

In our house we have a night time routine with our sons. After they're bathed, and their teeth are brushed, we cozy up for story time. Solomon is 8, and Hillel is 2 ½. So over the past few years I've grown to appreciate good children's literature.

Once this past summer, while I was away, Sol called me to share his latest bedtime read. "Ima," he exclaimed in between giggles, "I'm reading this book and it's really funny. Do you want to know why?"

"Of course." I answered, "What's so funny?"

"Well," he said, "in my book Roscoe is running up and down and up and down the stairs because, well, he keeps trying to be in two places at once!"

"Funny," I thought, "So do I."

When I was a recent college graduate, on Sundays I used to bake bread. After mixing and kneading the dough, during the first rise I would drive to the local laundromat. While the laundry was washing I would do reading for work. While the clothes were in the dryer I would take off to the nearby car wash.

By the time the car was washed, the laundry would be ready to go. I'd load my clean laundry into my clean car and be back at the house in time to take care of the dough. I prided myself on the ability to get work done, wash my car, launder my clothes and bake bread without a moment wasted. This, of course, was all in the pre-internet age. I'm certain that, today, recent college graduates could do all of that while texting, listening to music and capturing the whole experience on webcam to upload to YouTube!

We live our lives at breakneck speed, often multi-tasking. We eat dinner while driving, check e-mails while at a family gathering, and talk on the cell phone from everywhere.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we reflect on the year that has passed and prepare to embrace the year to come, I wonder how much time we have all spent running up and down the stairs in an effort to be in at least two places at once. And I wonder, too: While we're so busy trying to be everywhere, are we ever actually anywhere?

This evening I want to challenge us gently – no rush! No pressure! – to reflect on how awake we are to our daily lives, and to look briefly at how Judaism can orient us to living life with greater awareness -- more richly and more fully.

I took a break from multi-tasking this summer and spent five days in the mountains of New Mexico participating in a mindfulness meditation retreat. It is not my goal this evening to leave everyone rushing to sign up for Buddhist or Jewish meditation classes. After all, Jewish wisdom holds in it an intrinsic quality of mindfulness: a call to be present that does not require tremendous searching.

“Mindfulness” is a hot word these days. It shows up in discussions of religion, physical health, and, my husband Ben, a psychologist, informs me, in several of the latest trends in psychotherapy. But what, exactly, are we talking about?

In the words of one of my teachers, Diana Winston, Director of UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center, it’s “a state of consciousness, one characterized by attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity.” Jewish practice can create and help us to sustain such moments of awareness and clarity as we live our hectic lives.

At its core, Jewish practice is a religion of the mundane, the day to day. Think for a second about the structure of our Torah, our sacred text. Where would the story logically conclude? With the events at Sinai? With the emergence of the Israelites from slavery into freedom, and then their covenantal transformation from a collection of tribes into the Jewish people? The receiving of wisdom, God revealing God’s self? It would make sense for all of Torah to build to the encounter at Sinai as the final, climactic moment.

But no: this experience is relatively early in the story. It’s just a point on the journey. The Torah continues with stories of people figuring out how to live with the truths they bind themselves to at Sinai. Of human failings and frailties, of k’vetching and yearning, and rebelling and questioning faith and the covenant. And, ultimately, Torah concludes with Moses at the edge of the promised land, and with the Israelites engaged in the very human endeavor of discovery, exploration, trying to establish a society and a community in this new place. The Tanach – the rest of our sacred cannon – continues with entering Canaan, fighting, settling, building homes, cities, and a sacred spiritual center. We are not left up on the lofty mountain, directly experiencing God’s presence like Moses, but down on the ground wrestling with the daily business of living.

And then Judaism asks us to take this everyday business and elevate it. How? By recognizing the sacred in even the mundane, or especially in the mundane -- through prayer, ritual, blessing.

As the great modern rabbi, teacher, theologian, and social activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

The ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike. Some people sense this quality at distant intervals in extraordinary events; others sense it in the ordinary events, in every fold, in every nook; day after day, hour after hour. The sense of the ineffable is not an esoteric faculty but an ability with which all men [and women] are endowed; it is potentially as common as sight....

Heschel implored that we wake up to wonder – to what he called “radical amazement” – at the simple miracles of existence. To step off the speeding train of our productivity, our business, and to be awake to our lives is also to be awake to God. When we are awake to our own lives not only will we find greater meaning and satisfaction in living, but we will have a relationship with the Divine.

At this point you may be thinking, “Yep. The rabbi sure did spend some time secluded in the New Mexico mountains.” And it’s true that it’s easier to be present to the beauty and spirituality of each day when you are off the grid, without electricity or internet or cell phone

access, and instead of office furniture you are surrounded by wildflowers, elk, grouse, hummingbirds, and a beautiful river. And graced with three organic meals each day. Prepared by someone else.

But the lesson for me of that calm place is that it's possible to be awake to the miracles of this busy place, too. So, since I returned, I've been trying to capture and strengthen for myself simple, doable ways that Judaism helps me to live a more connected, compassionate, alive and spiritually grounded life.

