

## **Journey to the Present: Embracing the Here and Now**

Have you ever found yourself lost in a memory, so vivid that it feels like you're reliving it? Have you ever had a feeling that you wanted to return to the past and relive a part of your life? That happened to me this summer.

This summer I traveled to Japan with my son Ari. The last time I was there I was a junior in college 28 years ago, I lived in the fourth largest city in Japan, Nagoya and studied at a university there. The first time I was in Japan was the summer after my freshman year in college 30 years ago, I lived in a dorm in the mountains in a small town named Hida-Osaka. I was 18.

During our trip, we visited Nagoya and Hida-Osaka. It was a beautiful and profound trip, not simply through the beautiful external landscape of Japan with its temples and shrines and rivers and waterfalls, but also through the streets of memory, bitter and sweet.

We planned to travel to Hida-Osaka in the middle of our trip. A small town nestled in the beautiful mountains of Japan, the largest attraction being nature in bloom, and my memories.

We took a train from our Air b and b in Takayama half an hour by train to the north of Hida-Osaka. When we arrived I experienced a strange sensation, a combination of familiarity and newness. Some things had changed, some things had become distorted through the continual writing and rewriting and revising of my human memory.

I led Ari up the winding path to find the mountain dorm, using a combination of faded memory and google maps, where I lived during that summer 30 years ago, when I was only two years older than he is now.

In the intense heat of the Japanese summer with our electric fans pointed towards our faces and sweat on our foreheads, we wound our way up the crooked green

mountain path, me sharing the memories that peeked out of my mind with Ari along the way.

When we reached the top of the mountain path, we found the dorm. It was closed and dark, inaccessible behind a locked gate. I took a dozen pictures. I shared the memories that flooded my mind and heart with Ari.

It was a strange sensation that is hard to describe in words. It felt like I was being visited by ghosts, floating through my head. I studied there that summer 30 years ago with 18-20 people and two teachers, none of whom I am in touch with today. The past felt far away, inaccessible, black and white. I kept grasping, holding on to the memories. I remembered a conversation about life with an older mentor, I remembered my first real girlfriend who was from Singapore. I remembered her favorite Japanese song.

Meanwhile, sharing all this with Ari, though he was clearly trying to relate, and listened attentively, he was clearly hot and tired from the walk and just wanted to leave.

I, on the other hand, wanted to stay, I wanted to hold on to all of it. Maybe someone would show up who I knew, someone I could reminisce with. Even more, I had a strange feeling, a feeling like I wanted to go back there. Back to the innocence of being an 18 year old discovering the wonders of a foreign country, the wonders of the world again.

As I acquiesced to Ari's desire to leave and go swim in the river and we walked down the mountain path, I tried to explain to him what I was feeling.

I said that "nostalgia" was the best word for it, but, I said, not in the quaint way that one has nostalgia at an 80's party, but rather, closer to the original meaning of nostalgia which is a painful longing for home. The word "nostalgia" comes from the Greek words "nostos" and "algos".

“Nostos” means “return home” and “algos” means “pain” or “ache”. The term was coined in the late 17th century by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer to describe a medical condition he observed in Swiss soldiers who had been away from home for long periods of time.

The literal meaning of nostalgia is the suffering evoked by the desire to return to one's place of origin.

When I stammered out the words to Ari as best I could, he patiently listened, and then said, “It was just an old building to me, dad. Pretty boring.”

How could a boring old building hold so much for me, and yet nothing for him?

After reflecting on this for a while, I realized that some day I would be looking back on my trip with Ari longingly, with nostalgia, and that though I couldn't go back to being 18 exploring Japan again for the first time, that I could let this aching for the past to inspire me to be present in ***this***

**moment**, appreciating every morsel of experience. From the sight of my son enjoying swimming in the crystal clear river, to listening to the sound of the wind rustle through the leaves as I meditated at a beautiful shrine.

We can't return to the past, but we can return to the present.

The invitation is to live in the moment. This is what it means to [sing] "return again....return to the land of your soul," as we sing in this season.

Each of us has our own 'Hida-Osaka', a place or time we yearn for. But what do these memories teach us about embracing the now?

I invite you to take a moment of silence to reflect on a memory you hold dear, and ask yourself how that memory can inspire you to be more present today..... [WAIT]

The pace of modern life, with its endless to-do lists and the constant pressure to be productive, can make it hard to pause and truly experience the present. We're always thinking about the next task, the next appointment, the next milestone. But in doing so, we risk missing out on the beauty and richness of the present moment.

Simple practices can help. For instance, setting aside specific times in the day when we're free from digital distractions, or consciously choosing to be fully present during conversations, can make a world of difference. every time we choose to be present, we're making a conscious decision to connect with the world around us, to truly live in the moment.

