

Yom Kippur Sermon 2019 – The Blessing of Slow
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There are lots of ways of determining how old you are. You can tell me what TV shows you watched when you were young or what books you read. But one of the ways you can determine how old you are is by what number was on the McDonalds sign when you were young. If you were already into the billions, you are just a kid. If you remember millions served, you're still young. But if, like perhaps some here might remember: a million served, five million served, ten million served then you've been around a while. And now, you know McDonalds has just given up. Last time I checked, it just said "billions and billions served." I guess the next step is to say galaxies and nebulae served by the golden arches.

And if you ask yourself why – why so many people, why so popular – and you get away from jargon like "quality control" or even evasive answers like, "It tastes good" – lots of things taste good. The answer is really hinted at in the name of the food that McDonalds serves, which is fast food. In other words, it succeeded, in large part because it's fast. Your food is waiting for you as you walk in or you can drive up – you don't even need to get out of your car. As you might guess, for me as someone who hasn't eaten McDonalds in over two decades – I mean I have had cokes there – I could make the case against McDonalds for a lot of reasons, but now I just want to talk about speed. Because the idea of fast food in and of itself may not be dangerous, but the idea that something is better or more appealing simply because it's faster, which is an idea that we all share on some level, and that is constantly played in America – that idea is dangerous.

Just think about our attitude about this through ads for cars. Some cars are marketed as better because they go faster – even faster than any place in America will actually allow you to drive. The question as to why speedometers go up to 120, 140, 180 miles per hour is really a question, when the fastest your allowed to go is 75 on a highway. But, it shows that the idea that being faster is inevitably better is something that we imbibe in our society. And I think that the fear of slowness is a spiritual lack.

Admittedly though, there is something about speed that does take care of many situations, because after all its only momentary. As Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "When skating on thin ice, safety lies in speed." In other words, if you don't know where you are and you don't know where the foundation of your life is, just keep moving fast and you'll be all right. It's kind of like the cartoon, with the roadrunner and coyote – when the coyote would run off the side of a cliff, his legs would keep spinning and spinning, and as long as he was running he would stay in the air. Then when he'd finally look down, he'd fall like a brick.... And on some level, we all share that idea – that speed will save us. That if we walk faster, talk faster, eat faster, we'll then be able to answer more emails and make more phone calls, and then we will be able to fall soundly sleep at night, and we will have had a better, more fulfilling day.

Why? Why do so many of us believe that, either consciously or subconsciously? Is it because the more you do and the faster you do it, the more you will win – and we all want to win! Have you ever had that conversation with someone where there's like this unspoken competition of whoever works the hardest and fastest wins, whoever's the busiest wins? It's crazy. But I know that this is true because I'm guilty of it myself. There have been many a night when I couldn't sleep because there's an unanswered email in my inbox. And I know it's ridiculous; I know that there was a time in human history when letters would take months to be delivered and responses to letters would take months, and actually, if someone doesn't answer you in two hours, it's not a dereliction of human duty – they're not an incompetent buffoon or some selfish jerk – it's actually okay. And even though I know that, I still fall for it.

So it is that I stand here, fully aware of when my teachers in rabbinical school told me that the best sermons are the ones you deliver to yourself. So, allow me to remind me, that the Jewish tradition deliberately sabotages speed.

Go try to study the Talmud fast. You can't do it! You can barely study it slow. And even when you can do something fast, it is usually the product of slowness. I know a wonderful Jewish educator at the Bureau of Jewish Education in Los Angeles – Dr. Gil Graff. Dr. Graff has this incredible lecture that he gives, which he calls "All of Jewish History in Five Minutes," and he really does it! He will really tell you all of Jewish history in five minutes. How many years do you think he had to study to compress all of Jewish history into five minutes?

"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," said the poet (Wordsworth). In other words, always doing, always active, always moving onto the next thing, we deplete our energies, our spirits. And the problem is that we live in a workaholic culture and this workaholism, this do-aholism, speed-aholism makes us sick – sick both mentally and physically. Speed and workaholism lie at the root of many of our social ills because when everything is going so fast and is filled with such enormity – whether imagined or real – we get overwhelmed, afraid we can't keep up, afraid we can't win the race and that we'll never get "there," as if there's a there to get to.

