

EMBRACING LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

Ever since I can remember, I have always had difficulty sitting still. Those who know me often describe me as "energetic" and "constantly on the go-" which is usually code for the fact that I am often in a rush and tend to move quickly through life.

When I stop to think about it, this personality trait has been with me for most of my life. When I was in grade school, and in high school, I would always rush to get all of my work done so that I could have time for extracurricular activities. I can remember many an afternoon in high school when I would rush to get my math homework done in the car on the car ride home- a car ride that was less than ten minutes long! And eating- well, let's just say that the question: "Where's the fire?" was my mother's most common question at the dinner table.

As I grew into adulthood, I began to appreciate the importance of slowing down on an intellectual level, but often found that I thrived on moving at a fast pace. I have always tried to organize my schedule and my life to maximize every moment. I have a half an hour break here--what can I rush to get done in this time. I am up early, how much can I rush to get done before my wife wakes up?

"What's next?" "What else can I get done?" as if life is just one giant to-do list and I must never stop trying to check things off.

Fortunately, being an observant Jew helps. On Shabbat, on festivals such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there is no rush- because the only place I have to be is here, with my community and with my family. The "to do lists" are put aside for the day- waiting to be picked up when the holiday is over. But when I am in "hol" mode, when I am living life each and every secular day, I continually find that I am often rushing from place to place, from one task to the next- hurrying through life at a dizzying pace.

American society in the 21st century seems to be moving at a breakneck pace. Everyone I know seems to struggle in some way to "keep pace" with the speed of the world. Because the truth is that "keeping pace" is a delusion. We will never be able to get "everything done," no matter how fast we go. And in actuality, there is some research to support the notion that moving faster to get more done simply does not work. In actuality, the slower we go, the more productive we might become. A NY Times piece called "*Relax! You'll Be More Productive*" (Tony Schwartz, Feb. 9, 2013) argued that if we, as a society, would spend more time relaxing and getting the proper amount of rest, we would actually lead more productive and efficient lives. The article reads:

THINK for a moment about your typical workday. Do you wake up tired? Check your e-mail before you get out of bed? Skip breakfast or grab something on the run that's not particularly nutritious? Rarely get away from your desk for lunch? Run from meeting to meeting with no time in between? Find it nearly impossible to keep up with the volume of e-mail you receive? Leave work later than you'd like, and still feel compelled to check e-mail in the evenings?

More and more of us find ourselves unable to juggle overwhelming demands and maintain a seemingly unsustainable pace. Paradoxically, the best way to get more done may be to spend more time doing less. A new and growing body of multidisciplinary research shows that strategic renewal — including daytime workouts, short afternoon naps, longer sleep hours, more time away from the office and longer, more frequent vacations — boosts productivity, job performance and, of course, health.

In other words, our fast pace is often based on an unrealistic assumption that we have it all and do it all, and this way of thinking turns out to be not only unhealthy, but also counterproductive.

Our hurried lifestyle does not simply affect our productivity at work. In general, we are missing out on too much of our life because of our fast pace. We are going to sleep more exhausted, getting in more accidents on the road as we rush to fit in a text or a phone call, and having less meaningful personal lives.

I read a great blog post by a writer named Rachel Macy Stafford called, "*The Day I Stopped Saying 'Hurry Up'.*" Stafford describes her hurried condition as a mom who was living what she calls, "a distracted life." She wrote:

When you're living a distracted life, every minute must be accounted for. You feel like you must be checking something off the list, staring at a screen, or rushing off to the next destination. And no matter how many ways you divide your time and attention, no matter how many duties you try and multi-task, there's never enough time in a day to ever catch up.

That was my life for two frantic years. My thoughts and actions were controlled by electronic notifications, ringtones, and jam-packed agendas. And although every fiber of my inner drill sergeant wanted to be on time to every activity on my overcommitted schedule, I wasn't.

You see, six years ago I was blessed with a laid-back, carefree, stop-and-smell-the roses type of child.

When I needed to be out the door, she was taking her sweet time picking out a purse and a glittery crown.

When I needed to be somewhere five minutes ago, she insisted on buckling her stuffed animal into a car seat.

When I needed to grab a quick lunch at Subway, she'd stop to speak to the elderly woman who looked like her grandma.

When I had 30 minutes to get in a run, she wanted me to stop the stroller and pet every dog we passed.

When I had a full agenda that started at 6:00 a.m., she asked to crack the eggs and stir them ever so gently.

My carefree child was a gift to my Type A, task-driven nature --but I didn't see it. Oh no, when you live life distracted, you have tunnel vision -- only looking ahead to what's next on the agenda. And anything that cannot be checked off the list is a waste of time.

Whenever my child caused me to deviate from my master schedule, I thought to myself, "We don't have time for this." Consequently, the two words I most commonly spoke to my little lover of life were: "Hurry up."

I started my sentences with it: Hurry up, we're gonna be late.

I ended sentences with it: We're going to miss everything if you don't hurry up.

I started my day with it: Hurry up and eat your breakfast. Hurry up and get dressed.

I ended my day with it: Hurry up and brush your teeth. Hurry up and get in bed.

And although the words "hurry up" did little if nothing to increase my child's speed, I said them anyway. Maybe even more than the words, "I love you."

