

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Evening
September 9, 2018 – 1 Tishri, 5779
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

In my senior year of college, toward the end of January, I was sitting in my room looking down at a pile of papers. On the top was the application for the Wexner Graduate Fellowship. A professor had recommended that I look into the Fellowship: “I think they have some money,” he had said.

He was right. The Fellowship would pay my full tuition, pay me a generous living stipend, cover my health-care expenses, and provide me with an extraordinary program of leadership training. I had written away for the materials, and, like so many important things, I put it on the pile next to my desk.

I looked at the application again. It was Thursday. The application was due the following Wednesday. I had less than a week. So I called: “I was wondering if I could have an extension on the application?” “Sorry ... no you can’t,” came the reply.

So – I went to work. I called one of my professors: “Would you be willing to write me a letter for that fellowship?” “It would be my pleasure,” he said. “Would you be willing to Fed-Ex it?” I asked timidly. “It’s due Wednesday.” I cancelled my weekend plans and buried myself in front of the computer to complete the required essays and then I saw the last piece.

I needed to submit the application in triplicate – with passport photos. It was Sunday afternoon. The only place that did passport photos in Hamilton, New York was the bike shop. I called – “Bob’s out fishing,” came the reply. “When’s he getting back?” I asked. Thankfully, Bob opened the shop for me at 10:00 p.m. and I was able to Fed-Ex my application out the next day.

Jewish tradition teaches that to truly perform Teshuva you have to admit your failings out loud. So, I will say it here with you: I procrastinate. It’s gotten better over the years, but it’s still a terrible vice. I procrastinated on working on that application until the last minute. It inconvenienced my teachers, who had to produce recommendations at the last minute. My friends were mad I cancelled on them. And had Bob been out fishing for one more day, I would have missed the deadline.

Thankfully, I got a call in May early on a Friday morning that I had been selected for the Fellowship. I was up – I had just pulled an all-nighter finishing my thesis.

When I told my family I was going to talk about procrastination on Rosh HaShanah, I got a lot of the predictable jokes. “Written your sermon on procrastination yet?” Haha. But procrastination is a really serious problem. Procrastination increases our stress, jeopardizes our capacity for success, and inconveniences the lives of those around us.

Procrastination is the most potent form of self-sabotage that keeps us from living the lives we want, the lives we ought to live.

Why do we procrastinate? For most of us, procrastination is simple. There is something we know we have to do, but we really don't want to do it. Ask any student with homework to do why they are sitting watching television or playing video games and they will tell you – I hate homework. It's not fun. It's boring. We put off the things we don't want to do, even though we know we need to get them done. Who wants to clean out a closet? Who wants to do their tax forms? It's fine. It can wait. It's not urgent. It will get done ... eventually. Come on – no one's going to die.

But sometimes it's bigger than that. Dr. Jane Burka and Dr. Lenora Yuen in their studies of procrastination found that one of the major reasons people procrastinate is fear. Primary among those fears is a fear of failure. "Many people who procrastinate," Burka and Yuen write, "are apprehensive about being judged by others or by the critic who dwells within."¹ Deep down, we worry: what if I do my best, and it's not enough? What if I'm not enough? Internally, so much is riding on what we accomplish that we can't finish or even start a project – we literally become paralyzed with fear.

It's worse for perfectionists. A perfectionist sets extremely high standards, sometimes impossibly high standards, and believes you can only be successful if you meet them. You become so concerned with making mistakes, or that your finished product won't measure up to your expectations that you feel a sense of shame and disappointment in yourself. That fear of failure makes it so you cannot begin or see your way through to the end – you procrastinate.

We see this fear of failure everywhere. Someone decides they want to write a book, but can't get past the first few pages because they think their writing stinks and that their ideas aren't smart enough. Someone decides to start exercising, but gets quickly frustrated when they can't perform at the level they did in high school. Someone decides to take up a hobby, but drops it when they can't paint like Picasso or hit a golf ball like Tiger Woods.

A second reason people procrastinate ironically comes from a second kind of fear: a fear of success. How can you be afraid to succeed? Sometimes people fear being criticized for being ambitious. Other times people are afraid to compete for a promotion because if they win, someone loses, and you might hurt someone's feelings, lose a friend, or people won't like you. A woman was working in a terrible job in an abusive work environment, but kept putting off applying for a better job because she didn't want to abandon her co-workers.

A third reason people procrastinate is a fear of losing control. No one likes being told what to do, so we put off what others expect or require so we can prove to ourselves that they can't control us. We use procrastination like a weapon – "This is a ridiculous assignment! Why do we have to do it *her* way?"² If my self-worth comes a sense of

¹ Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen, *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now*. Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2008, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

autonomy or independence, from feeling like I'm the master of my own destiny, then I procrastinate in order to resist letting someone else have control.

But no matter why we procrastinate, we suffer similar consequences. We miss deadlines and antagonize co-workers or partners or family members who were counting on us. We carry anxiety and dread knowing we are falling behind in our responsibilities and commitments. We feel lousy about ourselves because of the things we leave to the last minute or leave undone forever. And worse – we wasted time.

One of the greatest gifts Judaism gave to the world was the concept that time itself is sacred. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: "Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time... There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique ... exclusive and endlessly precious."³

There is nothing holier or more precious than time. The Holy One has loaned us something incredibly holy and precious – the gift of life. The High Holy days remind us how incredibly fragile and fleeting is that gift. We are loaned something so precious – and when we procrastinate or waste time, we defile the holiness of that gift.

