

## Showing Up

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

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(With much gratitude to my colleague and partner, Rabbi Aaron Sherman)

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Shanah Tovah. Today, and the next nine to come—culminating on Yom Kippur—provide a chance for each of us to ask ourselves penetrating questions. We turn within, and reflect introspectively upon the year and years that have passed. And among the questions we consider is this: What is the most important thing I have ever done?

What if the answer—the most important thing you have ever done—were among the simplest of acts you have ever performed? What if it were something so basic, you could do it again and again?

A prominent young attorney answered the question as follows in an article in the Princeton Alumni Weekly:

The most important thing I have ever done, he wrote, occurred on October 8, 1990. I remember the date because it was my Mom's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, and for that reason I was back home, in Haverhill, Massachusetts, for a celebration my family had planned. I began the day playing tennis with one of my high-school buddies, a good friend whom I had not seen for a while. Between points in the usual thrashing I was taking, we caught up on what had been happening in each other's lives. He and his wife had just had a baby boy, who was keeping them up late at night. My friend's lack of sleep, I might note however, was not showing in his serve or cross-court backhand.

While we were playing, a car came screaming up the road toward the courts, its horn blaring. It was my friend's father. As the car screeched to a halt, he shouted to my buddy that his baby had stopped breathing and was being rushed to the hospital. In a flash, my friend was in the car and gone, disappearing in a cloud of dust and gravel.

For a moment I just stood there paralyzed, trying to comprehend what had happened. Then I tried to figure out what I should do next. Follow my friend to the hospital? There was nothing that I could accomplish there, I convinced myself. My friend's son was in the care of competent doctors and nurses, and nothing I could do or say would affect the outcome.

Be there for moral support? Well. Maybe. But my friend and his wife both had large families, and I knew they would be surrounded by parents, siblings and relatives who would provide more than enough comfort and support, whatever happened. All I could do at the hospital, I decided, was get in the way. Plus, I had a full day planned with

members of my own family, who were waiting for me to get home. So I decided to head back to my folk's house and check in with my friend later.

As I started my rental car, I realized that my friend had left his truck and his keys behind at the courts. I now faced another dilemma. I couldn't leave the keys in the truck. But, if I locked up the truck and took the keys, what would I do with them, and how would my friend get into his car? Reluctantly I decided that the best course of action was for me to swing by the hospital and give him the keys.

When I got to the hospital, I was directed to a small room where my friend and his wife were waiting for word from the doctors. As I had thought, the room was filled with family members silently watching my friend console his wife at the far end of the room. I slipped in quietly and stood by the door, trying to decide what to do next.

I had been in the room for less than a minute when a doctor appeared. He approached my friend and his wife, and in a quiet voice told them that their son had died, the victim of sudden infant death syndrome.

For what seemed like an eternity, my friend and his wife held each other and cried, oblivious to the rest of us standing around in pained, stunned silence. Then, after they composed themselves, the doctor suggested that they might want to spend a few moments with their son. My friend and his wife stood up and walked stoically past their family as they headed out of the room. But when they reached the door, my friend's wife saw me standing in the corner. She came over, hugged me, and started to cry. Then my friend hugged me and said these words, "Thanks for being here."

For the rest of the morning I sat in the emergency room of that hospital and watched my friend and his wife hold the body of their infant son, and say goodbye. It was, and is, the most important thing I have ever done.

Something terrible was happening to people I cared about, and I was powerless to change the outcome. All I could do was stand by and watch it happen. And yet it was critical that I do just that. The thing that I am the most proud of in my life is the time when I was just somebody's friend. The most important thing I have ever done was just to be there when someone needed me.

We underestimate the value of just showing up, the importance of even a single visit. We may not be sure what to say when we visit a friend in the hospital, or at the home of a fellow congregant when we make a Shiva call. Yet more often than we realize, the most important thing we can do for each other is to just show up and give the gift of our presence. Our words do not have to be original or profound; words are not the important part of our visit. You can simply say "I am so sorry to hear what happened; I am so sorry for your loss." Wondering about what to say should never keep us from showing up. In fact, our Jewish tradition teaches that at a house of mourning it is customary to say nothing until the mourner speaks to us first. This allows us to use those first words as a gauge of the mourner's state of mind, providing a hint of how we should respond. Perhaps he wants to share stories of his loved one; perhaps she wants to

sit quietly, or cry. That we come to console is more important than any words of support, comfort or healing.