Look at our children. Our kids are saddled with this intense feeling that they have to, not just get straight A's, but get straight A+'s. That's why Wendy Mogel had to write a book several years ago called *The Blessing of a B Minus*, which is full of Jewish sources along with psychological ones to substantiate the value of doing things imperfectly. And it's not only about grades. Our kids feel like they have to be high achievers in every area of life: in athletics and music and the arts, that they have to put in 30 hours of community service per week, all for their resume which, by the way, they need completed by the age of 14! They are sleep-deprived – literally – from all of the work; more car accidents among teenagers is caused by sleep deprivation than drunk driving. It is no wonder that we are seeing all-time highs in stress among our children leading to depression, anxiety, overeating, as well as under-eating, self-mutilation like cutting or hair pulling, suicide ideation, Internet

and social media obsession, and substance abuse. In the 21st century, in a country such as the United States of America – this is stunning! And the most plagued by this high speed, high expectation, high activity level culture is often affluent, privileged, suburban kids, who are binge-drinking, using drugs, vaping at higher rates than inner city kids, because they are looking for any means necessary to self-medicate and gain some kind of relief from their non-stop, high speed pursuit of perfection.

They just want to check out and relax once in a while, but many teens don't even know how to slow down without chemical aid or some other unhealthy behavior.

This is what led to the whole Lori Loughlin – aka Aunt Becky from Full House – debacle where dozens and dozens of parents (some from right here in Marin) paid tens of thousands to even millions of dollars to rig the college application system so that their already-affluent and privileged kid could be guaranteed admission into the biggest brand name universities... People are afraid, they're overwhelmed by a feeling of competition for what they believe is a scarcity of resources, and they feel like they can't keep up. But what it is that they can't keep up with? That's the question. What's the race all about; what's it leading to? Money, networking, a successful life? Many teens, as well as their parents, can't even define what a successful life even is – they can't tell you what success even means – but they still feel like they might miss it. They feel so desperate in the race that even those who are already winning will cheat.

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In America today, the richest and safest country the world has ever known – despite all of our political division – despite all of that, we are still among the luckiest, most affluent human beings to have ever lived just by virtue of the fact that we're in this room in Marin County, CA right now in 2019. But even amidst this incredible gift of timing and geography, many of us are suffering because the toxic strains of workaholic, perfectionism, and speed with which our culture expounds.

This is why Judaism consistently counsels against the values of speed and perfection. It's why we repeat the Torah again and again because when you read it again, you have read it more slowly, you have to focus with the full power of your attention in order to see something new. Try this if you want to see something new: take the same walk you took yesterday. Go, not somewhere else, but to the same place as yesterday and go there more slowly. I promise that you'll see something new. How many times have you gone down a street and said, I've never noticed that before – it's been there for years – but you just now notice it. And we should realize that this kind of thing is radical – it's counter cultural because repetition, depth, slowness, all are against the ethos of our time.

And so we arrive at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and the good news is that you're here and you are taking the time. Even if it's a long service, it's a long day –

many of you [will take] have taken it off from work to be together, and that's great. This is important. But here's the bad news: repentance and atonement, and spiritual cleansing can't really be done overnight. Things that are deep, things that are of the utmost importance take time – they just do.

You know, we're told in the Mishnah – the first Rabbinic document – what the rabbis of old would do when they showed up at synagogue before they started praying. You know what they'd do? They'd pray. They would spend an hour praying before praying – they would pray that their prayer would be proper. So what does this teach us? That if you drive in, you rush up the stairs, you sit down and open the book, you're still not really ready to pray – it takes time. Here's a hypothesis that I encourage you to test this year: if you come here earlier you will feel more connected to your prayer later. Because if you come here earlier, you will have had time, time to slowly settle into the proper mind set, time for your heart and mind to meander and filter out the nonsense, and so when the prayers come toward the end, you're more prepared, non-rushed, more open to whatever the moment will bring, without having to be anxious about what's next – they're not dependent upon speed.

