

What would happen if one of the world's most acclaimed violinists set up in a large public space and just started playing, with no introduction, with no indication that he was anything but just another street musician hoping to hustle a few bucks?

This happened in the L'enfant Plaza train station in Washington DC last January 12. For almost 45 minutes, Joshua Bell, arguably the world's finest classical violinist who normally receives \$60,000 for a one hour performance, played a program of masterpieces on his \$3.5 million Stradivari. It was an experiment sponsored by the Washington Post, a stunt, really. When Leonard Slatkin, music director of the National Symphony Orchestra, was asked what he thought would happen, he guessed that out of the 1000 people who would walk past, 35 or 40 would recognize the quality of the music, 75 - 100 would stop and listen, and he would make about \$150 in coins and small bills.

I would likely have stopped, because I love listening to street musicians. When I have time, I will hang around for 5-10 minutes and throw a dollar into their music case before I leave. I wouldn't have known who he was, but I would have noticed, as you can see on the youtube video, that he was pouring his heart and soul into the performance, he and his violin soaring with the music.

What really happened? Of the 1100 people who passed by, only 7 people stopped even for a minute to take in the music and only 27 people paused long enough to throw a dollar or so. At the end of the 43 minutes, he had made \$32.17.

I'd like to think that I would have recognized the quality, and paused, if only for 5 minutes. But what if I had a train to catch and had gotten to the station just in time to run to the platform? What if I was rushing to work, to do errands, or to an appointment? Do I live my life like the 98% of the people who didn't even notice the music, who cram so much into their day that they have not a minute to spare to notice exquisite beauty?

Most of us live our lives in distraction. Most of the time, we don't notice what is right in front of us. Most of the time, we don't appreciate what is right in front of us. Most of the time, we don't hear the sounds that are right in front of us. Most of the time, we don't smell or really taste the food that is sitting on the plate right in front of us. Most of the time, we don't smell the breeze blowing right in our face (unless perhaps it carries the odor of skunk!).

Rabbi Al Lewis pointed out to me that there are Midrashim about Moses and the burning bush which suggest that other shepherds did not see the burning bush; only Moses did.<sup>1</sup> How it is possible that they did not notice the miracle of a bush burning and burning without being consumed by the flames! The answer is that they did see it, but didn't pay attention long enough to notice anything special about it. Only Moses really took the time to look at the bush carefully enough to see that it was burning without being consumed.

I came across the following passage in the book "In the Image," by Dara Horn:

Jake often suspects that he experiences life quite differently from those around him. Every day as he walks around the city, he sees people with cellular phones welded to their ears and little electronic organizers in their hands. People are always setting a time to meet someone, plotting their course of action for the next fifteen hours, deciding how much money they will need to retire. Jake has no problems with technology. Contrary to what his father accuses

<sup>1</sup> Tanhuma Shemot 15

him of, he doesn't live in the past. It's just that he lives in the present, while everyone else around him lives in the future.

I want to live like Jake, but it's not always easy. Consider the following three situations in which I, and I suspect many other people, stumble:

In a conversation -- are we fully present and listening, or do we hear only enough to figure out what our response is going to be or how we are going to steer the conversation to a topic of our choosing or to ourselves?

In a meeting -- are we trying to understand the flow of presentation, argument, and discussion, or are we planning what we are going to say next or how we are going to interrupt the current speaker in order to get ourselves on the record as contributing to the meeting, or are we checking off how many more agenda items there are until we can go home and watch ER, Boston Legal, 24, or Desperate Housewives?

At the end of services - are we listening and responding to the final mourner's kaddish and are we immersed in the significance and meaning of Adon Olam, or are we already taking off our tallit and tefillin, chatting with our neighbors, or mentally or physically on our way to Kiddush, breakfast or to our next appointment or task?

I think in this respect we are deeply and heavily influenced in our behavior and habitual responses from our surrounding culture. We live in a competitive culture, and sports are a very important part of it. The lesson we learn from football, basketball, soccer, and hockey, is that we have limited time in the game and we have to do as much as we can. When we're sitting doing nothing, we're wasting time that could be better used in productive ways, to score points, as it were. Baseball doesn't have a ticking clock, but nonetheless our goal is to outscore our opponent. Golf is a race to go through the course with the fewest strokes - meaning, in a sense, as quickly as possible.

