**Shira Hadasha Melbourne, Yom Kippur Drash 5780, Annette Charak**

Almost 24 hours ago, we stood together, in the twilight at the beginning of Yom Kippur, sated, in an orderly space, ready with a sense of anticipation as we began Kol Nidrei. We recited the legal formula annulling all vows, sung with meaning and beauty, and expressing remorse for our sins, in the in between time that marks the beginning of YK, in perhaps the most widely attended shul service in the Jewish calendar.

Now we are gathered again, also at a time of twilight, but with a dramatically changed mood: perhaps tired, hungry, thirsty, in need of a coffee, a little dishevelled, and generally a little worse for wear. And yet, … as if by some sort of magic, in this twilight, we often feel uplifted, almost ecstatic, with a new energy for this closing service.

Gathered here in this particular moment, this *peculiar* moment, this twilight time, … time feels suspended, as if we are all part of some kind of living breathing still life. … We gather. And like me, you might find yourself thinking of other years, other Neilah services: I remember the first year I fasted … so proud that I had fasted the year *before* my batmitzvah; the years when the fast was broken with a festive meal at my grandparents; I remember the year I was 8 months pregnant and struggling to stay on my feet; the year I couldn’t get to Neilah because I had a very young baby; the year I sat in this hall, after my first 10 days of radiation therapy, so grateful chemotherapy was behind me and spring had arrived. I remember Neilah in different shuls, different cities, at different stages of my life. I remember them … And all my past Yom Kippurs collapse into this one, collapse into *this* Neilah, *this* moment.

It is Neilah again and in this moment, I am reminded that another year has passed, has slipped away and cannot be called back.

In his novel *The Rules of Backyard Cricket,* Jock Serong captured something real for me. He writes:

“The broken white lines recede into the blackness as we hurtle forward. Do you remember this? I knew it in childhood; this feeling of the irretrievable past slipping away behind the car. These things, gone and unrecoverable.”

A year has passed, gone and unrecoverable. We know but can’t quite articulate that curious feeling of time passing, slipping away, receding into the blackness, something we can’t quite grasp and with the inadequacy of language, might say “I can’t believe another year has passed” … even as we know with our brains that it has.

Time is moving forward, somehow at a faster pace as we age. Time. Until about a century ago, when Einstein—with his theories—revolutionised what is known about time, questions of time were reserved for philosophers. Because there is something not quite graspable about what it means for “time to pass”, and only someone who spends their time thinking could be expected to understand. What is time? What does it mean that it passes?

We know how to measure time and can do so with incredible accuracy. (ASIDE: And I believe some of us will be measuring very carefully in about an hour and a half.) We now have atomic clocks in which the atoms oscillate almost 10 billion times a second. One particular clock has been built that is expected to neither gain nor lose a second in more than 100 million years. Sounds like a clock you can trust to keep time accurately. But how do we measure the lived moments contained in that time. How do we make sense of them? Especially the moments that change everything. Where the experience is so much greater than the moment itself or even the telling of the moment and bears within it so much emotion.

In an essay in Tablet Magazine, Rabbi Moshe Rozenberg, father of Yair Rozenberg who was a guest here recently, wrote:

“A congregant of mine died of ovarian cancer at the age of 50. How much heartache, roller-coaster emotion, and sleeplessness hide between the words of that simple sentence? How many unanswered questions and how much ongoing grief suffuse it?”

[22 July 2016, Kobayashi Maru, Tablet Magazine]

How much indeed.

Beginning in Elul and through Rosh Hashana and the *aseret ymai teshiva* (the ten days of repentance), we reflect back, remembering our best selves and our worst selves. We gaze inward and examine our true selves—the good and the bad. Here, just before Neilah, we pause. And we stand in the moment. We have sought to repent for our sins, asked forgiveness of those we’ve wronged, tried to repair damaged relationships and committed to being a better version of ourselves.

And we wonder at the year ahead, now in this “last chance” moment.

The gates are closing. In the tefila we are about to recite, we no longer describe what will be *written*, but what will be *sealed*. With the special piyyutim [poems] written for this service, Neilah reflects the spiritual concept of the closing of the gates of Heaven, which have been kept open to receive our final prayers and supplications.

P’tach lanu sha’ar b’eit n’ilat sha’ar,

Open us a gate/ at the time of the locking of the gate, for day is passing

The day will pass/ the sun will set and pass; we will come before Your gates.

And the language of the poem become more urgent:

We beg of You God, please; forbear, please; forgive please; pardon please; spare please; have compassion please; atone please; overcome sin and iniquity.

