



Be Here Now
by Rabbi Michelle Robinson
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“Poor Zusia,” a friend of mine commented the other day, referring to the man whose claim to fame comes from a story about him being concerned that when he faced the heavenly tribunal after his death, he would not be found worthy.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Well,” said my friend, “He’s remembered for eternity for one thing only – worrying about not being Zusia.”

It’s true. Most of us have no idea about any of Zusia’s other teachings. What we know is the story about his fear that he will not be judged against the standards of Moses’ greatness or Abraham’s faith or Solomon’s wisdom, but instead for not having lived up to his own potential, using the gifts he was given to be the best he could be while he still had the time to do it.

To tell you the truth, if I had only one teaching that I’d want to be remembered for, I think Zusia hit the nail on the head. What is important in a life, Zusia’s story tells us, is that we be fully ourselves – that we live each moment we have in the best way we can.

So powerful is this idea that if we could really all keep just this one simple teaching at the forefront of our intentions every day, our lives would be completely transformed.

After all, how many of us spend our time worrying we’re not as capable as another colleague at work, not as wealthy as our next door neighbor, not as happy as the couple down the street? How much of our time is spent thinking about how we can change our future to become like them, instead of more like us?

Actually, Zusia was more right than we give him credit for. In fact, his concern is what the entire holiday of Sukkot is set up to combat. Our Torah reading teaches us, “You shall dwell in Sukkot for seven days.”

Now, most mitzvot are things we do or don't do. We light candles, wrap tefillin, refrain from eating pork. We put money in the pushke for tzedakah, clean the house for Passover. Active things – things that take us out of who we are and force us to be different.

But the mitzvah of Sukkot, according to the Talmud, is literally just to be there, in our Sukkah, as we are.

The Talmud teaches, "One should dwell in the Sukkah in the same manner that he normally dwells in his home the rest of the year." In other words, the mitzvah of dwelling in a Sukkah is defined as carrying on our normal living, just in a different place. To enjoy who we are and what we are in that precise moment. Nothing more than what we already were doing, just in a different space, a space without the distractions of every day life, a space where we can BE. The joy of Sukkot is the gift of, for once, being fully present in ourselves and in the moment.

Sounds easy, but it's not.

So, why do we have such a hard time fully embracing the person we are in the moments we have?

Professor Daniel Gilbert's recent book, "Stumbling on Happiness," offers some interesting insights into this question. In the book, Gilbert explores the question of what makes us happy and why so many of us are so bad at understanding and attaining that happiness. Gilbert points to the phenomenon of "making the future," something only we human beings can do, which is both a positive development – it inspires our optimism even in hard times – and a negative pull – it gives us the tendency to worry about what we do or don't do, what we have or don't have. Our "making the future," as he calls it, too often gets in the way of our enjoying the present.

Gilbert writes: “Most of us do not *struggle* to think about the future because mental simulations of the future arrive in our consciousness regularly and unbidden, occupying every corner of our mental lives... When researchers count the items that float along in the average person’s stream of consciousness, they find that...every eight hours of thinking includes an hour of thinking about things yet to happen. If you spent one out of every eight hours living in my state you would be required to pay taxes, which is to say that in some very real sense, each of us is a part-time resident of tomorrow.”

Dreams of tomorrow can be good. The hope for tomorrow is one of our fundamental religious gifts. It allows us to understand, even at our most painful moments, “*B’erev yelin bechi, b’boker rina*” – that even if the night brings tears and pain, there is a new morning, a new tomorrow to bring us hope and joy. But tomorrow can also interfere with our satisfaction by clouding our experience of the present with worries about what may be coming our way.

This Rosh Hashanah, as I read the Torah reading, I realized that this is precisely Sarah’s problem in the Torah, the problem that set in motion the whole tale of dysfunction and hatred between our Jewish family and the children of Ishmael.

There Sarah is, rejoicing at the celebration of the weaning of her miracle child, and she can’t help but notice Ishmael, the cloud. Her worries of the future, what might be, how he might threaten her son, how he might inherit instead of her son, overcome her until the only thing she can do is demand his exile. Her “making the future” requires her to throw a 13-year-old boy out into the desert, because what she sees down the line, three steps ahead, is too much for her to handle.

