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Congregation B'nai Israel
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Every piece of music has a pulse.
Underneath the swelling scales
and impassioned arpeggios,
there is always a steady and stable heartbeat
that both pushes, and puts limits, on the music.
No matter how much they rise and fall,
musical notes always exist within the bounds
of their rhythmic, repetitive beat.

As an avid flute player
throughout my childhood and adolescence,
I learned that in order to bring a piece music to life,
I needed to feel its beat and internalize its pulse,
as if it were my own.
And for this, I used a metronome.
You tell the metronome the proper rhythm,
and then like a thumping heart,
it ticks out the right tempo,
helping a wayward musician, like me,
to stay, and play,
on beat.

I can still hear that steady tick, tick, tick
of the antique, wooden metronome
that sat on top of the piano,
endlessly tick, tick, ticking away
as I drilled my scales
and practiced my sonatas and concertos.
And in the end, although it did the job
that it was hired to do,
I can't say that I felt hugely loving and tender feelings
for that triangular wooden box
that hung out in the background
at every flute lesson and practice.
In fact, I found its presence rather irritating,

with its grating, tick tick ticking
that I could never drown out or ignore.
There were days when I really, truly,
wanted to throw that darn thing out the window.
I learned to tolerate it, of course,
but it always felt like an endless game
of who was *really* in charge.
And the metronome, always seemed, to win.
Tick...tick...tick...

Decades later, and that sound still plagues me.
But now, for me, that tick tick ticking
is time itself –
incessantly, relentlessly, inevitably, ticking away –
reminding me that nothing is forever,
that my body is not forever,
and that none of us are here, forever.
In fact, according to writer and journalist Oliver Burkeman,
4,000 weeks is about all that we get.
Just 4,000 weeks.
Some, a little more,
some, enormously less.
4,000 weeks.
We spend our lives counting down.
T-minus 10 weeks to the wedding, the vacation,
the graduation...
but all within the context of this larger, ultimate
and final countdown.
No matter how much we rise, recede,
and then rise again,
we will always be constrained by the limits
of our own human finitude.
As our age goes up,
our weeks continue ticking down,
one by one, by one.
Tick, tick, tick...
I gather that *you* hear it, too.
And I gather that some of you hear it more loudly,
than others.

When we are young, and healthy,
and with, seemingly, all the time in the world,
the ticking tends to leave us alone, doesn't it.
It has to, for our own daily functioning,
for our own perseverance,
for our own ability to survive,
and thrive.
But then as life goes on,
it starts to get louder,
and then softer,
and then louder, again –
as if someone is gently adjusting the dial
on an old, Sony stereo.

And I sense that after a while, it gets harder, and harder,
to ignore.
For my mother-in-law,
the ticking is the loudest
when she tries to roll down the hill with her grandchildren,
and then her back and her knees say to her,
we are never going to forgive you...

My mom hears it when she contemplates
all the wonderful books that are out there,
and realizes there are going to be some
that she will never have a chance to read.

My dad hears it when he reads the NYT obituary section
and recognizes a name
in the definitive black ink.

And my father-in-law started hearing it twenty years
ago after his heart surgery.
The stents didn't age me – he says –
but the bypass did.
For him, it wasn't age that lifted the volume on the clock,
but rather, it was illness,
and the chest cracking surgery
designed to cure it.

And then there is Nora Ephron –
the literary genius behind “You’ve Got Mail”
and “Sleepless in Seattle”
and “When Harry Met Sally.”
The witty and wise Nora Ephron tells us
that she became most aware
of her own slow and steady decrescendo
as soon as the hands of the ticking clock
grabbed on to her neck,
and brought it down with them.
“I feel bad about my neck” she declared
in the opening of her 2006 treatise,
“I Feel Bad About My Neck –
and other Thoughts on Being a Woman.”

“I feel bad about my neck,” she writes.
“Every so often I read a book about age,
and whoever’s writing says it’s great to be old.
It’s great to be wise and sage and mellow.
I can’t stand people who say things like this.
Don’t they have necks?!

And so I do what so many women my age do
when stuck in front of a mirror –
I gently pull the skin of my neck back
and stare wistfully
at a younger version of myself.”

Now, *I know*,
that if *I* ever start to complain about getting old,
I know just what you are going to say:
“Oh just you wait rabbi...you’re still just a kid!
You’re barely even 40!
You can’t even call yourself middle aged!
Just you wait!”

Yes, it is true,
I cannot yet relate
to many of your aches and your pains.

But lately, there *is* something
that has gotten me thinking
about my own ticking clock,
and my own impending limits.

