

Yom Kippur – 5771

Leo Tolstoy wrote the short story, “Three Questions.” One day it occurred to a certain emperor that if he only knew the answers to three questions, he would never stray in any matter. What is the best time to do each thing? Who are the most important people to work with? What is the most important thing to do at all times?

The emperor issued a decree throughout his kingdom announcing that whoever could answer the questions would receive a great reward. Many who read the decree made their way to the palace at once, each person with a different answer.

In reply to the first question, one person advised that the emperor make up a thorough time schedule, consecrating every hour, day, month, and year for certain tasks and then follow the schedule to the letter. Only then could he hope to do every task at the right time.

Another person replied that it was impossible to plan in advance and that the emperor should put all vain amusements aside and remain attentive to everything in order to know what to do at what time.

Someone else insisted that, by himself, the emperor could never hope to have all the foresight and competence necessary to decide when to do each and every task and what he really needed was to set up a Council of the Wise and then to act according to their advice.

Someone else said that certain matters required immediate decision and could not wait for consultation, but if he wanted to know in advance what was going to happen he should consult magicians and soothsayers.

The responses to the second question also lacked accord. One person said that the emperor needed to place all his trust in

administrators, another urged reliance on priests and monks, while others recommended physicians. Still others put their faith in warriors.

The third question drew a similar variety of answers. Some said science was the most important pursuit. Others insisted on religion. Yet others claimed the most important thing was military skill.

The emperor was not pleased with any of the answers, and no reward was given.

After several nights of reflection, the emperor resolved to visit a hermit who lived up on the mountain and was said to be an enlightened man. The emperor wished to find the hermit to ask him the three questions, though he knew the hermit never left the mountains and was known to receive only the poor, refusing to have anything to do with persons of wealth or power. So the emperor disguised himself as a simple peasant and ordered his attendants to wait for him at the foot of the mountain while he climbed the slope alone to seek the hermit.

Reaching the holy man's dwelling place, the emperor found the hermit digging a garden in front of his hut. When the hermit saw the stranger, he nodded his head in greeting and continued to dig. The labor was obviously hard on him. He was an old man, and each time he thrust his spade into the ground to turn the earth, he heaved heavily.

The emperor approached him and said, "I have come here to ask your

help with three questions: When is the best time to do each thing? Who are the most important people to work with? What is the most important thing to do at all times?"

The hermit listened attentively, but only patted the emperor on the shoulder and continued digging. The emperor said, "You must be tired. Here, let me give you a hand with that." The hermit thanked him, handed the emperor the spade, and then sat down on the ground to rest.

After he had dug two rows, the emperor stopped and turned to the hermit and repeated his three questions. The hermit still did not answer, but instead stood up and pointed to the spade and said, "Why don't you rest now? I can take over again." But the emperor continued to dig. One hour passed, then two. Finally the sun began to set behind the mountain. The emperor put down the spade and said to the hermit, "I came here to ask if you could answer my three questions. But if you can't give me any answer, please let me know so that I can get on my way home."

The hermit lifted his head and asked the emperor, "Do you hear someone running over there?" The emperor turned his head. They both saw a man with a long white beard emerge from the woods. He ran wildly, pressing his hands against a bloody wound in his stomach. The man ran toward the emperor before falling unconscious to the ground, where he lay

groaning. Opening the man's clothing, the emperor and hermit saw that the man had received a deep gash. The emperor cleaned the wound thoroughly and then used his own shirt to bandage it, but the blood completely soaked it within minutes. He rinsed the shirt out and bandaged the wound a second time and continued to do so until the flow of blood had stopped.

At last the wounded man regained consciousness and asked for a drink of water. The emperor ran down to the stream and brought back a jug of fresh water. Meanwhile, the sun had disappeared and the night air had begun to turn cold. The hermit gave the emperor a hand in carrying the man into the hut where they laid him down on the hermit's bed. The man closed his eyes and lay quietly. The emperor was worn out from the long day of climbing the mountain and digging the garden. Leaning against the doorway, he fell asleep. When he rose, the sun had already risen over the mountain. For a moment he forgot where he was and what he had come here for. He looked over to the bed and saw the wounded man also looking around him in confusion. When he saw the emperor, he stared at him intently and then said in a faint whisper, "Please forgive me."

"But what have you done that I should forgive you?" the emperor asked.

"You do not know me, your majesty, but I know you. I was your

sworn enemy, and I had vowed to take vengeance on you, for during the last war you killed my brother and seized my property. When I learned that you were coming alone to the mountain to meet the hermit, I resolved to surprise you on your way back to kill you. But after waiting a long time there was still no sign of you, and so I left my ambush in order to seek you out. But instead of finding you, I came across your attendants, who recognized me, giving me this wound. Luckily, I escaped and ran here. If I hadn't met you I would surely be dead by now. I had intended to kill you, but instead you saved my life! I am ashamed and grateful beyond words. If I live, I vow to be your servant for the rest of my life, and I will bid my children and grandchildren to do the same. Please grant me your forgiveness."

The emperor was overjoyed to see that he was so easily reconciled with a former enemy. He not only forgave the man but promised to return all the man's property and to send his own physician and servants to wait on the man until he was completely healed. After ordering his attendants to take the man home, the emperor returned to see the hermit. Before returning to the palace the emperor wanted to repeat his three questions one last time. He found the hermit sowing seeds in the earth they had dug the day before.

The hermit stood up and looked at the emperor. "But your questions have already been answered."

"How's that?" the emperor asked, puzzled.

"Yesterday, if you had not taken pity on my age and given me a hand with digging these beds, you would have been attacked by that man on your way home. Then you would have deeply regretted not staying with me.

Therefore, the most important time was the time you were digging in the beds, the most important person was myself, and the most important pursuit was to help me.