A touchstone of our liturgy and our lives as Jews through the ages is the Shema. I turned to it for inspiration when I arrived home not only because of its central place in Judaism, but because its first word, its very name, is a call to awareness:

Not the familiar prayer book recitation "Hear, O Israel," but an imperative: "Shema!" "Listen up!" "Pay attention!" commands its first sentence, "And open yourself, explore, learn something about God presence!"

It goes on from there, and in the first paragraph we find "*v'dibarta bam b'shivtecha b'veitecha uv'lechtecha va Derech u'shochb'cha ov kumecha.*" "And you shall speak of them (these teachings of the Shema) when you are sitting in your home, when you are walking on your way, when you lie down and when you wake up." We can be aware, then, whether we're sitting, lying down, getting up, standing, walking – in any physical state and activity. And so I want to offer this evening just three encouragements for how to Jewishly be more awake to our lives, to wonder, to God. I hope that these are a starting point, and that they will spark more ideas, more exploration for you.

Upon waking: I remember many years ago, when I was early in my Jewish spiritual path, I went to see the movie *The Milagro Beanfield War* – no doubt in part because the director was Robert Redford, one of my true teen heartthrobs. In it the main character, struggling to survive, gets up each day, washes his face with cold water, looks in the mirror and says, "Thank you God for giving me another day." I was moved by this – and only later did I learn the Jewish blessing for when our eyes first open in the morning, which at its essence is saying the exact same thing. That blessing, *Modeh Ani*, encourages each of us to begin each day with taking a moment to recognize that we are alive, and to be grateful for it. There is a Hasidic teaching that "...A person who wakes up in the morning is like a new creation. Begin your day with unkind words, or even trivial matters – even though you may later turn to prayer, you have not been true to your Creation.

All of your words each day are related to one another. All of them are rooted in the first words that you speak. *Modeh Ani* helps us to root each day in awareness and gratitude.

2. Walking on one's way. If one takes a moment on waking to be grateful for being alive, expressed in *Modeh Ani* as awareness of one's life breath, then the question arises: during the day, how much am I aware of how I use my "life breath?" How aware am I of the life I'm living while I'm living it? Many of us may have had occasion to hear or to recite the *shehecheyanu* prayer. It says, "Thank you, God, for giving us life, for keeping us in life, for sustaining us so that we may reach this moment." It's traditionally said to celebrate firsts – special occasions, the beginning of holidays, even the first time one wears a new garment. I've come to believe that it is a powerful directive for how to live not only "firsts," but every moment. What would it mean when we go about our day-to-day tasks if we said, "I have been kept in life for this moment, now" – and to tap into that kind of gratitude.

My life breath, my strength is being used for this singular purpose. How does it feel, what does it look like, what does it mean to me?

On a recent outing with Hillel to the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, I was struck by the sheer number of us parents who had our cell phones out and were talking, texting, surfing and checking e-mails. For a moment, I had the urge to shout, "Turn them off! Look at your kids! This is the only **now** we get!" Then, instead, I suddenly realized it would be a great time to reach a friend in another time zone with whom I rarely have time to speak.

We live in a multi-tasking culture; so to actually focus on one thing and to be awake to the experience is going against the grain and can require considerable effort. Let's start small, then. Perhaps choose one time, one activity in the week when you will consciously unplug from e-mails, Facebook, Twitter and phone calls, and allow yourself to find the *shehecheyanu* in that moment.

It could be a walk with a friend, time with family, time alone in a museum, even folding laundry or feeding the household pet. It might coincide with Shabbat – a time when we as Jews have an opportunity to take a break from doing and to just be. Whenever it is, the goal is to be awake, aware, and alive to our own lives. When do you feel most checked-out – and can you commit to checking-in?

3. On lying down: Night time can be stressful if your sleep is troubled, or if the day has been long and busy. How can we use the time before sleep, when we lie down, to find awareness and gratitude? We have a set of prayers that are literally called *al ha mitah* – on the bed – so clearly our ancestors understood the opportunity at this time of transition to focus as we prepare for sleep. A state of calm awareness can allow us to release ourselves from the busyness of the day that is ending, so that we can move on to sleep, and then be prepared to fully embrace the coming new day. It can be a time to review the day's accomplishments, and to let go of the day's challenges.

The *al ha mita* prayers will be available on-line as part of this sermon. Along with prayers for peace and protection in the uncertainty of night, they include meditations to release our anger toward others and to pray that those whom we may have angered.

Acknowledging our frailty and taking time to let go of the emotional challenges of the day can help us to be clear sighted, to be grateful for the good, the accomplishments, and the variety of our experiences. And prime us to live more fully, with greater awareness, when we awake.

When we rise up, when we are walking on our way, when we lie down: Three points in the day and three simple exercises. In the New Year, if we aren't always able to stop running up and down the stairs, trying to be in two places at once, may we find a little time to step off the stairs and settle into one of the rooms to see what we can find there – or may we at least stop on the staircase long enough to pay attention and notice the stairs.

May it be for all of us a New Year rich with experience and with appreciation of our experiences, with compassion and understanding for ourselves and for others, with moments of connection to the simple as a window to the ineffable. May it be a good year. A year of blessing, fulfillment and peace. Amen.

Note: From my colleague Rabbi Daniel Brenner, drawing on the teaching of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, an introduction to the spiritual resource of the bedtime Shema.
http://www.clalrabbis.net/jliving_unit1.htm