The truth hurts, but the truth heals... and brings me closer to the parent I want to be.

Then one fateful day, things changed. We'd just picked my older daughter up from kindergarten and were getting out of the car. Not going fast enough for her liking, my older daughter said to her little sister, "You are so slow." And when she crossed her arms and let out an exasperated sigh, I saw myself -- and it was a gut-wrenching sight.

I was a bully who pushed and pressured and hurried a small child who simply wanted to enjoy life.

My eyes were opened; I saw with clarity the damage my hurried existence was doing to both of my children.

Although my voice trembled, I looked into my small child's eyes and said, "I am so sorry I have been making you hurry. I love that you take your time, and I want to be more like you."

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-macy-stafford/the-day-i-stopped-saying-hurry-up_b_3624798.html- 8-6-2013)

Now I know that the fact that I too am a parent of small, often unhurried children, made this resonate for me in a particularly poignant way, but I imagine we all can relate to this in one way or another. Many of us are continually telling our kids to hurry up, or telling the cars in front of us to hurry up, or wishing our elderly parents would hurry up, or wishing our friends, neighbors, or co-workers would hurry up. And worst of all, we're constantly telling ourselves to hurry up! But it is time for me,

and for anyone who is like me, to stop. It is time to slow down and stop rushing ourselves and those we love.

We all have good excuses- "there is so much to do and so little time," we say. But whose fault is that? Our schedules are overflowing with things to do. We have so many places to be. Our children have to go from school, to gymnastics, to soccer, to Hebrew school, eating dinner on the go in-between and then rushing home to do homework until 11:00PM when they are in fifth grade. And we wonder why everything is so hurried. But whose fault is that? The answer is that it is our fault- yours and mine.

It is our fault because we have given into the culture of FOMO. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, FOMO is a contemporary acronym that stands for "fear of missing out." We rush through life because we fear that we might miss something. We try to accomplish at least three things at once because if we don't get them all done we fear that we might "miss something." We over-program our children and rush them from one place to the next because we are worried that they might "miss out" on a great opportunity. And we check our e-mail and facebook compulsively and carry our phones everywhere we go because we are anxious that we might actually "miss out" on something important. The problem is that this fear is unnecessary. Because the truth is that we WILL miss out on things and more often than not, **that is actually okay.** The world will actually not come to an end!

There are days when we will not be able to move "fast enough" to get everything done. Our children will not, cannot, and should not, pursue every experience available to them. We will spend more time on a task, or god forbid on relaxing, and run out of time to do those three other things we meant to get done or thought about doing. Life is about choices and values, and no matter how quickly we move, we must teach our children and ourselves that we can only accomplish so much.

We have become a society that is always moving along the rollercoaster of life and we have forgotten how to enjoy the experience of simply standing around in line, appreciating the world that is around us. For those of you who have been to Disney World, just think of the way many visitors organize their ride schedules. In order to maximize our experience we get a "fast pass," because who wants to "wait around," we might miss something great! But in our rush to get on all of the rides in life, are we rushing so much that we forget to enjoy the ride we're on? Do we just end up exhausted with much of our life becoming a blur because of the hurried pace at which we tried to accomplish everything.

Keeping in mind the concept that Yom Kippur is actually a dramatic rehearsal for our deaths, we each must ask ourselves: *If today was my last day on earth, would I be proud of who I am, of how I live my life, and of what I have accomplished?*

And, recognizing that Yom Kippur is referred to as "Shabbat Shabbaton," a Sabbath of all Sabbaths, the ultimate day of rest, we also must ask ourselves: *Am I taking*

the time to stop, to pause, to rest and reflect and appreciate life, or am I living in a constant state of motion?

For me the two questions are linked. And if, God forbid, today were my last day on this earth, I would not be entirely satisfied with my track-record of rushing through life. I would venture a guess that I am not alone.

So what do we do? For those of us in this room who, like myself, feel like we are constantly in motion and struggle with slowing down, and doing less- where might we begin? We begin right here and right now on Yom Kippur; on this Shabbat Shabbaton. We begin by remembering that this could be it. Today could be our last day. When we conclude Musaf tomorrow, we will do so with the liturgical poem, "Hayom," today, reminding us that this moment, today, is the most important moment in our life right now. Did we enjoy it? Did we live? Did we slow down? Or did we merely exist, moving quickly through the holiday in an effort to get to the next thing on our to do list? We begin by stopping to tell those whom we love the most, that we love them- *hayom*, today. We begin by spending time with them over this holiday and throughout the rest of the year. We begin by making time to have an actual conversation, not text conversation, or facebook conversation, or e-mail conversation, with our friends, relatives, and loved ones, *hayom*, today. We begin by reminding ourselves that our "to do lists" are often unrealistic and that it is unhealthy, unwise, unproductive, and impossible, to move through life as if it were one long marathon. We slow down, and we do that *hayom*, today.

And then, after we have taken these initial steps to slow down, we do what is most important on Yom Kippur- we remember that just as God will forgive us, so too should we forgive ourselves. It is time for a fresh start. It is time to begin again. We have been blessed with another year. We have been given another chance. Let's slow down and enjoy it.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah, May all of us be sealed in the Book of Life.