

## A Time for Everything...is Now

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If you have ever attended a Jewish funeral, chances are that you have heard these words, which I know I have spoken at almost every funeral I have officiated: To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.... This beautiful phrase from the Book of Ecclesiastes unfolds with this well-known litany: a time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to reap; a time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing; a time for speaking, a time for silence. Ecclesiastes would have us believe that life encompasses it all, and that it plays out in an orderly fashion.

This is the year that I learned that I have been misunderstanding Ecclesiastes.

For life does not play out this way.

Last summer when people would ask me how my summer was, I would answer with this phrase: “it started with one daughter’s wedding, it ended with another daughter’s engagement, and in the middle, my third daughter got pregnant!” Our cup was very full – looking forward to a year of watching new life grow within our daughter’s belly; the exquisite awe of getting to look at the ultrasound machine and see a spine, a hand, a face, grow into viable life. And we looked forward to a year of wedding plans, of meeting our new *machateynum*, of the exquisiteness of wedding dress shopping with a daughter; and those precious moments of memory where you see the 6-year-old in dress-up wedding gowns become the 32-year-old bedecked in tiny crystal beads sewn into real lace and satin. This was a year where my joy was palpable, and I was filled with gratitude for the blessings that Seth and I and our girls were experiencing.

On a Sunday afternoon in January, I was driving out the 118 to Brandeis Bardin in Simi, about to immerse myself in a silent retreat when my brother called. Sam is three years my senior, my only sibling, and we have had a particular bond since our parents died of cancer when we were in our early 20s. Can you pull the car over? he asked, and I did. His conversation started slowly- it was clear he needed to tell me something he didn’t have the words for, nor the heart to say, as he told me that he had been diagnosed with cancer throughout his body. He was, in fact, telling me, that he was dying of this just-found cancer. My world was crushed. There are a few people in the world that I adore, and Sam was one of them. And the reality that the cancer he was facing was, even on the best of days and with pain management, leaving him in great pain, was a cruelty that I could hardly bear.

How do we hold on to joy and sadness at the same moment? While my story is *my* life story, I know that every one of us has these moments in life where we are holding on to a celebration, at the same time we are grieving or walking through the unknown of illness...those moments when our arms are outstretched with one palm burdened with such sadness and sorrow and the other palm overflowing with joy. The Bar Mitzvah where grandma or grandpa finds this superhuman strength to put on dress clothes and be there, even though they are in truth, so very ill and struggling? The father I watched lower his mask for the first time in 3

months, so that he might walk down the aisle escorting his daughter the bride, a superhuman journey from bone marrow transplant day to wedding day. Where does that inner strength and resilience come from, to overcome reality so that one can sit as the patriarch or matriarch with the generations, perhaps for one last time? *When did you witness, or bear, those moments?*

This has been a year for me of holding on to these two truths; to live in the reality of joy while living in the reality of loss. I think I would encapsulate the wisdom of this year for me in three teachings. The first is, this “Be present for what is, not for what you expect/want there to be.” I had expected that this year of Sam’s illness would play out differently. I thought we would have a year, I anticipated flying to Chicago, periodically, spending more time together in person. My expectation was wrong. But I committed myself to be as present as I could be, in every way I could be. When Sam was alive, we would talk on the phone every few months. There was no such thing as a short conversation. If you think I’m a talker, you have not met Sam. I would call him when I had an hour or 90 minutes to devote to a phone call. Early in his illness I told him that I would call often and that we could just have a quick 15-minute hello, just to hear each other’s voice. But that was not the way it was to be. Conversations do not happen quickly for people who struggle with pain, or with pain medication. So each week we would have long conversations, and they were not about illness but about our childhood, our memories, our grandparents and parents. We made something meaningful happen in our relationship, finding the opportunity to affirm our love and support for each other, over and over. I could stop my work, be present for him, and regardless of what tomorrow would bring for him, we had today’s conversation to savor. The Hasidic teacher Levi Yitzchak of Berdechev teaches that when God says, “see, I place before you this day blessing”, our task is to recognize *not* that each day we will receive blessing, but that each day we must be present with what is, and actively choose to embrace the blessing. I chose to be present in our relationship, creating the space in my life for it to lead me, rather than conform to my expectations of it.

