

YOM KIPPUR 5770
Rabbi Joshua Strom
September 27-28, 2009

Be Here Now

It was a blistering hot afternoon in Manchester, Tennessee, the final day of the 8th annual Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival. The What Stage – not to be confused with the Which Stage or This, That, or the Other Tent – featured Grammy-winning soul and R&B artist Erykah Badu. She sang and rapped, and even laid down some beats on her musician's drum machine. Her performance was fun and energetic, uplifting, and even motivational. Towards the end of her set, she spoke to the tens of thousands gathered on that Tennessee farmland. She looked out at the crowd and said, "Let's just be here right now. No thinking about the past, no thinking about the future. Just here. Just now." And she concluded with the words, "I'm so glad to be with you, right here, right now."

And I thought, "Yes!" I think I might've even shouted out something to the extent of, "That's what I'm talking about!" This was something I'd been thinking about for quite a while. Over time, it had become sort of an unofficial thesis or mantra, if you will, something I knew I wanted to speak about for these High Holy Days. And here, standing in the overpowering sun of rural Tennessee, I shared a moment with Erykah Badu. Clearly, we were on the same wavelength.

I was so pumped, so fired up by this connection, this shared passion for trying earnestly to be here and now, that what did I do? I took out my Blackberry and wrote a little memo to myself, quoting Erykah so that I wouldn't forget it. So moved, so jazzed up was I about being nowhere but in the moment, that I knocked myself right out of it with my electronic leash. I could only laugh at myself, as the irony of what I was doing washed over me.

And I know that I'm not alone in this. The advent of digital cameras with video and sound recorders, cameras on our phones, text, picture, and video messages instantly sent to friends and family, allow us to prove to the world, like the tagline from the Smirnoff commercial, that "we were there." So obsessed are we with the documentation of our own experiences that we miss the boat entirely, unable to realize that this collection of proof is *exactly* what diminishes the experience. So focused are we on being able to say "we were there" that we float right past the inherent irony: that the camera becomes the barrier between ourselves and the moment. In the end, we may have been "there," but when it happened, we were anywhere but "here."

And we know it's true, don't we. We're here, but we're not. We're in, but out. We're sitting in meetings but checking e-mail on our phones. We're out to dinner with friends but sending text messages to others. We're on phone calls at work but scrolling through photos from the red carpet at the Emmys. We've come to take such pride in our ability to multi-task, that at times it seems no task is getting the attention it really deserves.

Perhaps you read the New York Times article from last month about how this brave, new world is impacting our families. The family profiled in the article recalled mornings where the four of them would sit at the breakfast table together, talking about the coming day and reading through the newspaper, perhaps with the television on in the background. "That," writes the author, "was so last century." Now the father wakes up at 6 a.m. to check his e-mail, and the boys begin each day with text messages and Facebook, before they even get out of bed. They use texting as an in-house intercom, so that the phone replaces much of what would be, God forbid, personal interaction. A San Francisco mother quoted in the article said of her children, "They used to have blankies; now they have phones, which even have their own umbilical cord right to the charger. If their beds were far from the power outlets," she said, "they would probably sleep on the floor."

But this is not meant to be a technophobic indictment, a longing for some non-existent "good ol' days," or a rant about "these kids today." The advances in technology allow us to be productive members of our jobs and society, in places and times previously inaccessible. And they offer us precious opportunities to connect and re-connect with so many people with whom we would otherwise not be able to keep in touch. To blame technology for the near-impossibility of our being in the moment is not only simplistic, but also entirely inaccurate. Technology, after all, has only exacerbated what was already there.

Because even when the phones are away, the computers are shut down, and the television is off, the struggle is still very much there, just as difficult, if not even more so. Sometimes we're not here because we're lost somewhere in the past. We're strolling down memory lane to try and recapture the glory days of high school and college, or to torture ourselves with how we "could've been a contender," with painful recollections of the guy or girl or dream job that got away.