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. Remember that there is only one important time and it is **Now**. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person with whom you are, 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 that person, the one standing at your side, happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life."

To some extent, on Yom Kippur we complete an annual process of self-evaluation that is intended to begin with the first day of Elul, one month

before Rosh Hashanah. While the doors of judgment metaphorically swing shut later today at the end of the Neilah service, the lock on the door remains off until Hoshanah Rabbah during Sukkot. But the truth of our lives is that important questions, life changing questions, may occur to us any day of the year, often triggered by peak events: the birth of a child, a car accident, marriage, or a frightening, medical diagnosis. Suddenly, we have questions about time and value – who and what is really important to us.

What is the best time to do each thing strikes me as a question not only of timing, but also of priority. No Emperor could be a successful leader if all he ever did was dig garden beds or even treat wounded subjects. There is a time to work, a time to rest, a time to pursue personal interests. Isn't this the very message of the well known passage from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." There follows a long list of examples, all of which are no doubt deliberate, and none more so than the first one: "A time to be born, and a time to die:..." We really have no rational choice in either of these events, the start or end of life, but as the Tolstoy story emphasizes, we have a lot of control over the time in between. That time, as the Psalmist and tradition emphasize, is fleeting. Most of us powerfully encounter that reality a little later today during Yizkor. I don't know about you, but when I think

about my grandparents and parents and other relatives, as well as some members of Brith Sholom, I am stunned at how quickly the years have passed. In what seems retrospectively a blink, I have moved from childhood into early old age. Nine years of college and rabbinical school took forever. Thirty-five years at Brith Sholom – another blink. As part of the slow process of helping clean out my parents' home, I have come across family pictures that I do not remember ever seeing. I recently had one restored that was simply labeled: grandfather from Kirch-Gons, the village in Germany where my father grew up. That great-grandfather of mine isn't even named on the picture, although I am very sure that it is Wolf Theisebach, my father's maternal grandfather. But within three generations, there is no certainty. The brutal fact is that any one of us may be quickly lost in the sands of time. So what should we do in these few moments of history that are our lives? If we do not accept what Judaism tells us is important to do with our time: appreciate life as a gift from God, study Torah, do good deeds, support community – then no guru at the top of a mountain is going to guide us. We have to decide our own time priorities and might well do so with an eye to the future. What will future generations, even a few generations forward, remember about us? It seems unlikely that they will care much about how hard we worked, how much we earned, where we

traveled or how much we communicated electronically. The impact of our actions often transcends our comprehension and evaluation of the impact of those actions. Yom Kippur is a good time to contemplate what is the best use of our time, our limited time, in this world.

Who are the most important people to work with? The simple answer to: “who are the most important people” would seem to be our loved ones. But as Tolstoy’s story poses the question, it seems to have more to do with people beyond our loved ones. This being the twenty-fifth year of the Brith Sholom community living Jewish life in this building, and having finished my thirty-fifth year at Brith Sholom, this question gave me pause. Since the story revolved around an old man struggling and a wounded man, and Yom Kippur is a day that emphasizes taking care of the poor and hungry and homeless, I focused on people whom we collectively worked with. Long forgotten, from the late 1970s, are the Ethiopian Jews we helped to rescue by raising \$3,000 and a great deal of awareness long before Israel carried out Operation Moses in 1984. Then there were the Hekmati girls, Mino, Anita and Azita, three Iranian Jewish teenagers dropped off in Bethlehem because the Iranian government would not allow their parents and younger brother to leave Iran permanently. We helped settle them, educate them and get them started as adults until their parents and brother were allowed to leave many

years later for Canada and eventually a reuniting in the United States. In the early 1990s, we helped Boris Levin, a Russian teen who came to work for one summer in a Jewish camp in the United States. When Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin changed the face of the Soviet Union, Boris' parents told him to stay in the United States. We assisted Boris in many ways: helping him get asylum status and admission to Lehigh University where he eventually earned his PhD. And Boris was followed by other Russian families where we outfitted apartments, helped them find jobs and acclimate to life in the United States. As generations come and go, these most important events may be forgotten. But they are a reminder, along with the food we give to food banks and soup kitchens and other resources we provide to Jewish Family Service, that our presence is much more than just a building. Sometimes we select the people we work with and sometimes they select us and sometimes we do not even know who they are.

What is the most important thing to do at all times? We all have our limitations. It would be great if we could always do what we, ourselves, consider to be important. I know that reading good books is much better than surfing television stations, but there comes a time late at night where my eyes and brain have had it. If I picked up a book, my head would be slumping down, eyes shut, within a few minutes. I know that visiting people

in various long term care facilities is more important than sorting third class mail in my office. But the time must come for me to sort or I will never be able to get into my office. I always knew that spending time with Toby and our children was more important than the many meetings I attended, or attend, but if I am to know what is going on and have any opportunity to influence others, I need to be at these meetings. So the best we can do is push ourselves to reach as much of our individual potential as possible and recognize that there is a time to do what we perceive to be great things, significant mitzvot, and a time to dig in the garden. We can always care about God and people, but sometimes we have to take care of ourselves. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are meant to help us evaluate our priorities of time, people and actions. Thus, while we think of Rosh Hashanah as Yom Hadin, the Day of God judging us at the beginning of a new year, we might also consider it a day of us judging ourselves and where we are and where we are headed. That judgment requires brutal honesty. Today, those judgments are sealed for the coming year. If we live in the here and now and make ever better decisions on what to do and how to act, and how to relate more effectively, more openly, more lovingly to those close to us, then I have no doubt that our few years on this earth will be remembered for a very long time as a blessing. It is not only an Emperor who needs to decide how

to live life, we each face the same questions and need to search seriously for the answers. If your search has not already begun, I pray that it begins today.

AMEN