Compare that to the midrash we also recall this season that when the angels challenge God why he did not destroy Ishmael in the desert, knowing he would grow up to be an enemy of the Jews, God replies that Ishmael is not that now, and the now is what matters.

Sarah's mistake, our own mistake, reminds me of the Grimm Brothers' story of Clever Elsa. Elsa was a young woman on the eve of her engagement to a fine young man, and on that night her mother asked her to run down to the cellar to bring up some beer for the company. Now, Elsa went to the cellar, and as she could not reach the lid of the barrel she went to get a chair. Standing on the chair, she saw, just above eye level, a pick-axe stuck in the wall.

Elsa thought to herself: "If I marry and we have a child and the child grows big and we send him here to the cellar to get beer, then the pick-axe will fall on his head and kill him." And she began to weep.

When Elsa did not come, a servant was sent to fetch her. "Why are you crying?" the servant asked. When Elsa explained her tale of woe, the servant sat down and cried with her. When the servant did not return, her sister was sent to find them and was taken in by the same story. Then her mother, then her father, then finally the family of the groom. They all wound up in the cellar, weeping, because her future child, with a man she hadn't even yet married, might die one day.

Sukkot comes and says, you are right. Life is that fragile. You might die. The people you love might die. You might get hurt, have heartache, pain. But that's not your concern. Your job is to be here now. Celebrate the blessings you have now.

Michael Weiskopf, a journalist for Time magazine, has written about his experience of losing his hand in Iraq. In his recent book "Blood Brothers," he grapples with the meaning of his experience.

When he first saw his family after he'd been brought back to the States in the hospital, he recalls, his sister brought him a gift.

He writes, "My sister surprised me with a 1900 silver dollar our gambler father had won in Las Vegas and given to her in 1956 when she was 8 years old. I held my father's winnings

and thought of the larger bet he had lost. He deferred a family life to a business success, and died before he had either.

“I had almost repeated the same mistake. The realization put my father’s death in a new light. I understood for the first time why he exited before getting to know me: he had gambled on a future that never materialized.”

Why do we so often do that – devote our energy to a future that we cannot know while failing to savor the present and the gifts it has for us now? Daniel Gilbert argues, “We insist on steering our boats because we think we have a pretty good idea of where we should go, but the truth is that much of our steering is in vain – not because the boat won’t respond, and not because we can’t find our destination, but because the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the prospectiscope.”

Gilbert’s point was actually made long ago by the famous Torah scholar, Rabbi Yonaton Eibshitz, who worked as an advisor to the king. A story is told about him that once, while riding his coach down the streets of Vienna, the king met him and, after greeting him amiably, asked where he was going.

“I don’t know,” replied Rabbi Yonaton. The king’s eyes flashed in anger. Friend or not, advisor or not, how dare this Jew be so flip with the king! He ordered his guards to have the rabbi arrested, which they did.

However, before the day was over, the king regretted what he had done and went down to the rabbi’s cell. “I just don’t understand,” he said. “How could you address your king so frivolously? Help me understand. I do not want to keep you here, but I cannot abide people disrespecting me.”

“I didn’t mean to trifle with you, your Majesty,” explained the rabbi. “It simply is this: You did not ask me where I was planning to go; you asked me where I was going. I clearly did

not know where I was going, as you must realize by now. After all, I had planned to go to the beit midrash to study and pray, but instead I ended up here in jail!”

Life is like that. We do not know the cards we will be dealt, or where our paths will take us. All we can be certain of is what we have now. And what we have now, the tremendous blessings and goodness, is too often sold short amidst our worries of what might be on some future day.

Yes, Zusia was right – the best thing we can do with our lives, the most important thing we can do, is to be ourselves, truly, fully, for as many moments as we can. To savor and inhabit every bit of each moment of present we are blessed to have. Sukkot reminds us that we can do that today, every day, that we can choose to praise the blessing of simply being. This afternoon, as we sit in our Sukkot, may we begin.

Chag sameach.