It has been said that 90% of life is just showing up. Yet sometimes, given our busy schedules, nothing is harder to do.

Rabbi Avi Weiss serves as rabbi of a congregation and runs a yeshiva in Riverside, NY; he is a renowned activist; and according to this year's ranking of the most influential rabbis in *Newsweek* (for whatever that list might be worth) he was number twelve. Rabbi Weiss is certainly a busy man, but after the following exchange with his parents, who made aliyah to Israel in the 1970's, he tries his best to be present for those who need him.

Whenever his parents flew to New York, he has explained, it was his responsibility, as their only child living there, to meet them at the airport. Once his father called to inform Rabbi Weiss that they were arriving 24 hours earlier than scheduled. In response, the rabbi professed his deep love for his parents, but insisted that he could not change his schedule on such short notice.

"You become a hot-shot rabbi," his father responded, "and no longer have time for your parents?"

"I love you deeply," Rabbi Weiss protested, "but it's difficult to alter plans at the last moment."

Rabbi Weiss remembers his father's response to this day: "Don't love me so much—just pick me up at the airport."

Jewish tradition sees the mitzvah of showing up as no less than imitation of the divine. Midrash tells us that God showed up at the first wedding in human history—that of Adam and Eve. Of course, the first couple had no parents to attend their wedding, so God acted as the caterer, cooking and serving the meal. As Eve had no mother, the Midrash tells us in touching detail how God stepped in and doubled as hairdresser, braiding Eve's hair.

Another Midrash teaches us that God visits the sick. When Abraham was sitting by the oaks of Mamre recovering from his circumcision, God appeared to him in a guise of angels who lifted his spirits, announcing the impending conception of a long awaited son.

The Midrash describes God attending funerals, even helping shovel earth into the grave for, as the Torah says, God buried Moses in the valley. And God also comforts the mourners. As the Torah tells us, "and it came to pass, after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac, his son."

Yet even though God shows up, God calls on us to do what God cannot do alone—to be with each other at important times in our lives. We human beings are God's partners; we serve as God's hands and sometimes God's mouth. As difficult or inconvenient as it may be, each of us is called on by God to show up in life for good times and bad.

There are times for us to be places and, if we are not, our absence can never be remedied. And that applies not just to times of trouble and need—but in times of joy, as well.

Toward the end of my tenure as a rabbi in Massachusetts, a scheduling conflict arose between an important congregational service at my synagogue and my nephew's bris at my brother-in-law's synagogue—in Florida. Now I'm able to work what feels like magic with my schedule sometimes, but this particular being-in-two-places at once was well beyond any compromise I was capable of pulling off. I was deeply torn, and sought the advice of my mentor in the synagogue—not as my senior colleague (because surely he would want me to be at the temple), but as a dear and trusted friend. So I asked him, what should I do? He surprised me by exhibiting no bias whatsoever and instead simply reframed the question. Until I spoke with him, I had been asking myself, as I imagine most of us do: “For which will I suffer more immediate consequences if I miss it?” Clearly my synagogue could raise more of a fuss than an 8-day-old baby, no matter how tired or fussy he might be. But my colleague asked: “Which one will you regret having missed more five or ten years from now?” Suddenly the answer was crystal clear.

It's been six and a half years now since I made that decision. I'm afraid I cannot even recall what the “important service” was I missed at the synagogue that spring. And when my nephew looks back over the photos of his welcome into the world and Jewish community, I'm so pleased that he sees me. I didn't say or do a single thing he could possibly remember from the first two weeks of his life; yet he knows his aunt loves him—because I showed up.

