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Slow It Down
Rosh Hashanah – Day 1
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A few Fridays ago, I was sound asleep when my alarm went off. Part of me was tempted to just turn it off and get a few more hours of sleep. The other part of me thought that I should get up, as I had planned, and go to the gym. I went back and forth for a good fifteen minutes before I finally decided that I would make the healthy choice and workout. Of course, I was now behind schedule as I had spent all that time debating what I was going to do. So I rushed to get ready and made my way to the gym. After a quick workout, I looked at my watch and realized that I needed to get back home. As I was driving, it did not seem as though anybody was going fast enough. I became impatient. I needed to get ready or else I was going to be late for Shabbat with the preschool. So, to hurry things along I decided to make a lane change. And as I was moving over, “BOOM!”

I was shaking as I got out of my car. I had never been in an accident before. Thankfully, the person in front of me was unharmed, I felt fine, and I didn't even get a ticket. As I went to speak to the other driver, I thought that he looked familiar. I was about to ask him if we knew each other, when he said, “You're Rabbi Pam, right?” Can you imagine?! I was mortified but I was also somewhat amazed. There was no way that this was just an accident. I thought, “This has to be Divine intervention!” This has to be God's way of telling me that my life has become a whirlwind and I need to slow down.

This past year has been a busy one for me with a pretty steep learning curve. I have had to learn how to become a rabbi and handle my role and my responsibilities. I am newlywed and have been trying to figure out how I can be the best wife that I can be. I am working on taking care of a home and am even learning how to cook (just a little bit). I am also trying to make new friends while staying connected to my old friends and family. And in any given day, I want to be able to do all of these things. Unfortunately, a day only has twenty-four hours. So I try to pack as many events into one day as possible. And there are days when I can't get everything done that I need and want to do. But even on those miraculous days when I can, it is not always enjoyable. I am sure that like many of you, I often find myself stressed and distracted.

To say that we live in a world that moves at a quick pace would be an understatement. We drive faster, read faster, think faster, and eat faster than any generation that has come before us. I admit that in an attempt to save a few minutes, I recently went to eat at a fast food restaurant. As I was waiting in line, I noticed that the registers clock how long it takes to get the order completed. I think the average time is about 45 seconds and if they take longer than that, your meal is free! This tipped me off that something

must be wrong with our society when even fast food is no longer fast enough! How quickly do we really need to move?

We have convinced ourselves that we need to do everything at lightning speed so that we can as productive as possible. In the work place, this is especially true. We have to work at a certain pace or we might be viewed as lazy or incompetent. We're afraid that we could lose the respect of those around us if we moved a little bit slower. There are also other real ramifications. We fear that if we don't perform at the same pace as those around us, we could lose our jobs. With the way the economy is today, that is not a risk that we are willing to take. We need to be able to provide for ourselves and our families, so we often have to sacrifice quality for quantity. We have to get as much done as we can in the shortest amount of time. It does not matter if this produces extra anxiety or stress.

Now that is just in the workplace. This need for speed is also necessary in other aspects of our lives. I think that this is especially true for parents. I see many families here at the temple racing to get from one activity to the next. Not being a parent yet, this impresses me and overwhelms me. I can't understand how everything can get done. I once asked a mother how it was possible. She said that she wasn't sure, but she didn't have another choice. She wanted her kids to be able to participate in everything, even if it was stressful and meant constantly running around. I think that she feared that she would disappoint her child if she ever said, "No."

In order to live at this pace, we have had to acquire new skills. We have had to master the art of multitasking. To make the most of our time, we participate in many activities at the same time. If we don't, we feel guilty and unproductive. I know this is true for me. When I get home at night, there are times when I do the laundry, while talking on the phone, with the news turned on in the background. I know it is chaotic but how could I waste precious time doing just one thing at a time. Multitasking has reached new levels, sometimes hazardous levels.

Just a few weeks ago, there was a deadly train collision near Los Angeles. A commuter train full of passengers rolled through a stop sign and rammed into a freight train, killing 25 people. While it is not completely clear what the commuter train's engineer was doing at the exact time of the crash, there is evidence that he was text messaging while he was conducting the train. Unfortunately this is not all that unusual. I know many people who send text messages from their phones while driving. We know that this is not safe but we want to get the most out of our time. We want to move at a train's pace while connecting with friends and making plans. We call it efficient, but really we should call it dangerous, since people are killing themselves and others in an effort to do so much, so quickly.

Now I am not a doctor but I know that this also can't be healthy for us. We are rushed and stressed and it can have physical consequences: heart attacks, panic attacks, and migraine headaches are very common. But I also think that living at this pace can lead to emotional problems, especially with the people we love. We are so busy that we are not taking the time to slow down and connect and hear what is going on in each other's lives.

It has become infrequent for families to see each other, let alone spend quality time together. I have spoken to many of you who have children and grandchildren living out of town. I've heard your disappointment that your kids rarely come to visit. You say that you don't want your families making sacrifices for your sake because the things your children do, such as work, school, and activities, are important. And this is true. Many of the activities that we participate in are valuable.

