

5769 Yom Kippur morning
The Gates are Closing: All we have is this moment
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My husband travels a great deal for his work. On one of those nights when he was out of town and I couldn't sleep, I was flipping the television channels and came across Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection. It was a production of Thornton Wilder's play Our Town. Paul Newman, of blessed memory, had been nominated for a Tony Award in 2002 for his role as the stage manager in this particular Westport Country Playhouse production. I nestled down to watch the show.

Set at the turn of the 20th century, the play reveals the ordinary lives of the people in the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire*. Grover's Corners is a typical American town-hum drum and ordinary in every way. The opening scene contains the lines "No one from town ever went on to fame and fortune", but its residents seemed to like it. 90% of the high school graduates remain in Grover's Corners to settle down and raise families. The townspeople go about their ordinary business-whether shopping at local stores or mowing lawns.

The story takes place in three acts over a period of twelve years. Act I entitled "daily life", testifies to the artfulness and value of routine daily activity. Simple acts such as eating breakfast and feeding chickens become subjects of dramatic scenes, indicating the significance Wilder sees in such seemingly mundane events. Wilder juxtaposes this flurry of everyday activity with the character's inattentiveness to it. The characters are largely unaware of the details of their lives and tend to accept their circumstances passively. Families rush through breakfast, and the children hurry off

to school, without much attention to one another. They, like most of us, maintain the faulty assumption that they have an indefinite amount of time on earth. A key refrain comes from one of the characters who abstains from traveling abroad because, as she says "there will always be time to visit Paris"

Act II "Love and Marriage". This act is centered on the wedding of the young character Emily with all of the fanfare that goes into lifecycle events. The similarity between the morning activities in acts I and those of act II imply that an underlying stability defines life in Grover's Corners, despite the indications of individual growth and maturation. Though the narrator states that several years have passed since Act I, very little in the town seems to have altered. Milk and newspapers are still delivered daily, and the train whistle blows at 5:45 every morning. The passing of time emphasizes the difference between individual change and broader change. On the individual level, "babies that weren't even born before have begun talking in regular sentences already; and a number of people who though that they were right young and spry have noticed that they can't bound up a flight of stairs like they used to." On the more general level, the narrator notes the slow shifts in geology, saying that weather and erosion have gradually worn down the mountains. Even though, as he says, "millions of gallons of water went by the mill" and the "sun's come up over a thousand times", these natural and environmental forces remain cyclical and steadfast.

In the final act of the play, titled “Death”, the main character Emily dies in childbirth. Yet her soul is given the opportunity to return to life and relive one single day of her choosing. She selects her 12th birthday, but as she unsuccessfully tries to get her mother to *really* look at her and not take her presence for granted; her joy at being able to return to life quickly gives way to disappointment. Everyone seems so oblivious to the blessings all around them—paying no attention to how quickly their lives will pass by. It is this sorrowful realization, that most people do not cherish life the way they should, that creates the real emotional atmosphere of Act III. Emily admits that she herself did not pay enough attention to detail and did not appreciate her family or her town the way that she does now that she is gone. Speaking to the souls around her she admits that in life she did not realize how much the little things in life—things she did not notice before—really do matter. “Humans, they don’t understand do they?” she states... “No dear, they don’t understand.”

After this experience, Emily comments to the stage manager, “It all goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another... Oh earth; you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” The stage manager, who by this point clearly seems to be a stand in for God, responds that humans indeed do not realize life except for perhaps the “poets and saints, maybe.”

It is evident that Wilder ponders whether human beings truly appreciate the precious nature of a transient life. Wilder’s characters place importance on moments of ceremony and consequence, such as weddings and funerals. But the characters do not seem to value or make an emotional connection to the daily activities of their ordinary lives.

Instead of attempting to “realize life” at every moment, the inhabitants of Grover’s Corners—more often than not, lack any sense of wonder at what passes before their eyes every day.