Sometimes the hurdles to our “showing up” are even greater than distance or scheduling or finances. Last fall, I sat with a couple in our congregation wrestling with whether or not to attend their granddaughter's wedding. The service was to happen in a church, and for these two devoted members of KKBE, even thinking about their granddaughter walking down that aisle brought them pain. How could they bear going? And certainly they couldn't condone her decision to so publicly and significantly abdicate Jewish tradition, could they?

I felt their pain, but as we sat and talked we discussed what their absence would—and *wouldn't* do. It wouldn't change the venue of the service; it certainly wouldn't stop the wedding. But it may very well irrevocably alter their loving relationship with their granddaughter. In the end, they elected to “show up,” and the memory of dancing at their granddaughter's wedding has only been shared with a smile ever since.

When people went to Cheder (Hebrew School) forty or fifty years ago—when the State of Israel was still in her infancy and American Jews were just beginning to conceive of Hebrew as a spoken language—not much Hebrew was used in classroom discussions. But there was one Hebrew word students used every day. When the teacher took attendance, they would answer, “*Hineini*,” I'm here, I'm present, I showed up for Hebrew School today. We know that word from this morning's Torah portion: God calls to Abraham and Abraham quickly responds, “*Hineini*,” Here I am—not once, but three times in this morning's reading.

Ultimately, our *Hineini* moments are the most important moments in our lives. Saying, “*Hineini*”—not with words, but with our very presence—is perhaps the most important thing we will ever do. As we think back over the times we answered *Hineini* in the past year, and the times we did not, I'd like to close by sharing two of the most important things I did in the year that has passed—beginning with the second...

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, as many of you know, my family and I attended Aaron's grandmother's funeral. G.G., as she became known upon becoming a great-grandmother for the first time, was truly an incredible woman, and I could easily sing her deserving praises for the rest of our service this morning. But you can sense how special she was when I tell you that her three children and their spouses, five grandchildren and spouses, and all four of her great-grandchildren gathered together for the ritual of saying good-bye. All of us grandchildren and our children live a day's travel away; three of us are rabbis serving congregations, and these High Holy Days were mere weeks away. Yet we made the effort to come together to support one another; and to comfort G.G.'s children by surrounding them with their mother's tremendous legacy—a new generation of cousins (four kids, age six and under) who are growing up enjoying one another so much.

As we gathered together at the synagogue after the funeral, and again at her son's house for shiva that night, we all had the same, somewhat ironic sentiment—boy, would G.G. have loved to have been here! It was potentially a bittersweet sentiment, but we were able to focus predominantly on the sweet because of the *most* important thing we did in 5771. Five and a half months earlier, the same group had gathered for G.G.'s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday—a fantastic celebration.

It wasn't just the party. It was two days before when Aaron, Eli and I drove in and had a chance to have her all to ourselves. Or the day after when she made hamantashen with her four great-grandchildren in her small kitchen, prune and apricot filling overflowing everywhere. Or our last night there, when G.G. watched Eli draw what I have to proudly admit was a pretty amazing picture of a helicopter and she openly kvelled about his budding skills as an artist—something Eli has taken to calling himself lately. While I can't prove a definite connection, I like to think that as Eli grows, every time he beams and introduces himself as an artist, he'll have a picture of G.G. beaming at him, as well.

The party was in Tampa, FL. Getting there entailed over nine hours of travel by car with a three-year-old then very much in the throes of potty-training, so you can each imagine the particulars of the trip for yourselves. But the most important thing I did in 5771—for G.G., for my husband and his family, for my son, and for me—was to show up.

What is the most important thing you have ever done? May you discover that it was—and will be—when you were moved to hear the call of God and your fellow human beings to show up, and you responded, "*Hineini*," Here I am.

At a wedding ceremony, before the couple sips from the Kiddush cup, we say: "Whatever few drops of bitterness life may hold, may it be less bitter because you drink of it together. And all the fullness and sweetness which we hope and pray life's cup holds for you, may it be even sweeter because you share it." May the New Year move each of us to hear the call of God and our fellow human beings to show up.

My prayer for the New Year is that all of us in this congregational family and our extended family may increasingly share in each other's cup of life. And let us say: Amen.