On Sunday mornings, we have more than four hundred children come to the Temple. Most of them go to secular schools so this is one of the few times that they have to learn about Judaism. This time is important but because they come here, they miss out on spending time with their parents. Many of their parents work all week so Sunday morning would be an ideal slot for quality time. Therefore, our religious school began to implement Family Days and Parallel Classes. We do it because we think it is vital for parents and children to learn together. They mark the date on their calendar and then know it is going to be a time when they can be with their children and talk about important issues. It may be the only time that week that they get the chance to do this. Sadly, there are some families who think that these days are somewhat annoying and pointless.

But maybe that is just the fear talking. Maybe we are scared what will happen if we slow down and face one another. We will have to actually talk and go below the surface because it will not just be a quick conversation as we move from one event to the next. It seems to me that it is human to resist this type of encounter. Even Abraham and Isaac do it. We saw in this morning's Torah portion, God calls upon Abraham to take his son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice on top of Mt. Moriah. God is testing Abraham and wants to see if he will follow through. But I think there is another test as well. God wants to see how Abraham and Isaac will do when they are forced to spend three days together all by themselves. They don't do very well. It is their time to bond yet they let stress and distractions come between them. All they talk about is the upcoming sacrifice: "Here is the wood. Where is the sheep?" They are distant from one another and do not talk about anything real. They do not take advantage of their time together.

I remember when I used to drive to college at the beginning of the school year; my parents would always jump at the chance to make the ten-hour drive with me. I was always surprised by that until my dad told me that he realized early on that it was one of the few times that he could spend time with me and have my undivided attention. Of course I was happy to have the company, but I was always worried that we

would find that we would have nothing to talk about. But by the time we reached our destination, I was always pleased with how well the trip had gone and how much we had connected.

Wouldn't it be great if we could all take time out of our busy schedules to really focus on a child, parent, spouse or friend? It's not really that novel of an idea but it is one that we seem to have a need for that is being ignored. I am talking about real, extended, distraction-free time together. The distraction-free part is difficult. It seems to me that even when we make the effort to take time out of our schedules, our focus is elsewhere. I believe that Blackberries, iPhones, and other messaging devices, are partially to blame for this. They make it possible to be connected to work, email, and the Internet no matter where you are or what time it is.

When I was spending a year of rabbinical school in Israel, Brad, who my boyfriend at the time, was able to take some time off and come visit me. We went down south and took a day trip into Petra. We were about to enter the gorgeous city built out of rock, this new wonder of the world, and I look over and see Brad reading an email on his Blackberry. It was the middle of Jordan! It was not his fault that he his boss was emailing him and distracting him, but we were supposed to be on vacation together after having not seen each other for a few months.

We are preoccupied and moving too quickly and this prevents us from ever being fully present at any point in time. This makes it impossible to ever be truly connected and it is harmful to us and our relationships. We literally need to schedule in time for each other as well as time for ourselves. We know that this is what we should be doing, but we wonder: Where am I going to find the extra time to do this?

The truth is that we have always had this time. It is called Shabbat. God knew that we would need time to recharge so that we could have more manageable lives and healthier relationships. Therefore, God commanded us to keep Shabbat. To rest! To slow down! This is one of the Ten Commandments. Yet out of all of them, this is the hardest one to keep. I know that if we were to walk out of here right now that we would have every intention of starting the New Year off right and keeping 9 of the 10 commandments. But somehow, it is the idea of keeping Shabbat and taking a rest that holds us back observing them all.

But keeping Shabbat is every bit as important as the others. Let's think about it. God has commanded us not to lie, especially in the sense of the law, because if we do we are destroying a just society. God has commanded us not to steal because if we do, we are crushing our economy. God has commanded us not pray to idols or take God's name in vain, for if we do, we are harming our relationship with God. God has commanded us to honor our parents because if we do not, we are damaging our relationship with them. God has commanded us not to commit adultery because if we do, we are breaking up our

marriages. God has commanded us not to covet because if we do, we are wrecking our relationships with our friends and neighbors. God commanded us not to murder because if we do, we are killing another human being.

And the same is true with Shabbat. God has commanded us to take this day of rest because if we keep moving at the pace we're going at, we will continue killing ourselves and harming our relationships with our families and friends. Today is Rosh Hashanah and in ten days we will come together for Yom Kippur. We will read the words from the Book of Deuteronomy, which say, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!"

I pray that in the coming year we will all make a conscious effort to choose life by taking this day of rest seriously and letting it permeate into our daily lives. We will each find ways that are personal and feasible so that we can take a break from the swift rhythm of our everyday lives, so that we can slow down and refresh...so that we can stop concentrating on the next thing that we have to do and focus on ourselves and the people in front of us. Because when we stop going through the motions and start to live in the moment, I believe that we will be living healthier lives that are filled with more purpose and more meaning. Certainly this is what it means to choose life.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.