The central image of the piyyut powerfully captures the mood of the moment: the gates of prayer are closing. This poetic image imbues the Neilah service with a sense of urgency. In contrast to the leisurely pace of the other Yom Kippur services, the mood has changed. This is our last chance to recite desperately felt words of prayer. The gates are closing.

My father used to describe the mood he remembered from his childhood in a small town in Galicia in interwar Poland—the electric mood in shul as people prayed during Neilah, with an almost childlike devotion, certain that the book was closing and their fates were being sealed. But equally certain that their sincere prayers might *just* avert the evil of the decree.

What will the coming year bring?

At mussaf, we repeated the powerful Unetaneh Tokef, including the haunting lines of Who will live and who will die, who b’kitzo and who lo b’kitzo, who in their time and who before their time. My father, whose own parents were taken between Rosh hashana and Yom Kippur, often repeated those lines at this time of year with a melancholy I think I now understand.

A year has passed, a full cycle, but not a complete circle. We are not where we started. We are changed, altered by the pain and joy, the sorrows and moments of happiness, the heartache and disappointment. A year has passed and we have rejoiced and grieved, individually and sometimes collectively. One friend movingly described his own emotional turmoil as “palpable loss and unbridled joy” referring to the passing of his father and the birth of a grandchild within a few short months of each other.

What will the coming year bring?

The name, Unetaneh Tokef, is poetically interpreted by one writer, as Let us Cede Power. [Helen Plotkin]. We cede power because what else can we do? We are not in control.

Who will live and who will die. We cannot know; who in their time and who before their time. We cannot know. But when it comes, it hits us hard. Last year was my first Yom Kippur without my father; this year is my husband Alain’s first Yom Kippur without his mother. We can say for both of them that it was b’kitzo, it was their time. They lived long full lives, not just 3 score and 10 (or the shiv’im shana of Tehilim), but both of them more than 4 score and 10. Although their happy childhoods were torn from them by the Shoah, they embraced life after the trauma, building homes, families, businesses and each finding happiness again through their connections with others. For each, it was b’kitzo, in their time. And yet. We feel their absence and we grieve … as we should. For when we love someone, they have no age. We don’t measure them by the time they have lived. We miss them precisely because we loved them. For what is grief but love crashing against the wall of loss.

Therapist and presenter of the singular podcast *Where Should we Begin*, Esther Perel likes to say that love is a verb, because verbs are action-oriented. I like verbs. They record the action and keep things moving and that is what we need—in life, as in writing.

Our lives don’t just happen to us. We cannot just wait, like characters in a Chekhov play for life to knock at the door. No, we are not in control. … And yet… We must not let that paralyse us. We must do. We must embrace the verb, the action, the doing word. We must act.

Towards the end of the Nick Cave documentary, *Twenty Thousand Days on Earth*, there is concert footage of Cave overlaid with him narrating his thoughts about creativity. We hear him say "All of our days are numbered. We cannot be idle. To act on a bad idea is better than to not act at all. Because the worth of the idea never becomes apparent until you do it."

We must act. We must do, … accepting the exhortation we read 2 weeks ago in parshat Nitzavim to make life a verb, to live. [Dvarim, Nitzavim, 30, 15, 16]

Ishay Ribo, in the song Mandi ended with last night and read so beautifully today during the seder ha’avodah, reminds us that if we counted the failures, the missed opportunities, the sins, the errors, we would give up the count immediately. But if we could but remember the many kindnesses and the good and all the many mercies and all the many crises resolved, the counting would lead to a thousand thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of amazing miracles: elef, alfei alafim v’rov ribei r’vavot nisim niflaot.

Neilah is the end of the end of the Teshuva season. The siren is about to go. Literally—in a short while we will hear the long shofar blast.

Since the beginning of Elul, we have been given chance after chance to do Teshuva, to make amends, to make ourselves whole: the month of Elul, the 2 days of Rosh Hashana, the 10 days of Teshuva. But even if we’ve missed all those opportunities, we still have this one. It’s not too late. The book is not sealed. The gates have not closed and we can collectively harness the special energy of Neilah and use this last chance to avert the ro’a ha’gzera, the evil decree.

I stand in this beautiful kehila [community] that means so much to me and am reminded of Mark Twain when he said that to get the full value of joy you must have somebody to divide it with. How great must my joy be with so many of you here. I wish for us all that the magic of this last chance will drive us to do and that through kindness and compassion in our doing, Ishai Ribo’s thousand thousands of thousands of wonders will be ours in the year ahead.

Chatima tova to us all.