

Slow Down
Yom Kippur Evening 2017 / 5777
Rabbi Mark Kaiserman
The Reform Temple of Forest Hills

Slow down, you move too fast
You got to make the morning last
Just kicking down the cobblestones
Looking for fun and feelin' groovy.¹

Life is fast. And it's getting faster. Technology, economic demands, social pressures, and a general sense of competitiveness has pushed us to work, play, and live a much more intense pace of living than ever before. We hear it all the time: The summer is too fast. The day is too quick. And how long is it until the next season of *Game of Thrones*?

At work, we spend longer hours officially on the clock than nearly any other country – nine more weeks a year than the average European. 9 to 5 has vanished as we work more on our off-hours checking email and being accessible by cell phones. Most people have few weeks of vacation available to them – and don't even take all the days off that are coming to them. And even when we go on vacation, those vacations are often hectic adventures or we stay in touch with work regularly leaving us anything but rested.

We definitely are moving too fast. We don't take time to rest. The average American gets ninety minutes fewer hours sleep each night than a century ago. Of course, there wasn't late-night television then either. Or television. We have instant entertainment and information in ways no one could have imagined. "I'll sleep when I'm dead," we say, or as Ben Franklin originally put it, "There will be sleeping enough in the grave"

"We are moving from a world in which the big eat the small to one in which the fast eat the slow."²

We have become accustomed to our breakneck lifestyle. It is only in the moments when something is malfunctioning that we find we can no longer cope in the new world of fast. The wi-fi goes out or the cable or the power or we're stuck on the subway with nothing to do. Then we discover how quickly we are bored or unable to entertain ourselves.

Carl Honoré, the author of *In Praise of Slowness*, recognized he was moving down a dangerous path when he found the book *One Minute Bedtime Stories* an attractive way to fulfill his son's desire for multiple stories while still getting to his own stuff at night.³ We praise quality time over quantity time and then spend later years regretting where we focused ourselves. "Speed is

irrelevant if you're traveling in the wrong direction," we're reminded by Gandhi. But he never had an internet connection.

When people are asked what they want out of life, what might help, "more time" is often cited. We imagine filling it with family, a chance to catch up with friends, hobbies we love. But in reality, if we added an extra day of the week, most of us would fill it with more of the same – work, errands, sports, scrolling through Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, mindlessly binge watching a show episode after episode, playing Xbox, and so on. More time is not about more time do things, but how we make each moment matter.

Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, reminds us we need to create that time in our lives and keep it slow. We take off from other activities on this holy day and the day can drag a little. Fasting doesn't help. Yet, this day is unique in our lives because we take it easy and let the hours float. By investing in this moment, in this time, we have a marker that is different than the rest of the week, the rest of the year. Showing up counts for something, but enjoying this time, the meditative, the holy, makes the experience actually memorable and meaningful. In other words, if you keep checking the clock on Yom Kippur, it'll last a long while.

We focus on a constant need for speed that provides little in terms of memories, connections, and self renewal. I think of the electric car, which recharges every time you step on the brakes. We're overdue to step on the brakes.

Levi Yizthak of Berditchev was walking through the town square when he saw a Hasid rushing along, briefcase in hand. The Rebbe said to him, "Stop for a second and say hello." The Hasid said, "Rebbe, don't you know that I have to chase after a living?" Levi Yitzhak replied, "How do you know that your living is in front of you? Maybe it's behind you trying to catch up."

This past summer I spent a week at Glacier National Park in Montana. As my tour group hit the trails, I found myself in New York City mode, needing to speed to the next stop. On one trail, we heard there was a mother bear and her cub ahead. I walked with purpose wanting to see the bears before they disappeared into the trees. We found the pair playing on a large ice patch and sat on a hill at a safe distance. We ate lunch watching the majesty of God's creatures run, chase, and nuzzle each other. I wanted

to be nowhere else. I will admit the whole group did move really quickly when the bears suddenly decided to walk up the hill we were getting on. But for the rest of the trip, I walked more slowly, took lots of photos, and marveled at the animals and surroundings of this amazing National Park.

There is a story about the steps leading to the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem on the Southern Wall. Each step was a different height and width. You couldn't just run up the steps. You had to watch where you were going. This was intentional to make everyone slow down, look around, and also to reflect inside.

