

“All you have is time”
Rabbi Rachael Jackson
Rosh Hashanah 5779, September 9, 2018

I want you to imagine that it is a beautiful Saturday morning in Hawaii. It's just after 8 o'clock and the sun has been up for not quite an hour. The water is glistening, the birds are cooing after their breakfast at dawn. A gentle breeze is blowing salt water your direction and you inhale its aroma while sipping on your coffee. The air is a temperate 70 degrees and 65% humidity¹. Your weekend could not be starting out better.

Then your phone dings an alert. Thinking it's just an amber alert and knowing you're not in the car, you ignore it. Then it dings again, this time it's your friend from down the street. Reluctantly, you pull yourself away from your peaceful morning of putzing around and look at your phone. What you see changes your life.

“BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.”

What do you do? How do you react? Where do you go? Who, if anyone, do you contact? What do you say?

Here are some true stories collected from those in Hawaii on January 13 2018 when the alert actually happened.

Confess: My uncle and his family live in Hawaii. He's been cheating on his wife for 2 years. We all found out about it in a mass text he sent 5 minutes after the emergency text went out. He wanted to clear the air before he died.

Brave: I came out on social media. I don't completely regret it, but I have definitely lost some friends, and a lot of my relationships with my friends have become really awkward.”

For some, it was a time to reveal their secrets, perhaps as a confession or as act of bravery.

Are there pieces to your life which you keep hidden? What would it take for you to be honest with your loved ones? These lives were forever changed when they thought they were going to die. We can learn from them and not wait until our final moments (were we even to know when that would be). We can be honest now. If not with our loved ones, at least with ourselves.

There were some people who went on with their life, either knowingly or unknowingly.

Asleep: I was sleeping when the announcement came out, and the others in my house didn't decide to wake me up. They said if I was gonna die, might as well let me die in my sleep.”

Status quo: . A young woman rolled out of bed and told her boyfriend “well, how about I make us one last cup of coffee before we die” then proceeded to the kitchen to brew a small pot. She said that all she wanted was one last time to do one of her favorite things, sit and talk stories with him with coffee in the morning.

Memory lane: Sat with my girlfriend looking at pictures of a vacation we took.

¹ <https://www.timeanddate.com/weather/usa/honolulu/historic?month=1&year=2018>

Do you consider it an act of mercy or one of neglect to let someone sleep or to simply make coffee? Which would you want?

I think that the immediate reaction is to let someone sleep. Many of us say that we wish to die peacefully in our sleep, so why not in this scenario too.

However, the converse is, did no one want to hold this person? Did no one want to share coffee with them and swap stories?

Life, and relationships, are so very rarely black and white. I can imagine that someone in the house did want to be with the sleeper, but out of care for them, allowed them peace.

And it takes a mature and strong spirit to ask. While we have the time now, ask now. Or better yet reveal what you want to your loved ones.

Only a text: A woman on the mainland whose family lives in Hawaii. Her father sent her a text, which she didn't receive until half hour later, because she had been sleeping. She wrote, "I could have lost my dad, my step mom (who is blood to me) and my little brother, and worse, slept through it. It made me realize how little I tell my out of state family I love them. And then it sunk in that my family thought they were going to die, and only my dad texted me! And then... that my dad *only* texted me. He couldn't let me hear his voice one more time? I am his *daughter*."

Innocence stolen: My oldest child is seven. We explained it very simply with as little detail as we could. We told him a bomb was on the way from North Korea. We told him about the missile defense systems and that all we could do was hope that they worked. We took away a lot of his innocence.

Focused: Throughout the whole thing I didn't think to even call or text any of my family on the mainland. If you had asked me what I would do if put in this situation I would say I would call my parents and tell them I love them but I didn't even think of that. I just thought about how much I love my wife and son and how sad I was that I wouldn't be able to see who he would become when he grows up. This has really given me a completely different perspective on life and makes me sad that I didn't even think to say goodbye to my family back home.

Choice: "I found out about the threat and had to decide weather [sic] to shelter there [,] drive to my two younger children at home [,] go back to the airport [,] or go be with my wife at her work. None of these destinations were within :15 min of where I was. I chose to go home to the two little ones [.] I figured it was the largest grouping of my family. Knowing I likely wouldn't make it home in time."

These folks all experienced heartbreak in one way or another. Whether that was parent to child or child to parent, the bond between generations is one which cannot be duplicated by any other relationship.

These relationships have incredible power in our lives, so any trauma stings that much more. It does not matter how old you are, or how long it's been since you've spoken to your child or parent—whether a day, a year, a decade—these bonds have a hold on us.

Some prayed while others were paralyzed.

Pray: I was sitting in the bathtub with my children, saying our prayers,"

Paralyzed: I was in the living room changing my 2 month old sons diaper. My wife was in the bedroom sleeping in. I hear the alarm go off on my phone a couple feet away and just think "oh it's just one of those amber alerts" and go back to changing his diaper. A second later my wife comes running out of the bedroom screaming that we were going to die. I kind of froze up, all I could think was how helpless I felt and how I couldn't do anything to save my newborn son. My wife was running around the house grabbing diapers and formula for the baby and I was just slowly finishing changing his diaper because I just couldn't imagine that something like this could happen.