So here on Yom Kippur, this most holy of holy days, the truth is that we don't have enough time. We don't really have enough time today to look back on all of the year, all of the people we effected and hurt, all that we have done, all of our behavior and attitudes, or to look on all that we want to improve upon in the coming year. There just isn't enough time in one day – it's a process. As *Pirkei Avot* says: *hafoch ba v'hafoch ba* – you have to turn it and turn it over and over again because each time you explore yourself, you will discover something new. Repentance, self-exploration, self-transformation – all of which we call *teshuvah* in our tradition – cannot be done on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur alone. In fact, do you know when the rabbis say we need to do *teshuvah* to repent and self-evaluate? The day before you die. When is the day before you die? Right, every day.

So yes, Yom Kippur is not enough time, but I'll tell you a little Rabbinic secret – because I like you and I'm a nice guy. The Rabbinic tradition says that the gates of repentance and prayer stay open until the end of the holiday of Sukkot. So, really we all have a grace period until sundown on Tuesday October 22nd to get it all in – I'm telling you this because I want you to make it through the gates. So, take your time today and tomorrow, one day at a time – don't rush or feel overwhelmed, just do the work.

So, what I really want to say is that it's not just about today, it's about cultivating a life of doing *teshuvah*, of taking the time for spirit and not falling for the American speed game, which claims that who does the most, the fastest wins life. It's just not true; it's not real. Not if you are measuring success in life by intrinsic measures of self-worth, contentment and meaning. Speed can get you lots of extrinsic measures of success – money, stuff, power, prestige ... but at the end, it's the intrinsic that matters.

And I've had the privilege of being with many people at the end. I have spent a lot of time with people dying, and it is so obvious as to what's most important in life in those moments – it's so not-complicated, it really isn't, and let me tell you, whether your kid goes to Stanford or Fresno State or whether they're majoring in marketing or medicine is like at the bottom of priorities, when a soul is transitioning. I have sat at the deathbeds of many people, not one has ever said, "You know what, I should have rushed more in life; I should have put more hours in at the office," "If I just got that second house in Aspen and that sports car, the demise in my final days would all be worth it." Nobody says that. What they say is that they regret spending too much time at work, too much time on extrinsic values and not enough time on intrinsic values – relationships, spirit, service, love.

My teacher and former colleague, Rabbi Harold Schulweis (z"l) said that it wasn't that he was afraid of dying, rather that he was afraid of never having truly lived. And to truly live we have to live as Thoreau described in his book *Walden*, "to live deliberately," slowly, day by day. Killing the email game or how you network business contacts is irrelevant nonsense compared to listening to the sounds of the forest, playing with your children or grandchildren, holding hands with the one you love, savoring the tastes and smells and beauty of the world's gifts.

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So that's what today is for. It is a time set aside for your soul, for deliberation, for gradualness, for unfolding – to see the flower of your heart unfold in the slowness of real time. And although we're here today, I'm also saying that today is not enough, it's not enough to really know your life and the life of the ones you love. Today is a beginning, a beginning to grow deeper and better. We actually started this journey about ten days ago and as with the mystery of all journeys, all successful ones anyway, is that no matter to where we venture, we return – *teshuvah* literally means return – we return to the place we where we began to see our situation and ourselves anew. That is the spiritual work of each and every day for each and every one of us.

This year, we stand before God, we stand before our people – before one another – and we will be able to say that we have taken the time – the slow, gradual, deliberate time – to go on a soul adventure, to get to know our souls a bit better. That we will have taken the time and we will know that life is not measured in emails answered, in business deals consummated, in miles run, but in spiritual growth, in faith and courage, in goodness, and in love.

May this year be of slowness – of valuing the time to self-explore; a year where we take time for *teshuvah* each week, perhaps even each day – learning the different parts of ourselves, the beautiful parts as well as the salty and gritty bits. May we value the journey of our souls, with slightly more deliberation and intentionality and of knowledge of ourselves and of one another.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah