here's the second point: time is our friend when we remember the words of the great rabbi and philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel has taught us that life's goal is...

...not to have, but to be, not to own, but to give, not
to control, but to share, not to subdue, but to be in
accord.

After the hurricane, these remain even more crucial and profound realizations. Remember what I just asked you to pack up and take home to ponder – if time deceives us, and if so, is it our friend? Well, here's the second course to take home with you.

Judaism says that there are really only two very separate dimensions to our world. The first, the realm of space, encompasses material things that we earn. I mean the things that we win, that we collect, and that we amass. There's nothing wrong with that – no one's asking you to give up air conditioning, or to turn in your Lexus, or to miss dinner at Chris's steakhouse. But, many of us have lost everything of this nature – our homes and all that was in them.

There is also another dimension: the world of time. That's the one to which our Judaism calls us to give our hearts away.

We Jews get around and travel the world, don't we? It seems to me that every time you come across a synagogue in Bombay or Bialystock, you stop in. You might not darken the door of your own temple, but you never miss a shul in Budapest. But, here's my point: we Jews have left no great Gothic cathedrals to fascinate would-be tourists and pilgrims. Virtually nothing we've built compares to Notre Dame or St. Sophia. We Jews remain unequalled, however, when it comes to the realm of "architecture in time." The central truth of our faith lies in the realm of hurricane-proof time and space that can never flood. We remember the day of Exodus from Egypt (Pesach) and the day when Israel stood at Sinai (Shavuot). We assemble this evening of Rosh HaShanah – Yom Ha-rat Ha-Olam – the day God created the world. We commemorate and remember the Sabbath of rest, the New Moon's arrival, the sounding of the shofar in the Jubilee year, and the liberation of the captive at the sabbatical year. As Heschel reminds us, for Jews, "ours is architecture in time, not space.

So, what have we said so far?

1. Time is our friend is we are not deceived into thinking that it is ours forever. And...
2. This world of ours comes down to two dimensions: there is the realm of space (i.e. the material – insurable minus the deductible) and there is the world of time (the immaterial). And, it's the world of time in which we Jews are called to glory and even to sanctify. The realm of time is more precious than any of the things this world has to offer us.

After the hurricane, your life is far from complete. So, what are you doing? Do you have a far-off vista to glimpse (besides the end of this sermon)? Did God bless you with a song in your soul? Do you have a wondrous love to express or a talent to explore and develop? Is there a crucial personal relationship – incomplete and under construction, waiting to be addressed with the full force of your creative energies? Well, then you know the last question to tuck inside the to-go package – "What are you waiting for?"

My good friend, Sam Feinblatt, had been comatose for many days and was failing fast. His wife, Ida, sat at his side. Suddenly, his eyelashes fluttered and he awoke.

"Ida? Ida?" he asked. "Are you here?"

"I'm here, Sam," she reassured him.

“Ida, I’ve been thinking of our lives together. You were always with me, all along the way, Ida: when I broke my arm, caught malaria in the jungle, through all my surgeries – the hip, the heart, and both knees. And, even now, as the end draws near, here you are, Ida, at my bedside.”

“Yes, Sam.”

“Ida, you know what? You’re bad luck!”

As Thoreau puts it in his *Walden*, tonight...

We stand at the meeting of two eternities, the past
and the future, which is precisely the present
moment. And only that day dawns to which we
are awake.

So, don’t blame you bad luck on poor old Ida or on where your house was located, or the rotten insurance man, or the crooked politicians, or anyone else as an excuse. Life happens in a series of moments, and we can only experience the present at this moment – **right now**. So, I ask you – what are you waiting for? What are you going to do after the hurricane, and for the rest of your life?

An Israeli poet asks us three questions in just a six-line poem. She asks:

What should I do?
Live! [is her answer, live now!]
In what should I believe?
In the seed (of possibility)
Why do I live?
To give [is her answer]

Time must be our friend, because we live in it. It is our friend when we are not deceived by it, and when we remember that our goal is not to have, but to be and to become. Time is our friend when we remember that it waits for no one. Ultimately, you have to make your move, friend. **And, so do I.**

Born into this world, we find ourselves the guests of existence who dine at a table we neither set, nor furnished. Every such guest should respond decently – in whatever circumstances or time we are granted. We must become a host for another. Freely receiving, we freely give.

We have every reason to sit down and cry in our beer. Fate has played a cruel trick on many of us. And, for those of you here in Baton Rouge and other lucky areas, you face your own trials and challenges – many of them totally unfair and undeserved.

Now, it's time to create the new world for ourselves. Fill out the FEMA forms. Pull out the salvageable things, and, like our ancestors who survived so many exits and cruel hardships – take your faith in your hands and face the future with determined confidence to...

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul
as the swift seasons roll!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last, shut
thee from heaven with a dome more vast, till thou
at length are free, leaving thine outgrown shell by
life's unresting sea.

When the story of Katrina is told in all the years to come, long after we're all gone, I hope when they think of me – and when they think of you, too – they'll be impressed with what we've been up to after the storm, and for the rest of our lives.

Amen