

30 Years On

(Kol Nidre 2018/5779)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

I have special reason to reflect this holiday season. I am beginning my 30th year as a rabbi, and I will be 60 in January. As the Psalmist wrote:

Na'ar hayiti, gam zakanti – once I was youthful, alas I have aged.

Where have the years gone? How to find the words – how to absorb – that three decades have come and gone since receiving my now-faded ordination diploma? Inaudible and noiseless time: We barely notice its thievish progress. The years now seem to accelerate with increasing speed. My first rabbinical decade took forever. The last ten years seemed like three. In a month, I will be eighty – four score years – the Bible's statute of limitations.

When I was 30, 60-year-old rabbis seemed ancient to me. The first rabbi who agreed to take me in after rabbinical school – Harvey Tattelbaum – still my dear friend and mentor – was five years younger than I am now. How is that even possible? Some SWFS congregants remember me from those days. I am touched that you have stuck with me all these years. I may look different to you but I don't feel different. And if I am to be honest – you look a bit different to me too.

In many ways, I still feel 30. I listen to the same music. My wife and I attended an Eric Clapton concert last year. Sitting next to us were two young people probably in their early twenties. I was curious: What was the attraction of Eric Clapton for kids in their twenties? Clapton is in his 70's and was at Madison Square Garden to celebrate his 50-year career.

Before the concert began, I asked the couple: "Do you and your friends like Clapton?"

"Clapton is okay," said the young man, "but I'm also here for the first act – Gary Clark."

I said, "Who?"

You know that look that young people give you when they think you are hopeless – the look you get when you ask for computer advice – a kind of bewildered but respectful stare – bespeaking the unbridgeable chasm of ignorance between you and they? That's the look he gave me, as he patiently explained: "Gary Clark Jr. is a great blues guitarist – but much younger than Clapton."

And then – so earnestly, so sweetly, so innocently – with his date nodding her approval – he added: "Gary Clark is about thirty – he's in the prime of his life!"

In the prime of his life! At 30! Hey kid – so what do you think a 60-year old rabbi is – ancient – until I reminded myself that that was precisely what I thought of 60-year-old rabbis at his age.

The Mishna states: *Ben sheloshim la-koach* – "one is at full strength at the age of 30." Kind of what the kid said – you are at your physical prime at 30 years old.

To add insult to injury – a few lines down, the Sages say:

Ben shishim le'zikna – at 60 you are old.

Some scholars understand the word – *zikna* – not as “old” – but “mature.” I much prefer that interpretation. Mature implies wisdom. If that is what the Rabbis meant – their point was that while a 30-year-old is at peak physical strength – a 60-year-old is at peak intellectual strength.

Take that – Eric Clapton concert kid.

So I keep asking myself: If I am at the peak of my intellectual strength – why do I still make so many mistakes – amateur mistakes – the kind I made in my first year as a rabbi. Not a day goes by – not one day – when I don't admonish myself on the way home: “You made some stupid mistakes today.” Mistakes of commission – I said something I shouldn't have – and mistakes of omission – I didn't say something I should have said.

When I was thirty, I assumed that by the time I reached the age of those sixty-year old rabbis, three decades of accumulated wisdom would free me from these limitations of the self. The consolation of being closer to the edge – is that I would be much wiser – no longer prone to the mistakes of youth. Alas, I now suspect that by the time I get really good at what I do – my time will have run out.

When we are young, perspective is difficult for us. Most of our future has not happened yet. So we magnify events beyond their true significance. If we succeed today, we think the world is ours. We are on an uninterrupted trajectory to the top of the universe. If we fail today, we think we will never recover from the setback, the loss, the bitterness, the anger, the disappointment, the blow to our ego.

When that lover jilted us in our youth, we moped around convinced we are worthless. No one will ever love me again. Since the next fifty years haven't happened yet, we could not know at the time that it may have been for the best. Only decades later – knowing all that transpired since – might we realize that had she not jilted me – I might have ended up with her. You know that Meat Loaf song: “I swore that I will love you till the end of time – so now I'm praying for the end of time to hurry up and arrive – cause if I have to spend another minute with you I don't think that I can really survive.”

When we were passed over for that first job that we so desperately wanted, we could not know at the time that it may have been for the best. Only years later, looking back at all that transpired since, might we realize that had we gotten that job, we might never have gotten the other jobs that have made our lives so rewarding.

Thirty years ago, my entire senior rabbinical class was competing for one Manhattan job. For many reasons, moving out of New York was not an option for us, so to increase my chances I also applied for a suburban congregation in the area. I didn't get that suburban job. I didn't realize at the time that it was for the best. All I could think about was why they took my classmate over me.

Years later – one of the members of the search committee told me why I didn't get that job. In the years since, she had become a close and cherished lay trustee. I had no recollection of meeting her as a student. When she told me that she was a member of that search committee, I

asked her whether she remembered my interview. She told me that people will go to their graves remembering my interview. “No one ever forgot your interview.” I asked why. She responded – “you don’t remember what you said?” “No, what did I say?”

