

Yom Kippur Sermon 5769

I was recently at a cemetery and saw a section dedicated to Jews from the former Soviet Union. The entire area had around 100 tombstones. All of the stones were cut from same beautiful rich black granite. Each was quite tall, around 6 or 7 feet. What made these matzeivot striking was that each had a fairly large picture of the deceased embossed on the front of the stone. I had never seen this before and it took me somewhat aback. One of the workers at the cemetery told me that around dusk it is a little uncomfortable as all the faces seem to be looking at him and the eyes seem to be following him. I spent a good deal of time taking in the many different faces. Someone came up to me and said, "Imagine what an awesome responsibility it must be." I asked him what he meant. He said, "what if you pick a picture that the person would not have liked and there it is for all time.

I began to think about the pictures I have of myself. Which picture would I pick if I had to sum up my life for all time through that one picture? Would I be young or old? Would I be alone or with my wife? How about a picture with my children and my parents? Maybe I would want a picture of me running on the beach with my dog or at work doing what I do. I love a picture I have in my office where I am blowing the shofar in front of the ark, days before Rosh Hashana but I also love my wedding picture when we are cutting the cake.

"And the life of Sarah was 100 years and 20 years and 7 years; and these were the years of the life of Sarah." (Bereshit Chapter 21)
The great commentary Rashi explains

For this reason was the word shana written after every item; to tell you that each term is interpreted individually. At 100 she was like 20 as regards to sin, just as a 20 year old girl does not sin, for she is not liable to punishment; so at 100 Sarah was without sin. At 20 she was like 7 regarding beauty. Finally, all of her years were equal in goodness. This is a difficult Rashi. I would have thought that one would compare 100 to 20 regarding beauty and not sin as we are considered most beautiful in our younger years and prone to youthful indiscretions in our 20's. I would have also thought that 20 years was compared to 7 years in innocence and lack of sin not beauty as Rashi does.

Well I did find another interpretation of this verse closer to my reading in the Medrash Hagadol as quoted by Rabbi Menachem Kasher in his book Torah Sheleima. He says, "at 100 she was like 20 bakoach regarding strength. At 20 like a 7 year old b'tzniut regarding modesty and purity. At 7 she was like 20 in daat, understanding. At 20 like 100 years, b'tzidkut in righteousness. To teach that the 100 years were equal to all 20 and the 7 years. The 7 years were equal to the 20 years and the 20 years were equal to the 100 years.

Do you ever look at the obituaries in the paper? Sometimes there is a picture of a handsome young man or woman. You would guess the person was in their early 20's and then you read the copy that the person died at 87! What is a picture and what does it capture? It is really only a moment, a split second of life. Is it reality? A rose is just a rose ...

Hashem gives our greatest physical strength and vigor when we are young and most of us are hoping to capture or recapture our youth, at least the way we looked and felt. Which is the best time of our life? As a young boy or girl of 5 or 7 we had very little worries and life seemed so simple. We were pure and innocent. Our parents told us that we should always tell the truth. We believed that we could be anything we wanted to be; a fire person, a police person, a nurse, an astronaut, or even the President. Is that what we would like to freeze in a picture? When we were 18,20,25, or even 30 and just beginning our adult years, many of us thought those were glorious times. We got our first pay checks and had very few responsibilities. No mortgages, no tuitions and our backs, knees, elbows and wrists were all in good working condition, still under warranty. All of our dreams seemed in front of us. Our passions were strong and so were our opinions. We were sure about so many things.

As we traveled through our middle years we often saw that every day was a juggling act just meeting our multiple obligations to our work, family, community and yes, to Hashem. We never had enough time to do all that we wanted to do and we were always exhausted. We tried to save away something for those golden years which we knew were just around the corner and then they arrived. At first they were golden indeed but eventually became a struggle and a real challenge. But the best part of growing older was the nachat from children, grand children and the love of friends. For all too many it was also a lonely time as so many we knew and loved would be taken from this world.

A lot of pictures indeed but I can only pick one, no collage.

A word about the dramatic events around us regarding the economy. What lessons if any can we learn from this storm? We thought that we had control of the big things like our future. Well we don't. We can save and save and it should be there when we want it but it might not be so. There are no sure things in life except what we can control. Like how we treat other people and what we do with the time we are given on this earth. That is in our control. As Victor Frankel explains real freedom is in the mind. What choices we make are the significant and holy moments in our life. The attitude we bring to the events which swirl around us is ours to determine. We have the power to decide how we react to others and how internally we deal with it. No event or person can take that away from us. Hakol bedei shamayim chutz m'yirat shamayim. Second, only through pain and tremendous challenges can change and real growth follow. Today's disaster lays the groundwork for tomorrow's new beginning. Our country and each one of us can use these days as opportunities for renaissance. Yom kippur is the day of the broken tablets being replaced with an even greater set precisely because it

comes on the heels of the sin of the golden calf and breaking of the tablets. There is nothing as whole as a broken heart! Reb Nachman

Close your eyes and think of those who you love who are not here. What picture do you see? What is the person doing? Are they smiling, calling out to you, are they in pain or at rest?

When your name is mentioned what mental picture or caption do you want to surface?