When a Vikings player this past week caught a pass on a bounce, which was incorrectly ruled fairly caught, the quarterback rushed the next play so Detroit couldn't ask for a review. Both the team and the player in question acted within the rules of the game but outside of the rules of ethical behavior. Bill Belichick, coach of the New England Patriots, was fined \$500,000 and the team was fined \$250,000 and lost a draft pick, for stealing signals from opposing teams using video equipment. The owner of the team was displeased with the coach for violating the rules, but took no further action. The bottom line, however, is that the coach won 3 Super Bowls, and producing, scoring touchdowns and winning, is more important than good behavior -- what team wouldn't give up a draft pick and \$1 million to win even one Super Bowl?

I'm not saying there is anything wrong with playing or watching sports. I'm suggesting that many people have absorbed the sports metaphor and incorporated it into their daily lives. This means that we rush through life trying to reach the finish line in the least amount of time, with the idea that the one with the most toys at the end of the game wins.

How many of us treat life as a competitive sport, rushing from one thing to another -- how quickly can we remove our tallit or tefillin? How quickly can we finish what we are doing so we can get to the next thing? How often do we go through our days racing towards our ultimate deaths as if nothing else matters?

Isaiah wrote:

God never grows faint or weary, . . . . God gives strength to the weary, fresh vigor to the spent. Youths may grow faint and weary, and young men stumble and fall; But they who trust in Adonai shall renew their strength as eagles grow new plumes: They shall run and not grow weary, they shall march and not grow faint. [Isaiah 40.28-31]

We want to think that we have unlimited energy, that we can keep doing more and more. Isaiah suggests that the God-connected part of ourself can transcend our physical limitations. Too many people take Isaiah's metaphor literally - that's why the traditional Sabbath has all but disappeared from our culture. Shabbat is intended to be a brake on our lives, a time to slow ourselves down and accept ourselves as limited beings.

A more realistic look at our lives comes from the Psalmist, in a passage that we recite in Yizkor:

Adonai, what is man that You should care about him, mortal man, that You should think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow. [Psalms 144.3-4]

We are limited, transitory beings, and Yom Kippur calls us to examine and refocus our lives.

Let's pretend we're in a room in which no one has a cellphone; or at least they are turned off. Not on a vibrate setting, but actually turned off. Let's pretend that there is no television, radio, or other sound producing device within earshot. Let's pretend that no one around us is chatting. Let's pretend that the room itself is fairly quiet. We've now removed auditory distractions.

Let's pretend that the room is well lit, but not so bright that it hurts our eyes. Let's pretend that there is no television to provide visual distraction, and in general the room is uncluttered so that the eye naturally focuses on one or at least a limited number of objects. We've now removed or limited visual distractions.

Let's sit in this room in comfortable seats, so we can focus on what's happening outside of our bodies.

This room might be Ahavas Israel this morning or any other Shabbat or Festival morning; in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel it might be a Palace in Time, the Shabbat room that you can build anywhere you happen to be; or it could be any moment that you decide to focus on the here and the now.

Teaching oneself to notice the beautiful music right in front of us is a matter of accepting that what you are doing right now is the most important thing you are doing right now. It's a matter of living your life in the current moment, rather than living this moment in anticipation of the next moment. It's a matter of realizing that life is not a competitive sport - there is no prize for reaching the finish line first!

We have limited time on earth in order to accomplish whatever it is that we were put on earth to do. It might just be that the music we don't hear, the roses we don't smell, the person we don't acknowledge with a smile, was part of our mission on earth.

The following story is repeated about various rabbis:<sup>2</sup> When a rabbi was just starting out, he wanted to change the world. He tried, but the world did not change. Then he tried to change his town, but the town did not change. Then he tried to change his neighborhood, but the neighborhood did not change. Then he tried to change his family, but his family did not change. So he learned to change himself. But once he succeeded in changing himself, then he saw that

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Chaim of Sens, the Chafetz Chayim (1923) The Rebbe of Apt, R. Zusia, Reb Bunim

his family was different, his neighborhood was different, his city was different, and in a sense the entire world was different.

Our reflection during Yizkor teaches us that life is precious, that each moment we have the potential to change ourselves and thus affect the world in unexpected ways. To do so, we need to be conscious of how we interact with the world. May the memory of our beloved departed family and friends help us learn to live in the present moment, living each day of our lives as if it were as new as the first day of creation; may our lives be refreshed as the calendar is renewed; and may we fully see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the beauty and richness of God's world.