At other times we're not here because we're somewhere in the future. We're listening, but not listening, because we're thinking about the next big project, the next big meeting, the hectic commute that awaits us, an upcoming vacation, our plans for our next day off, etc.

This is not to say that we should forget about the past or stop planning and thinking about our future. The past makes up who we are in this moment and remembering it helps us learn from it. The future, we pray, offers us the promising hope of bettering ourselves, the chance to become the people we know we can and should become.

But if there is *only* the past or *only* the future, there is no present; there is no "now." If there is only "before" and "after,"—like we see on the infomercials for cleaning and weight-loss products—then there is no "during." And if there's no "now," no "during," then we cannot possibly change ourselves or engage in *t'shuvah*.

See, *t'shuvah* is not simply about forgiveness, not just about saying, "I'm sorry" to those we've wronged and hurt. It is about *fundamentally* changing ourselves by altering our behaviors and habits, by shifting our outlook on the world and on the people in it. The great medieval scholar Maimonides wrote a famous tractate detailing the necessary steps to proper *t'shuvah*. The final step in the process is not in the acceptance of an apology. It's not in the attempts to make it up to the people we've harmed. It's not even in the vows we make—on *Kol Nidre* or any other night—never to do whatever we've done again. No. The only way, the Rambam wrote, to actualize a true and complete *t'shuvah* is when we find ourselves in exactly the same situation in which we sinned before, and this time, we do it right.

A contestant from Tali's and my favorite reality TV show, *The Biggest Loser*, certainly no stranger to our obsession with before and after, had this to say to the viewing audience of millions as she was sent home:

"It's not about winning the title of Biggest Loser. It's not about winning a weigh-in, it's not about who gets eliminated in that Elimination Room. It's about how I feel about myself, what I know I'm capable of doing, and the woman that I've become. And I really love her."

For Nicole, being in the “now”, the “during” between the “before” and “after,” is what enabled her to start on a path towards changing her life. That is where each of us hopes to get to. But the only way to begin that arduous journey, to effect that powerful internal and systemic change, is to be right here, right now.

And that is what these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, are all about. The word *hayom*, meaning “today” or “this day,” can be found everywhere we look during these High Holy Days. In our *Torah* portion for the morning of *Yom Kippur*, we read the words, “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem*,” “You stand *this day*, all of you, before the Eternal your God.” In total, *hayom* appears 14 times in the *Parashat Nitzavim*, including five in just the first four verses. It is as if Moses is saying to the Israelites, “Hey! Don’t miss this! This is the real deal! This is where it’s all happening!”

And it is a theme that runs through our liturgy as well. On *Rosh HaShanah* we say *Hayom harat olam. Hayom ya’amid bamishpat kol y’tzurei olamim*, “This is the day of the world’s birth. This day all that has been created stands before You.” It is a reminder that just as the world came into being on this day, so may we—in our new and improved, higher, better selves—come into being as well. We say, both on *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*, *Un’taneh tokef k’dushat hayom*, “Let us proclaim the sacred power of *this day*.” It is the power of God, placed in our hands, to make real the changes we want to see in ourselves and in the world. The cantor chants on our behalf the words, *Ki vayom hazeh y’chapeir aleichem, I’taheir etchem*, “For on *this day* atonement shall be made for you, to purify you.” It is the chance to start over, to be made pure, to make this the first day of the rest of your life. And at the end of this service, we will sing together a prayer that cries out with exclamation points to God, but perhaps more to ourselves, “This day, strengthen us! This day, inscribe us for a blessed life! This day uplift us with Your righteousness!” And we will sing the word *hayom* more than 80 times, so that the message is abundantly clear.

On this day, may we find the strength within us to block out the distractions of the past and the future, obstacles lying in the path between the people we are and the people we want to be. May the words of our faith and tradition, these hours of prayer and introspection, move and inspire us to embark on the sacred journey of *t’shuvah* and change. And may each of us begin that journey right here. Right now. *Hayom*.

AMEN.