After about 2-3 minutes I sort of snapped back to reality and focused only on getting my son and wife to some sort of safety. I live in a relatively small beach house with very thin walls so I knew it wouldn't do anything but I told my wife we would be safest in the bathroom in the middle of our house.

When any of us are asked, what would you do in an emergency, we have an idealized answer. Because, you see, we don't truly know. There were around 1.5million people who had one idea of their behavior who now know their actual actions. However, every emergency is different. Even people trained to handle emergencies will respond differently if their family is on the front line. I hope that each of thinks about what we will do, with whom we will communicate in the event of a catastrophe. And I hope we never have to find out if our plan made in calmness is realized in a crisis.

Awkward: "I was at work here on Maui My wife was at home with the kids and i called them to calm them down Once I realized they were all together I went to the third floor of a building with some coworkers and waited for the big bang or whatever was to come I told my big Samoan boss that we should just hug This way they would find us frozen in time like the folks they found in Pompey after mount Vesuvius Things were e a little awkward the rest of the day."

Run: "I checked out of the hotel and booked an uber to catch a flight to California. I wasn't going to stick around and see what happened."

Humor: "I didn't know where to go," she said. "Anyone try to dig a hole in lava? Good luck trying to build a shelter. I'm stocking my liquor cabinet."

Of course there was awkwardness and humor. Because for some people, when they are under pressure, they take a laissez faire approach and let their lackadaisical attitude shine through.

Here too, we can hopefully only speculate for ourselves.

Though I do have to say, I've never thought about trying to dig anything in lava and cannot imagine how quickly it might dent my shovel.

Those in Hawaii had 38 minutes to process their own impending mortality before they were told it was a false alarm.

You'll notice a few trends in all of these stories. Not one talked about work, money, or property. Almost every one focused on relationships in some way. Because at the end of the day, that's what is important in our world.

Each of us has a finite amount of time, and none of us know how long that will be. Some souls are with us only mere minutes, while others span more than a century. Even those of us with perfect health do not know. Even those of us with terminal illnesses do not know. For at any time there could be an act of war, a natural phenomenon, a physical disease, or an accident. I do not say that to scare us. Rather, I say it to bring a measure of comfort and action.

Rabbi Eliezer, from tractate Shabbat of the Talmud, tells us to act each and every day. He told his disciples “repent one day before you die”. Confused, they retorted, “But does a person know the day on which they will die?” Sagely, Rabbi Eliezer replied, “One should repent today lest they die tomorrow”².

In this season of repentance, that Talmudic teaching echoes in our hearts.

But let us expand his guidance beyond repentance to all interactions.
Tell someone you love them today, lest you die tomorrow.
Hug your friend close today, lest you die tomorrow.
Reveal your secrets today, lest you die tomorrow.
Reminisce about special times today, lest you die tomorrow.
Savor your cup of coffee today, lest you die tomorrow.
Find happiness today, lest you die tomorrow.
Pray today, lest you die tomorrow.
Find humor today, lest you die tomorrow.

What is stopping you? Of what are you afraid?

Native American Lakota Sioux leader Crazy Horse is quoted as saying at the Battle of Little Big Horn, “Today is a good day to die”. This phrase was used a hundred years later by the Star Trek fictional Klingons. Both groups were known for their warrior status and bravery in battle.

Here too I want to expand this statement. Today is *not* a good day to die just because I am going into war. Rather, it is good because I am at peace with my mortality and with my life. I have prioritized and chosen what is important to me, and I have followed through.

Thinking about prioritization of relationships can be hard, so let’s instead think about our checkbooks [aside: do people still actually use checkbooks?] Most of us cannot get everything material we ever want. Some of us have to choose between going out to eat or cooking at home. Some of us have to choose which credit card we’ll pay this month. Some of us have to choose where we can afford to vacation. No matter what though, all of us have to choose something.

Now take this idea of a checkbook as your life. Except you don’t really have a budget. And in a very kibbutznik way, all of us have the same theoretical budget. It’s a matter of choice how we spend it. We are pulled in a myriad of directions: socialization, volunteering, family, synagogue, self—and we are in control of how we allocate our one true non-renewable resource: time. No one else has authority over your time but you.

How will you use it this high holy day season?

We often quote Unetaneh Tokef with its climatic final line: “Teshuva, tefilah, tzedakah (repentance, prayer, and justice) avert the severe decree”.

Let us take that line and not use it to scare ourselves into an assumed behavior for ten days a year. Rather, let us use it to alter our life.

Teshuva is literally repentance. What if we use that as the means to repair and honor our relationships with those in our lives? Take teshuva to be everything in our relationships and every way we want to be in them.

² <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.153a?lang=en>

Take now tefilah, which literally means prayer, and use it a means of repair and honor our relationship with that which is great than ourselves. To really look into our individual theology, to commune with whatever concept we have of the Divine, to be spiritual.

And finally, take tzedakah—righteous giving. This is our way to repair the world. Whether that world is one person, one community, one nation-state, it is our role to repair what we can.

You have 38 minutes, what are you going to do? You have only today, what are you going to do? You have but one life, what are you going to do?

May we have the good sense to know ourselves and not wait to act. May we appreciate each other and heal relationships which hurt. May this coming year be free of crises and instead be full of celebrations. May it be good and sweet.
Shanah tovah umetukah!