

Dear Congregants and Friends ~

One trait both good trial lawyers and great running backs have in common is their ability to shift direction and “turn on a dime”. I had already prepared most of my column for November, when I decided to take a break to do some yoga. After the class, my yoga teacher shared a story about her son that so resonated with me that I have decided to “scrap” my initial article and instead write about what I took from her story.

First, however, I would like to point out that, after 6 weeks of seemingly non-stop religious “holy days”, the Jewish calendar has reached a temporary lull period. The Hebrew month that we are now in, for example, once called Cheshvan, is now called Mar Cheshvan, or “bitter Cheshvan,” called so, because the month has no holidays in it. According to our Tradition, however, the absence of any holidays this month can also be a good thing, providing us with an opportunity to slow down our lives a bit and to use the month for personal reflection.

Returning now for my yoga teacher’s story. Her 5 year old son has just recently started kindergarten. When I asked her how he is adjusting to leaving home and taking a school bus each day, she said that he implores her each morning “to please hurry up and walk him to the bus stop,” that he does not want to be late and miss the bus and thus get to see his friends. A big smile came to my face as I remembered how much I enjoyed taking the bus to elementary school, seeing and talking with my friends on the bus, and how this contrasted with the attitude that I later had, when I was in high school, when my parents would often have to prod me to “hurry up,” so that I would not miss the school bus.

She then shared with me how his teachers have just started giving her son brief homework assignments, one for each day of the week, urging all of the parents not to let their children do more than one daily assignment at a time. She said that she and her son have started working together on writing and learning his numbers and the letters of the alphabet. “When they complete each night’s assignment,” she said, “he pleads with me to let him continue with the next night’s lesson, which, following the teacher’s instructions, she respectfully declines to do.”

I again thought back how excited I was to learn to read and to write, when I was in kindergarten, and how I would have stayed up well past my bedtime to read had my parents permitted me to do so, and how this contrasted with my attitude about my studies, when I was in high school, when my sports, social life, and other responsibilities made me feel that I had not a free moment in my life and even caused me to question the relevance of some of what I was learning.

What accounts for this change in attitude as we grow older and assume more and more responsibility? This question called to mind for me one of my favorite adult “children’s” books, “The Precious Present,” by Dr. Spencer Johnson, who has a knack of packing a great deal of wisdom into a relatively small number of pages. What Dr. Johnson teaches in his book is that one of the greatest gifts that we can give ourselves, whatever our age, is to live as much as possible in the present moment, which, in turn, leads to feelings of gratitude and appreciation in our lives.

As a child, I recall savoring every day, every new experience, with feelings of amazement, accomplishment, and joy (unless, of course, my parents happened to say “no” to something that I wanted to do).

The critically important role played by living in the present moment and gratitude in leading a joyful and meaningful life is well recognized in the Jewish Tradition, serving to explain, why we are called upon to begin each morning with prayers of gratitude; why we are encouraged to say 100 blessings each day; and why we are urged to take a day of rest, Shabbat, for ourselves, to name but 3 ways to develop mindfulness and gratitude. I know, for myself, that my days go far differently, depending on whether I begin my day with prayer and meditation or immediately jump headfirst into the day, thinking about all that I have to do; and whether I proceed from one responsibility to the next during the day or instead carve out some time during the day for quiet, exercise, and/or a walk in nature.

With hate and intolerance in our country and across the world appearing so frequently in the news today, I thought that I might close my article with a story of healing and redemption, resulting from a swift and strong response by leadership to an act of bigotry and anti-Semitism in Italy. Last week, at an Italian “A” league soccer game,

Anne Frank's picture was used to "troll" a rival team. Responding quickly and decisively, and with compassion, Italy's governing soccer body responded to this act of anti-Semitism, strongly condemning those responsible, saying that such behavior will not be tolerated in Italy, and ordering that a passage from "The Diary of Anne Frank" be read aloud before all soccer games this week throughout the country.

The passage from her "diary" is one of hope and teaches that we adults can learn much from our children: "I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness; I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And, yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better; that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

Kayn Y'hi Ratzon! "May it be your will, Adonai!"

Rabbi Howard Mandell