I always knew that I wanted to be a mother.
When I picked out the tallit
that I was going to wear for my Bat Mitzvah,
I held it in my hands
And I told my mom
that this was what I was going to use
to wrap my babies in someday,
right after they were born.
My understanding of who I am,
and who I want to be,
has always been inextricably linked with motherhood,
and the extraordinary notion that *I* could create
a new human being.

And it always felt like I had all the time in the world
to decide when to have children,
and how many to have.
And knowing that so many struggle with fertility,
not a day goes by
that I do not think about how blessed
and how lucky, I am.
Not a single day.
This past summer, I entered my 37th year of life
with my two beautiful children by my side.
And it was around that time,
that it started to dawn on me.
If there are to be more children in my future,
then I do not, actually,
have all the time
in the world.

Now, to be clear, I have *absolutely nothing* to announce.

But what I *can* say, with certainty,

is that I am starting to make out,
in the hazy, upcoming horizon,
the end of my child-bearing years.
And with this recognition,
I feel a sense of sadness.
What does it mean, as a woman,
to be approaching this milestone,
this life-altering landmark...
what does it mean to be nearing my point
of no return?
What will it feel like to begin to settle,
and adjust,
to this new and unfamiliar reality?

As time ticks on,
I gather that some of you
will be reaching your own points of no return.
I gather that you will be making your own sorts of
“now or never decisions” –
decisions that will make *you* more aware,
of the inevitable:
Who will move their parents into assisted living.
Who will sell the house and downsize to something smaller,
and more accessible.
Who will retire.
Who will decide to stop treatment.
Who will move into hospice.
Who by fire, and who by water.
Who by plague, and who by illness.
Outside of these walls,
the ticking, for you, may be loud,
or it may be soft.
But for the hours that we are in here, together,
these sentiments in the Unetoneh Tokef
intentionally and shamelessly
raise the volume.

Today, we cannot lessen the noise.

Today, none of us are supposed to be able to turn away from it.
I will live.
And I will age.
And I will die.
And so will you.
And so will everyone we love.
Maybe this year.
Or maybe the next.
Or maybe the year after that.
Because nothing is forever.
And no one is forever.

But even so...is it *still* the metronome,
who is the only one,
in charge?

Thousands of years ago,
when the Biblical Psalmist became aware
of his own ticking clock,
he penned this humble,
heartfelt prayer:
Teach me, oh God to make each day worthwhile...
that I may obtain a *heart* of wisdom.
To this prayer, I add my own:
Teach me, oh God, to own my own clock,
just as much as the clock,
owns me.

And the Unetoneh Tokef tells us how.
U'tfilah, U'tshuvah, U'tzedakah.
Prayer, and Forgiveness, and Righteous Living:
These are the things that lessen the severity
of the decree.
These are the things that imbue our lives with purpose,
fulfillment,
and meaning.
These are the *melodies* that help us master our time,
even as time,
runs out.

The Unetoneh Tokef prods us to play along
with that ticking, pulsating beat.
Yes, it is there, our Unetoneh Tokef laments,
and it always will be.
But rather than ignoring it,
or trying to make it go away,
our prayer nudges us to consider:
what beautiful, heartfelt music
are we going to layer *on top*
of that ultimate, 4,000 week countdown.
Or, to put it another way:
“I know you are here,
you irritatingly brazen ticking time machine
that I want to throw out the window.
But I am not going to.
Instead, I am going to look you in the eye,
and I am going to say to you:
You may be here, ticking away,
but guess what.
I am still here, too.
And so there is no other choice,
but to exist,
together.
There is no other choice,
but to play *together*,
side by side.”

I am in awe of the way that Steve and Grace Weitzer
respond to the clock
with hope, faith, and love.

Steve and Grace joined our temple family three years ago,
having already been longtime friends
with several families in our congregation.
They settled into our community
as they continued to enjoy and settle in
to their golden years.
Life was utterly and delightfully normal, stable,
and predictable.

Dinners with friends,
rounds of golf,
visits with the grandchildren,
ages six, four, and two.

This past Spring,
feeling more tired and more run down than usual,
Steve made a visit with his primary care doctor.
Some routine blood tests later,
and his doctor called back.
“I think you need to see an oncologist,”
she softly suggested.
It wasn't long after that.
Pancreatic cancer.
Stage 4.
Six months,
maybe eighteen,
maybe more,
maybe less.
It's really anyone's, guess.

But Steve and Grace believe in prayer.
And they believe in miracles.
And they believe in hope.
It's what keeps them going,
now that the ground as been ripped out
from under their feet.

And, at the same time,
they now have a much deeper sense
of just how precious, and just how fragile,
life really is.