The second wisdom I took from this year, is this: “Don’t only plan for tomorrow’s events. Create today’s joy.” There is a story about an elderly man who visits his wife’s grave at the cemetery every day. A young woman, who sees him there often, notices that he stands at the grave and over and over he says, “Tomorrow we will talk about the cruise, tomorrow we will make plans to see your sister, tomorrow we will get plane tickets to visit the kids.” Is he having mental confusion, she wonders, that he stands at his wife’s grave and talks about their plans for tomorrow? Finally, she approaches him and says, “I’m sorry, I just overheard your conversation; you are making plans with your wife for tomorrow?” With great sadness the man looks at her and says, “these are the words I said to my wife everyday when she would ask about making plans...I didn’t know there wouldn’t be a tomorrow.” Creating today’s joy is not about busying yourself checking things off your bucket list, so that you screech into homeplate exhausted, battered, bruised but having taken life for a ride- no... that may be fun but that is not Joy. Fun is a fleeting event, Joy is having cultivated within ourselves a state of being in the world where we feel full, because of what we have given of ourselves authentically and deeply to others. It is not about external experiences we have had. It is about inner contentment we have cultivated. I watched this experience of creating joy just a few months ago in this sanctuary. A couple, who

had spent the prior year wrestling with serious illness, chose to celebrate an upcoming wedding anniversary with a vow renewal at the ark. Surrounded simply by their children and closest of relatives, they chose to simply acknowledge, at this moment in their relationship, the fullness, and joy, and depth of what they had created, to acknowledge the challenges before them, and the opportunities to grow even deeper in their relationship because of the hardships on life's path. They let love rule the day- and the joy was palpable.

The third wisdom for me this year, is this: Life does not come in neat packages, like a time to be born, a time to die. I had been reading Ecclesiastes wrong all of these years. I understood this from a note of consolation, from a colleague who I actually do not know. She wrote: I empathize, Lisa with your sentiment of how overwhelming it is to simultaneously experience grief and joy. My wife and I became parents during the summer between my 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of rabbinic school- just four weeks after my father died. While many tried to comfort me with the words, a "time to be born, a time to die", I knew there are not such separate distinct times but individual moments when we might be able to focus on each..." Yes, I realized how often we have to live in both worlds, hold both truths, both tensions, both realities. I turned back to the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes, and realized that "BOTH" was what the wise author was telling us, for the Hebrew reads "*Eht l'ledet, v' eht L'amut;*" not, "A time to be born, a time to die," But "a time to be born, AND a time to die," that Vav- which means "and", is a connective- it makes contiguous all of these experiences. This AND this. These times in our lives are not separate/ categories, /events, /experiences. Sometimes time unfolds in a linear way. AND sometimes it happens simultaneously.

At the end of April, I watched our first grandchild be born into this world, watched the moment of ensoulment as she took her first breath and, like everyone born in the world before her, become a human being. Seven weeks later I watched the slow process of Sam taking his very last breath, a merciful release from pain and disease, a surrender back into the world of the lifeforce that had animated a man who touched so many with his caring heart and good humor. Life and death are not so much like switches that get thrown on a train track, but more like parallel train tracks. Not just Ecclesiastes, but Jewish ritual seems to understand this. We welcomed Ayla Maayan into the covenant with an 8<sup>th</sup> day Hebrew naming, naming her in part for her great-grandfather, of blessed memory, and for a cousin, who had died too young...before Sam died my daughter sat by his bedside, and showed him the well-guarded picture of her in her wedding dress for her wedding three weeks hence... and when the time came, we rejoiced at her wedding, but holding broken glass shards that spoke of the incompleteness of the moment because of the loved ones who we dreamed would see this day, but who did not. Joy and sadness continue to be intermingled. The sadness does not so much lessen the joy, as make more meaningful/deepen the joy.

When people have asked me "how was your summer," this year, I have found myself struggling to find the right words. This sermon, I think, is the answer to their question. Life is filled with the daily joys, and the once-in—a- lifetime joys, and it is equally filled with the moments of sadness and challenge. May we find a way to hold it all, be present for it all, and sanctify it all. Amen.