

A Day Pregnant with Possibility

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5777

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Our Rosh Hashanah prayers include the proclamation, *HaYom Harat Olam*, traditionally translated as, "Today is the birthday of the world." My colleague, Rabbi Greg Wolfe, has taught me a different way of understanding those words, which he learned from Rabbi Marsha Prager: "The actual phrase *harat olam* originally comes from Jeremiah, where [the prophet] bemoans his fate and wishes that he had never been born; that his mother had been *harat olam*, 'eternally pregnant.' So, now, our verse in the [Rosh Hashanah] service reads: *HaYom Harat Olam*, 'Today is eternally pregnant.' Today, [Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world,] is always pregnant, [forever] filled with potential and possibility."

Jeremiah coins the phrase "eternally pregnant" at a horribly difficult time in his life. That prophet suffered like none other, often imprisoned for speaking truth to power. Rosh Hashanah isn't a sad or difficult day. Likewise, I'm told that pregnancy is often uncomfortable, but also can be a time of great joy. The opportunities for life's future are endless.

Harry Kraemer, one of America's foremost business leaders, inspired me to consider the prospects for future possibilities that we may consider on this pregnant day. At a gathering for rabbis and synagogue executives at Northwestern University's business school, Kraemer began a talk by writing a number on the board: 168. Almost nobody knew the significance. 168 is the number of hours in a week. Can we apportion the hours offered to us each week in ways that will truly make a difference, for our work and for our families, for our bodies and for our souls, for ourselves and for our God?

Kraemer suggests that we start our self-examination "with a lot of questions," tough questions about who we are and how we spend our time. Kraemer challenges us to ask: "What's important? . . . And if I say certain things are important, is that reflected in my actions? If people observe me, would they agree" that I am putting my stated priorities first?

Most of us spend many of our 168 hours each week at work or as students. Some of us are blessed with work that is truly important to us. I am particularly fortunate. You, the members of Congregation B'nai Israel, enable me to study and teach our Jewish tradition, week after week. Many of you come to this place quite frequently, particularly on Friday nights, when we celebrate the vibrant life of our tradition together. You invite me into your lives at your times of greatest

celebration and at your hours of deepest need, and I have the privilege of sharing your joy, of seeing you through your sorrow.

Others enjoy equally meaningful, if entirely different, work. You teach and nurture the next generation. You help people solve complicated problems. You heal the sick. No doubt, some would say that they enjoy their work, but they wonder if their labors really matter. Would the world be worse, they ask, if people bought less of what I am selling? Does humanity really need to know about the arcane field of study I pursue? Though the questions are understandable, the answers are equally clear. Work itself is important. I am reminded of the Zionists who built the State of Israel through their labors. They taught, in the words of Ben-Gurion, that “the right to a nation, as to anything else, springs not from political or judicial authority, but from work.” What Ben-Gurion said about Israel applies to this country, too. We build our nation, our state, our community through our labors, whatever they be. Our work, day in and day out, makes a difference. America was established through hard work, and will continue to be a great nation only if individuals in every kind of economic endeavor devote themselves to our chosen tasks with earnest commitment.

Whatever our work, we can do it well or we can “phone it in.” Whatever our field of endeavor, we can be honest or we can cheat and steal. Whatever our position in the economy, we can be a pleasant coworker or we can make others miserable.

The same goes for students: Your work is important. You are building your future and America’s tomorrow. For some, achievement comes easily; for others, extra effort brings only mediocre grades. Even for those who do well without breaking a sweat, dedication is required. Arkansas and our nation need future leaders who will put in the effort to build a better tomorrow. You, too, can do your own work or you can cheat. You can contribute to a positive school environment or you can be a bully or a downer with a bad attitude. You, too, will come to be known by what you do, every day, and your actions will show the world what’s important to you.

And what of those who are retired or unemployed, or folks who cannot find work at their full potential? None of these conditions exempts us from spending our time doing what is important. Perhaps the greatest column William Safire ever wrote was his last regular op-ed in the *New York Times*. His words remind us that every single one of us has important work. Safire wrote, “When you’re through changing, learning, working to stay involved – only then are you

through.” Whatever our circumstances, we have the ability to demonstrate what is important to us in living our lives with meaning.

But even for those who work more than full time, our 168 hours cannot be apportioned entirely to economic or creative endeavors. Harry Kraemer preaches the gospel of a balanced life. At the height of his career, with the tremendous demands of a corporate CEO, Kraemer continued to volunteer actively at his church. He never stopped exercising regularly. Kraemer told us about leaving a room filled with millionaire, high-power executives to be with a group of little girls. He never stopped coaching his daughter’s soccer team. We may rightly wonder how he could do it all. We all have to find our own way; Kraemer’s includes not even owning a television.

The ancient Jewish wisdom of Ben Sira taught, “There is no wealth like health.” Assuring our own physical well-being is surely important enough to set aside hours in every week – for adequate sleep, every day; and also time to exercise, to eat right, to take in the fresh air of God’s creation.

I am in absolutely no position to give a sermon to anybody about how to apportion the hours in the week. I’m always struggling to make more time for Robert and Daniel. What I do know, and what I can say to you, is that absolutely nothing can match sheer hours spent with one’s children while they are growing up. No quality time, no magic words, nothing will say “you are important” to my children like spending time with them. No words of wisdom, no “laying down the law” will help to raise happy, successful, productive children like the presence of their parents. Whatever our stage of life, but especially when children are in the house, family must stake a priority claim to those 168 hours.

Judaism, for its part, is rather demanding of our time. Most of us ignore our tradition’s requisition, but Jewish teaching would have us set aside time for prayer every day and to reserve Shabbat as a day of rest and holiness, worship and study. Indeed, Judaism asks for 168 of our 168 hours, requiring that we act in accordance with God’s teaching every minute of every day. We are not permitted an hour to mistreat our employees, and we are not allotted ten minutes for malicious gossip. Still, none of us is without sin; nobody is perfect. Setting aside moments for prayer and reflection affords us the opportunity to redirect ourselves to more praiseworthy behavior, to seek forgiveness and to stimulate our better selves. A good start is the Shema before bed, a simple but powerful reminder of what matters most.

Our ancient Rabbis taught, *aveirah goreret aveirah*; “One sin leads to another.” If we become accustomed to poor behavior, we will repeat it. If we establish the wrong priorities, we will pursue them. If we do not think about how we allot the 168 hours we are given each week, we will spend our time foolishly; we will waste our lives.

But our Rabbis also taught, *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*; “One mitzvah leads to many.” Observing the *mitzvot* of this pregnant Rosh Hashanah, let us ask: What goodness will we birth after this year’s Rosh Hashanah pregnancy? If we are wise, our New Year meditations will lead us to examine our lives more regularly, even daily. If we make that time for regular reflection, we will set our priorities straight. If we know what’s really important, and we work toward that goal, we will utilize the life we’re given to do what matters most. In our work and for our health, in our homes and for our families, in our synagogue and for our God – and yes, even for ourselves – let the New Year be a good year, 168 hours every week.

Amen.