The consequences of wasting time can be catastrophic. We procrastinate too often at our work commitments and we lose a job. We procrastinate too often in our commitments to our families and we lose our marriages. We procrastinate too often in taking care of our well-being that we lose our health – or worse. We procrastinate too long in taking care of our world, and we may lose life as we know it.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the world has warmed more than one degree Celsius. The Paris Climate Accord from which the United States announced its intent to depart sought to limit warming to two degrees – the odds of its success is about five percent. Robert Watson, a former director of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has argued that at this stage, three-degree warming is the realistic minimum. The overwhelming majority of climate scientists agree that will produce catastrophic consequences around the globe – the extinction of the world's tropical reefs, sea-level rise of several meters, the loss of most coastal cities, the advance of desertification and severe weather disasters.

And as Nathaniel Rich has reported, "Nearly everything we understand about global warming was understood in 1979. By that year, data collected since 1957 confirmed what had been known since before the turn of the 20th century: Human beings have altered Earth's atmosphere through the indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels.

In the late 1970s, the CIA and other governmental agencies formed a group of scientists called the Jaxons to devise scientific solutions to national security problems. They began to study the effects of carbon dioxide on the earth's atmosphere. "The Jaxons' report to the Department of Energy, titled 'The Long-Term Impact of Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide on Climate,' was written in an understated tone that only enhanced its nightmarish findings. Even a minimal warming "could lead to rapid melting" of the West

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*. New York: Noonday Press, 1951, p. 8.

Antarctic ice sheet. The ice sheet contained enough water to raise the level of the oceans 16 feet.”⁴

In response, a lobbyist and organizer named Rafe Pomerance and a master geophysicist named Gordon MacDonald circled Washington and Capitol Hill to raise awareness among power-brokers and policy-makers. Over the ensuing decade, a growing consensus was built among scientists, leaders in the fossil fuel industry, politicians and policy-makers that something profound needed to be done on a global scale. In 1988, George H.W. Bush campaigned for president and took up the challenge. “Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect,” he said, “are forgetting about the White House effect.”⁵

But during that first year of his administration, the consensus around meaningful action toward lowering carbon emissions began to unravel. From inside and outside the administration came voices challenging the science, questioning the economic impacts, and looking to postpone an agreement. At an international conference convened in November 1981, in the end no agreement was reached to curb carbon emissions. And in the years since, we have continued to procrastinate, and now the world is beginning to see the horrific effects we have known were coming for forty years.

So why haven't we acted? Because we're collectively afraid. We're afraid of changing our way of life, especially if it costs more. We're afraid of inconvenience. We're afraid of giving over control to the science and policy makers to change how we power our lives and transport ourselves, and policy makers in turn are afraid to ask us to change for fear of losing their positions and power. Fear is what leads to procrastination, but procrastination is what leads to destruction.

What if we could work this year to overcome our fears – to name them and acknowledge them, but not let them dictate how we live? What if we could realize that our self-worth is defined by our courage to face the challenges and opportunities of our time?

Tomorrow we will return to the central theme of our liturgy – Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat HaYom – Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day. In the midst of this day of reflection and judgment, we are reminded of how fragile is that precious gift of life. “Who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not...”

For everyone – there comes that day. One day, you will visit the doctor who will tell you, “You have ...” One day you will find you can't do what you used to do. You can't remember as well as you once did. The abstract idea that life is short suddenly becomes very real.

We don't want to arrive at that place and discover, as Henry David Thoreau feared: “that I had not lived.” We can, instead, live deliberately, and be more careful and conscious about how we make best use of the precious time allotted to us.

⁴ “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change” by Nathaniel Rich in *New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

The Talmud relates a story: “Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said A king once invited his servants to a feast and did not set a time for them to come. The wise among them adorned themselves and sat at the entrance to the king’s house. They said: Is the king’s house missing anything necessary for the feast? Certainly the king could invite them at any moment. The fools among them went about their work and said: While the feast is being prepared, we will attend to other matters.

“Suddenly, the king requested that his servants come to the feast. The wise among them entered before him adorned in their finest clothes, and the fools entered before him unprepared. The king said: These wise servants who prepared themselves for the feast shall sit and eat and drink, but these fools who did not prepare will not participate.”⁶

None of us knows what time is left to us. So we must endeavor to use our time most wisely. We need to stop putting off the choices we know we need to make, the tasks we know we need to fulfill. We need to make it known to our elected leaders that we demand they stop procrastinating and come together to confront the pressing issues of our time – the soaring national debt, our failing infrastructure, our broken immigration policies, and the challenge of greenhouse emissions, climate change, and sea rise.

In the Mishna in Pirke Avot, Rabbi Eliezer teaches us that we ought repent one day before our death. Since none of us knows when that day will come, we need to always be prepared. Likewise guests, we do not know when we will be summoned to the feast, so we need to live our lives ready to answer that call.

Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short and the work is much, the workers feel sluggish, but the reward is great, and the Master of the House is pressing.⁷

In this New Year, let us resolve to make best deliberate use of the precious gift of life we are so blessed to enjoy. It’s not easy. It’s scary. But if we can overcome our fears and face the challenge of this moment, then this moment can be truly blessed, our lives can be truly blessed, and our world can be truly blessed, for us, for our children and the generations to come.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153a

⁷ Pirke Avot 2:20