Our Jewish liturgical tradition attempts to confront this very real flaw in the human psyche. The ritual of Morning Prayer begins with the reminder that our lives are indeed finite. When we say Elohai neshamah shenatata bi t’horah he... My God the soul that you have given me is pure You created it and formed it You have breathed it into me and You protect it within me... then we say: asher b’yado nefesh kol chai—in whose possession is the breath of every living thing. When we complete the prayer we do so with the awareness that at some point our breath, our souls, will permanently leave our bodies. Is this not a daily wake-up call to see the miracle of life? Reminding us to see the wonder in the mundane? Perhaps encouraging us to live every moment as if it were our last?

We are taught in our tradition, that one should say 100 blessings every day as a way to live in a state of gratitude, kindness and awareness of the miracles that surround us moment by moment. This may seem a tad over the top, perhaps, but the notion is solid because, “blessing” is a spiritual and psychological act of recognizing and affirming. When we bless something or someone, we must become aware of them and acknowledge that this thing or this person is good. When we bless, we make note of the connection between the blessed and the Divine. Awareness is about living in the moment. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that we are surrounded by mystery, swimming in mystery, living and breathing mystery every moment of every day of our lives, yet unless we make ourselves conscious, life will fade away

unrealized. Think about it...so many of us are either caught up in the stress and chaos of every day living or we simply float through in the sheer banality of the day-to-day existence. We forget to LIVE in the moment; our blackberries and daily planners have us living days, weeks and even years into the future. We have got to stop! We let our lives fly past us...this life given to us by God, is not to be taken for granted.

All of us sitting here today are here because our tradition calls upon us to come together to hearken to the call of the shofar, to return to God in order to renew our days. We dress in white not just as a symbol of purity and newness, but also to shake us out of our complacency. We are dressed in a symbolic burial shroud- we image ourselves standing before God in judgment, forced to face the tough questions that most human beings prefer to ignore. The words of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer jolt us with the harsh reality that we have no control over the length of our life. By being confronted by our own mortality we are asked to quantify the meaning of our lives-are we living our lives in vain? Are we stumbling blindly through our days? Are we doing all that we can to make this a better world? Can we say that we are proud of our lives? Do we appreciate each day? If I died tomorrow, will my life have had meaning and purpose or have I simply just taken up space?

Look around you; look at all the faces across the aisles. There is the possibility that some of those faces will not be here next year. Perhaps it will be you, perhaps it will be me. Nothing is certain- we have only this moment. Turn right now to someone you love, look into their eyes, really see them- promise yourself that from this moment on, you will appreciate every moment.

One of the prayers in our Holy Day Mahzor reads: Dear God, teach us to use all of our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom. A better way to read this is: Teach us O God to be aware that our days are numbered...for when we come to the full realization that our life is truly finite, only then will we have attained a heart of wisdom.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote it is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it is too easy to postpone the things that you know you must do today. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile each day is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last that you have; you take the time to grow. To become more of whom you really are, to reach out to other human beings.

That in essence is what Yom Kippur has the power to do for us. Yom Kippur confronts us- As we stand before God; we are reminded that all that we have is this moment.

Emily, the character from Our Town does not learn the lesson until it is too late...and the town itself, I suppose that they never learn. But as in all good theatre, we the audience, have the opportunity to grow and change. Through Emily's pain we can see what is available to us. The opportunity to change, and to save ourselves...

Let us embrace the lessons now, while there is time.

Let us recommit ourselves this very moment to our lives, to our families and to our community, because we can not know what the future will hold.

As we reflect during these waning hours of Yom Kippur, let us do as God asks of us, to turn and return while we can. As the Gates are slowly closing, let us live while we can. Let us reach out to one another while we can. Let us act, while we can. Let us bless our lives with awareness while we can. Let us live each day as if there were no other.

There is perfection in every day- and it is the realization of that which can endow our lives with beauty and powerful sanctity.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah, May you be inscribed for a life of fulfillment, wonder and awareness.

Kayn Yehi Ratzon.

*Credit to Spark Notes for portions of Our Town overview