

“In the Now”

Back in the old country, centuries ago, there was a man named Shlomo whose business it was to buy eggs from peasants in his village, bring them to town, and sell them there for a small profit. One day he was walking down the long dirt road into town with a basket on his head that had a *thousand* eggs in it, and he began to think (kind of a dangerous thing for Shlomo). “How long must I go on working so hard and making so little money?” he wondered. “It would be a much better idea to take the eggs home with me, put hens to roost on them, and wait for the chicks to hatch out. If each egg yields a chick, I’ll have a thousand chicks in ten days’ time. When they grow up, they’ll begin to lay too, and I’ll have a thousand eggs every day. I’ll let every one of them hatch, and soon I’ll have two hundred thousand chickens. At a dinar per chicken, that will bring me two hundred thousand dinars. Then I’ll leave the chicken business, buy a consignment of wool, sell it in England at a fifty percent markup, use the money to buy goods there, mark them up fifty percent again, and sell them here. If I keep buying and selling like that for three years, I’ll have five hundred thousand gold pounds to my name. With that I’ll buy a mansion surrounded by gardens and orchards and some shops to rent out for an income, and I’ll live like a Rothschild. The richest Jew in town won’t have a fraction of my money! I’ll be elected president of the congregation, and on the king’s birthday, I’ll be in the delegation of Jews that’s sent to pay respects to him.” The thought of paying his respects to the king made the egg seller picture himself bowing. So he lowered his head a bit, and the basket fell to the ground, breaking all thousand of the eggs.

Shlomo was not in the *now*.

In a small town in Russia, centuries ago lived a porter who made his living by transporting people and packages to and from the train station. The porter had a young son named Yoni who assisted him with his work. Every morning the two would awaken very early, recite their morning prayers, eat breakfast, prepare the horse and wagon, and hit the road. During the summer months, when the sun often rose as early as 3:00 AM, the porter and his son awoke even earlier.

A summer fast day arrived on the Jewish calendar. The porter roused his son at the usual time, and off to the synagogue they went. When they had finished praying, the porter informed his son that today there would be no eating due to the fast. The day wore on. The son grew hungrier and hungrier. He began to ask his father incessantly when they would finally eat. Finally, the day ended and his hunger was satisfied.

The following morning, Yoni refused to budge when his father tried to wake him. With an air of indignation, he told his father, “I do not want to get up, and I do not want to work. I am afraid that you will not let me eat anything today either!”

“Ah, my son, have no fear,” replied the porter. “Today is not yesterday.”

Yoni was not in the *now*.

What if that phrase we have adopted this year as our siren for reflection, “If not now, when?” was not at all about *seizing* the moment, but about *being in* the moment. Like saying: “If you are not in the now, what ‘when’ are you in? If you are not living in the present, is your “when” the past like Yoni? Is your “when” the future like Shlomo? Where do you spend your “now?” I imagine that all of us vacillate between the past and the future, moving between them in a moment’s notice, and “now” is incredibly illusive.

The hardest part about living in the now, especially in our world, is that there is so much happening every single day, we try to process what happened to us and process what’s about to happen, and it is so overpowering that we can’t hear our spouse, kid, parent, friend, whomever, right in front of us – or should I say we hear them, but we aren’t encountering them.

There are times I am driving my daughter to school, and it may be the only time that I have with her, that precious 20 minutes in the morning, and I’m in my head thinking about what I have for the day, or obsessing about something that happened the day before (or, weeks before, months...years?). There’s just silence. I imagine she’s probably lost in her future and past as well. We lose that twenty minutes of *now*. Never to get it back.

Harriet Beecher Stowe said “the past, the present, and future is really one: they are today.” Our todays are filled with all of it, it all weaves together to make a whole life. But which one of the three we emphasize can have a great impact on how we experience life.

Let us start with the past. It is healthy to reflect on the events of our lives to find meaning from them, or learn from them, or bask in them, or cry from them. But we need to follow our past into the present, not let our past follow us.

Allowing our pasts to follow us can blur the now. Consider Yoni who didn’t want to fast: he was thinking so much about his past experience that he was afraid to get out of bed for fear of it happening again. Yesterday is not today, his father told him. Yesterday is *not* today. We don’t *have* to carry the weight of the past in the present. Every single day we have a new opportunity to be the person we want to be. And today, especially, on Yom Kippur, we need to leave the pain of our mistakes behind us. In the book “The Four Agreements,” Don Miguel Ruiz asks this about the way we punish ourselves:

How many times do we pay for one mistake? The answer is thousands of times.