Steve tells me that he is preparing for the reality
of one day leaving this world,
in a way that he never did,
before.

I asked him what he is doing, to prepare.

“So many pictures,” he said.
“We are taking lots and lots of photos and videos
for the grandkids.
Because they are still so little,
and because I want to own what they will know,
and what they will remember.
I want them to have a sense of who I was.”

At the beginning of the summer,
Steve and Grace took a trip up to Cape Cod
with the kids and the grandkids.
There was one day during the trip
when Steve was having a bad day –
and so he grabbed his eldest son,
Alan,
and enfolded him into his arms...
and the two of them stood there together,
and cried.
No words, needed.
Only tears.

“Everything is going to be ok,” Steve whispered to Alan.
“I know,” Alan responded.
“I know.”

Time may be ticking away,
but at that moment,
for the two of them –
for a father and his son –
there was all the time,
in the world.
Teach me, oh God to make each day worthwhile,
that I may obtain a heart
of wisdom.

Our own Ernie Malecki also knows a thing or two
about time.
At a Shabbat service a few weeks ago,
we invited Ernie to the bima for Kiddush

in celebration of his upcoming 93rd birthday.
And without missing a beat,
Ernie quipped that he'd be back in 10 years
for his 103rd.

What is it like to be 93?
I asked him, a few weeks ago.
“Well, it's the same as 92, and 91, and 90!”
he countered.
And then he shared his mantra for daily life:
“If you don't get out there and do something,
nothing is going to happen,
and you will rot like a vegetable!”

Well I can say for certain,
there are certainly no rotting vegetables in Ernie's life.
And what a life, Ernie has lived.
From his childhood in Nazi Germany,
to his experience of Kristallnacht,
to his voyage to America
when he was nine years old,
Ernie has known, for practically all his life,
just how much everything can be taken away
in one single moment.

And as for the clock – well, in Ernie's world, what clock?!
There are not enough hours in the day
for all the things he still wants to do.
Ernie fills each day with peer groups,
and lectures, and programs, and theatre,
and reading and writing.
For Ernie, it is never too late to learn or try
something new.
Which is why he simultaneously became
both our *newest* and our *oldest* shofar sounder
for the High Holidays this year.

Teach me, oh God,
to make each day worthwhile,

that I may obtain a heart of wisdom.

And I cannot talk about time,
without taking about George.
Because these are our first High Holy Days,
without George Markley,
in our lives.
In a sense, it feels like it has been years
since he left us,
and, yet,
it feels like it was just yesterday.
And I know that we all still hold our favorite “George stories:”
our favorite anecdotes
about how much he gave
and how much he loved.

My favorite George story is from just about a year ago,
as he was undergoing his final rounds of treatment.

George wrote to me,
asking if I could send him my High Holiday sermons.
I sent him my sermon about “The Spoon Theory:”
the notion that we live each day
with a finite number of spoons –
or a finite amount of resources, energies and abilities.
In my sermon I shared the stories
of three remarkable individuals –
Rachel, Michelle and Hannah –
who live and cope with chronic illness and pain,
and who find a way,
each and every day,
to use the limited spoons that they have,
to carve out their own small corners
of purpose, meaning, and love.
Within a day of receiving the sermon,
George wrote back to me with a request
that was so truly George.
He wrote back,
asking for Rachel, Michelle and Hannah’s contact information,

so that he could share some of *his spoons*,
with them.

George passed away about six weeks later.
Right up until the very moment
that his time ran out,
George still had all the time in the world.
To give.
To love.
To care.
George Markley owned that clock.
Just as much as that clock, owned him.

Many of my music genes come from my mom.
She started playing guitar and violin
at her progressive liberal arts elementary school
in Brookline.
But her father's career in social work
always kept the family on the move.
After leaving Brookline,
her musical interests never found the same fertile ground.
Move after move after move –
from Brookline to Mount Vernon
to New Jersey to Salt Lake City –
it was hard enough to find stability,
let alone music lessons.
Your daughter is really talented –
friends would say to her parents –
but despite my mom's best efforts,
it just never happened.

By her junior year, she was living in Silver Spring,
where she started working at a bakery,
to earn some cash.
And something propelled her
to spend it on a flute.
She played it here and there –
but by that point,

too much time had gone by.
Too many moves,
too many missed opportunities.
She had crossed a point of no return.

Many years later,
I came home from elementary school,
and I told my mom
that I wanted to play an instrument.
She dug out the dusty old flute
that she had kept all those years,
and she handed it over,
to me.
That's the thing, about time.
While it is always running out,
it is, also,
always just beginning.
All at the very same,
time.