Psychologist Matt Killingsworth, tackled a big question: When are humans most happy? To answer this question, he built an app, "Track Your Happiness," that lets people report their feelings in real time. Fifteen thousand participants from around the world provided over 650 000 reports (using an app that requested data at random

times). Killingsworth found people who reported thinking about the past or future or people who were in the midst of daydreaming were less happy than those who were lost in the moment.

Much like my journey in Japan, there are tales in our tradition that emphasize the importance of being present.

### **Tell the story.**

One tale is from Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the great hasidic master, and it is an example of what many of us may feel from time to time.

One day in the synagogue, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev seemed to be observing a group of his Hasidim as they prayed. When they were finished, he approached them with a hearty greeting, "Shalom aleichem! Welcome home!"



They looked startled to hear their rabbi greet them as if they had just returned from a long journey. "But Rabbi," they said, "we have not been anywhere!"

The rabbi continued to shake hands with them, as though they were travelers arriving in Berditchev. He said, "From your faces it was obvious that your thoughts were in the grain market in Odessa or the woolen market in Lodz. None of you were actually here while you recited the prayers, so I was glad to welcome you back home once you stopped."

In this story, home is where your heart, mind and thoughts are. The Hasidim were praying in their spiritual home, but they weren't really there.

Once there was a king who is doggedly determined to find the answer to three questions:

**When is the right time for every action?**

**Who are the most important people to work with?**

**What is the most important thing to do?**

Convinced that he would succeed in any endeavor if he possessed the answers to these three questions, the king sought the advice from the most educated in his kingdom. After hearing only disappointing answers, the king decided to approach a reclusive hermit, widely known for his wisdom.

The king donned plain clothes, dismissed his bodyguards some distance away, and met the wise man alone. He discovered a frail old man, digging a ditch in front of a modest hut in a wooded area.

The king proclaimed his three questions to the sage, who did not answer, but merely kept digging. Feeling compassion for the weak hermit, the king grabbed the shovel and relieved the old man of his laborious task. After hours of work and still silence from the hermit, the king uttered, "I came to you, wise man, for an answer to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so, and I will return home"

At that moment, the king and the hermit spotted a man running towards them, clearly wounded in the abdomen from some form of penetrating trauma. The man collapsed at the king's feet. The king dressed the man's wounds and nursed him through the night in the hermit's hut. By morning, the wounded man revived and immediately begged for the king's forgiveness. Puzzled, the king questioned why the wounded man would beg for compassion. The man confessed that he was a sworn enemy of the kingdom, and was determined to assassinate the king following his meeting with the hermit. While hiding, the would-be assassin noted that the king

delayed his return, forcing the assassin to emerge from his concealed place. The king's bodyguards recognized the assassin and gravely wounded him. He escaped the bodyguards, only to falter before the king and hermit.

Touched by the man's sincere confession, the king not only forgave his assailant, but made arrangements for his personal physicians to attend to him upon return to the kingdom.

Before departing for his palace, the king asked his three questions one last time to the hermit. "You have already been answered," the hermit replied.

The wise old man explained that had the king not stopped to help him dig, he most surely would have been attacked on his return by the assassin. "So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business".

“Later, when the wounded man ran up here, the most important time was the time you spent dressing his wound, for if you had not cared for him he would have died and you would have lost the chance to be reconciled with him. Likewise, he was the most important person, and the most important pursuit was taking care of his wound.”

The wise man concluded by saying:

**“Remember that there is only one important time and that is now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person you are with, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making the person standing at your side happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life”.**

When the hermit explained that now is the only time over which we have “dominion,” he affirms the truth—the past and the future cannot be changed. The only time we have

any real power is in the present. Why be preoccupied with what already happened (guilt) or fearful of what is to come (anxiety)? Truly, the most important relationship you have is the person you are with now. Now is the only important time.

This Rosh HaShanah holds a unique significance as it also graces us with the sanctity of Shabbat. Shabbat, in its essence, is a weekly invitation to step into the present.

There is only one place. Here. There is only one time. Now. There is only one person, the one who is in front of you. There is only one task, to relieve their suffering.

Since returning from my trip to Japan this summer, I have tried to adopt the lessons I learned through my nostalgic trip down memory lane and stay anchored in the present for the unique beauty of each moment. Each moment together with family and friends. Being there for the most important time, the most important person, and the most important task.

“May the old year end and with it its curses, and may the new year begin and with it its blessings.” This refrain encourages us to let go of our regret and pain over what was, or what never came to be in the past year, and to embrace the present year, the present moment, and the blessings it brings.

As we journey forward, I invite each of us to make a simple yet profound commitment. Let's challenge ourselves to find at least one moment each day to be truly present. It could be during a meal, savoring each bite; during a conversation, listening deeply without the urge to respond; or even in a quiet moment of solitude, feeling the rhythm of our own breath. In these moments, we not only honor our own experiences but also those we share our lives with.

In the new year, may we be blessed to cherish the present, for it's the only time we truly have.

SHANA TOVA

(Sing teach us to Treasure Each Day?)