The human is the only animal on earth that pays a thousand times for the same mistake. The rest of the animals pay once for every mistake they make. But not us. We have a powerful memory. We make a mistake, we judge ourselves, we find ourselves guilty, and we punish ourselves. Every time we remember, we judge ourselves again, we are guilty again, and we punish ourselves again, and again, and again. Is this fair?

Punishing ourselves, and certainly punishing others for past failures doesn't change the past. Reflect upon it, learn from it, use it in the present. That is what this day is for. For our final judgment before ourselves and our eternity. Yom Kippur is for our forgiveness of ourselves and others. Judaism wants you to leave it here and move forward without it. The final image of this day are gates closing with our pasts behind those gates, locked away.

Living for the future doesn't seem to help us either. We are thinking about what may be next even before we have finished what we are doing in the moment.

How many times have you arrived home, consumed by what you have to do tomorrow? Or what you have to do at home that night, so you are ready for tomorrow? It's like the future is grabbing on to you, and you are in a kind of future dream state as you're eating with your family, or helping your child with his/her homework, or listening to your spouse's experience of the day. You aren't there, you are into tomorrow already, and not living presently.

How, then, do we bring ourselves into the present moment, into the now? How do we allow ourselves to live and experience the now, the moment, without thoughts and feelings about our past, or thoughts and dreams about our future clouding us?

I would like to offer two approaches to this challenge we have in our lives. The first is Jewish tradition itself, and the second, a way of thinking proposed by a 20th century Jewish thinker. First, Jewish tradition.

Jewish tradition is about remembering the past and envisioning the future, at set moments, at concentrated times devoted to this action. Our holidays are memory signposts so that we view the world through a certain lens. We were slaves in Egypt, we received the Torah, we lived in sukkot in the desert (tents actually), our Temple was destroyed, a small band of Israelites defeated the mighty Greek armies, and so on. Our liturgy highlights hopes for the future – for our return to Jerusalem, and for the messiah, who will usher in peace for eternity. In fact, Shabbat (which we are focusing on during this year) is built for this exact exercise of reflecting upon the past and the future.

Judaism takes these thoughts and deliberately brings them into the now, at an expressed time. If only Shlomo the egg seller deliberately thought about not selling those eggs before he started out on that road. He might be sitting in the chicken coop right now watching over those eggs for the next ten days. Or perhaps in the next moment, Yoni the Porter's son realized that his father was right, and lived that day without his past experience entering into his mind at all as he went about his business.

We can learn from Jewish tradition to be deliberate about our thinking or meditating on our past and future, bring it to the present, so that we can learn from and then leave our past, and become empowered by the vision of our future and spend our *now* carrying out that vision.

But what about those smaller moments in life, those quieter moments when you are with those close to you, and you can't control those thoughts as easily as you like?

Enter Martin Buber. Buber was one of the great existential Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. He had a theory that we relate with the world in two ways. We either "experience" the world, what Buber called the "I-It" relationship, or we "encounter" the world, what he called the "I-Thou" relationship. From here on I'm going to refer to them using the words "experience," and "encounter."

According to Buber, when we "experience" the world, we analyze and think and classify everything by what we receive from it. Kind of like we say to ourselves, "This is how I act with a salesperson," or "This is what I can expect from my wife, my boss, my daughter..." When I was in the car with my daughter, I was experiencing her as a daughter, it was alright to sit with her in silence because I expect that she is my daughter and will always be, even if I don't give her my full attention. It sounds rather cold, but it is the way we normally interact with the world. In this mode of relating, we can be close to another person, but only so far, because we are experiencing, not purposefully interacting.

To "encounter" the world is to encounter the other without desiring anything from it. It is being there with full attention and intention, with a person, or even an inanimate object, like the way an artist interacts with her canvas, or the poet interacts with words, or the basketball player interacts with the ball. I think another word that we use in synagogue often that comes closest in meaning to the "encounter" relationship is *Hineyni*, "Here I am." That phrase points to a relationship that is an intimate encounter, a relationship of love.

It's very difficult to live in a constant state of encounter, but to strive for this kind of concentration on the *now*, on the person or project or object in the present can help to keep out the pasts that haunt us, or the future that we obsess over.

When I first wrote down these thoughts, I shared them with my daughter. In the car. On the way to school. We put the Katy Perry a little softer on the speakers in the car, and talked. We got our 20 minutes back in the morning – just father and daughter, encountering each other.

The formula sounds simple, but the execution is difficult. In order to exist in the now of life, bring reflection about the past or thoughts of the future to a deliberate and strategic time. Bring attention and intention to the moment, to the present, and live with the energy of now. If not now, when?