Some things are just designed to be done slowly. Knitting is great for some. I love baseball which has no timed ending, although the way the Mets played this season make some games last forever. On the other hand I can't watch soccer at all, while others find the sport intoxicating.

Tomorrow after morning services, four members of our Temple will talk about ways they take it slow at our Layperson's Hour. Stay after Yom Kippur morning services, because where else do you really have to go?

A couple years ago, I joined a group of rabbis and cantors in a year long spirituality program. At our retreats, we were silent for most of the day, did Jewish yoga, and extended meditation. It was challenging. It turned out I was fine at the keeping quiet part – I know that's a little surprising – however my mind was racing during the meditation to every place, but the current focus. Extended meditation was not my way to slow down.

Slowing it down takes mindfulness. We have to consciously celebrate the instant we are in. When silent prayers comes in a service, it is hard to use that time to reflect and let our mind explore the divine. We sprint from moment to moment often thinking ahead when we will slow it down like the weekend, vacation, or even retirement. It is hard to decelerate so suddenly. When you are diving 70 and suddenly go 25, it seems like a crawl. We have to train ourselves to appreciate and celebrate such reflection all around us.

Many people find great power in yoga. My dad loves it. He didn't start doing it regularly until he was 65 and continues to do it three times week. He loves the stretching, but finds strength and power in the breathing and being in the moment. Over 90 people joined us on Second Day Rosh Hashanah for our meaningful service of reflection and guided meditation, prayer, and song, with our special guest Jackie Tepper. Jackie will be returning to the Temple to lead her specialty, Neshama Yoga, Yoga of the soul. Join us on Saturday, October 14 at 4pm for this elevating journey.

Judaism reminds us of that need to celebrate the slow and thoughtful every week. Every Shabbat is an opportunity to step off of the accelerator or drop out of cruise control. Shabbat is a blessing. If we can grab onto it, it is a break from the hustle of six other days. It is easy to let it become another day of speed like the rest of the week. We have to work to make the day, or even a piece of the day, one of mindfulness for ourselves, for our family.

Holiness doesn't come quickly. There are few shortcuts to finding connections to the divine, to ourselves, or to each other. And what is earned in steady, quiet approach pays off many times over. There's a reason fast food is forgettable, but a great meal is luxuriated.

Our Saturday morning Torah Study class has mastered the art and blessing of slow learning as it goes through the Five Books of Moses at a reflective, but fascinating pace. It took us 2 ½ years to complete Genesis. And Exodus may take just as long. But it is a deep dive that everyone found inspiring. Consider joining us any Saturday at 9am.

Whether it is services, Torah study, time you spend with family or friends, or time you find for yourself, make next Shabbat – and every Shabbat – one filled with a chance to slow down and recharge.

There is a power in the slow and in the silent. At Selichot, we heard the story of 1000 women interred in Auschwitz. They somehow arranged to observe Yom Kippur. The guards gave them one candle and one siddur and told the inmates they had 15 minutes. A young woman took the prayerbook and began to slowly chant Kol Nidre. Each word was aching to be sung. Each note wavered in pain and holiness. 1000 woman stood there silently. They heard every syllable. They said nothing, but everyone cried.⁴

When we spend our lives busy in technology and media and conversation, we never have time to hear ourselves. We need reflection moments to consider life, weigh options, and explore our journey. Sometimes we just need it to center ourselves.

My friend Kate Wurtzel, recently shared her slowing it down: "Starting a PhD program, working part time, and having three kids including an infant, means you have to accept some level of craziness and messiness in your house and in your life. I feel like I should write a book about 'letting go' and 'finding quiet space.' This morning I choose to turn a blind eye to the dishes, laundry, and everything else, the things that silently demand my attention, and instead I choose to sit and simply BE with my baby boy."

Slow down. We move too fast. We have to make the moments last. We race through life with forgettable, insignificant events, hurrying to be first so we can wait or simply run off to the next moment. Like Shabbat teaches us each week, we have to savor moments for ourselves, our family, and our community.

Or as another sage once put it, the great Ferris Bueller, “Life moves pretty fast. You don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

¹ Paul Simon, The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)

² Klaus Schwab from *In Praise of Slowness* by Carl Honoré (2004), 4.

³ *In Praise of Slowness*, 2-3.

⁴ Judy Weissenberg Cohen, *18 Voice Sing Kol Nidre*.