“We asked you why you applied for this position.” They were looking for a rabbi–educator – essentially a rabbi to run their religious school. She said that I responded: “I don’t want to be an educator. I don’t know how to run a school.” “So why are you interviewing for the job,” they asked. According to her, I responded – “I thought that I would persuade you to change the job: That after meeting me you would be so impressed that you might decide to hire me anyway for what I did want to do” – which was to be an assistant rabbi.

I do not recall saying that – but it sounds like me from thirty years ago.

When we are young, we think that we can bend the world to our will. If we don’t like something, we will just change it. If a goal seems hard, we will simply plow through, flattening any obstacle in our way. It takes years for us to accept that some things in life are impervious to my will. That no matter how hard I try – no matter how hard I work – no matter how disciplined and focused I am – no matter how ingenious I may be – no matter how much I persevere – no matter how much I want something – some things are beyond me.

We cannot change the job description of life. The world is bigger than any one of us. We can influence some aspects of life but not as many as we think. And even where we have a degree of control, we are still dependent on many factors and many people beyond our control. You may have thought that the simple act of arriving here tonight on time was entirely an act of will on your part. You just needed to prepare and leave early enough. What you do not consider are all of the circumstances beyond your control. I bet that you did not give a passing thought to all the systems that make urban life possible – electricity, water, food, transportation, police – and but for their smooth functioning none of us would have made it here tonight.

This realization that so much of what I do, what I want, and what I achieve is not dependent on me and cannot be brought under my full control – is the beginning of wisdom. It comes to us only through living. Our dependency on things outside of us; our frailty and fragility; our gaping ignorance no matter how much we think we know – these dawn on us only after we get knocked around by life. We acquire humility only after being humbled. Only after we have personally experienced unfairness do we learn to love justice. Only after we have fallen ill can we appreciate health. Only after we have failed over and over again can we cherish those moments of life when we truly succeed.

This is when we develop that thing called faith. Not a rote recitation of religious doctrine – but a deeper devotion that seeks to affirm life despite its hardships, unfairness, injustice, and finality.

There is a profound passage in the Talmud:

Rabbi Simlai taught:

There are 613 commands in the Torah. King David then came along and established them upon eleven. Then Isaiah came along and reduced the eleven to six. Micah then came along and

reduced the six to three. Isaiah came back and reduced the three to two. Finally – the prophet Habakkuk came along and reduced the two to one. (Chagigah)

Talmudic rabbis look to a verse in Habakkuk to establish the one fundamental principle of Judaism upon which every other value is based, and every other principle rests. According to the Sages – each and every command of the 613 mitzvahs enumerated in the Torah – all emanate from one verse in Habakkuk.

Most of you have probably never heard of Habakkuk – right? He is a rather obscure prophet. Scholars know little about where and when he lived. He left us only three chapters of his teachings – 56 verses. But one of those verses was considered by the Talmud as containing within it every last particle of Judaism.

It was this:

Ve'tsaddik be'emunato yichyeh – the righteous shall live by their faith.

Why do these three Hebrew words contain the essence of the Jewish way? Because faith is the foundation of life. We cannot live without faith. Everyone believes. Life is too complicated, too uncertain, too unpredictable, too harsh – to not believe. Most of what we do – most of what you did today – was taken on faith. You took dozens of leaps of faith today.

Every time you step outside you take a leap of faith that the people you meet on the streets do not have nefarious intentions. Every time you sit behind the wheel, you become a believer – with only partial evidence at best – that the driver coming down the road in the opposite direction does not want to kill you. Every time you step on a plane, you take a leap of faith that the pilots, the crew, the engineers who designed the plane, the workers who built it – are all competent and have good intentions. But what is the evidence for that? Do you know the crew? Did you investigate their background?

When you take medicine – you take a leap of faith that your doctor's intentions are good – but not only that. You assume her competence. You assume that the people who manufactured the pill mixed the proper ingredients in the correct amounts. You assume that the pathologist examined your blood and not another's. You assume that the pharmacist gave you the right bottle and not someone else's bottle.

And on and on and on through every moment of every day of your life. Faith is synonymous with life. We cannot live without faith.

The only question is what we choose to believe. Will we believe in the hopelessness of the human creature? There is plenty of evidence for this. Or – will we believe in our capacity for goodness? There is plenty of evidence for this as well. Will we believe in the perfectibility of the human creature? There is plenty of evidence for this. Or – will we believe in the ineradicable evil of human beings? There is plenty of evidence for this as well.

Our faith has become cynical. We are disenchanted. The world seems corrupt and brutal. We assume that everyone will lie, cheat and exploit to sell me something. Technology brings out the worst in us. Tablets, touchpads, tweets, trolling, trending, Tumblr, Twitter uncover our shameless

ignominy. The human creature stripped of dignity, revealed in all his moral nakedness. We disgust ourselves.

It is the age of demagoguery. We no longer trust each other. Thus, we have become afraid. Some danger, some threat lurks in every corner of my life. Our paranoia unsettles us and gives us no rest.

Even paranoids have enemies. But the belief that human beings are hopelessly corrupt and out to get me – leads to despair. It is to invite what Thomas Hobbs warned against:

“To this war of every man against every man, nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have no place. Force and fraud are the two cardinal virtues. Consequently, in such condition, there are no arts, no letters, no society, and worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death – and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

History produced many such periods – wars of everyone against everyone – when fear and insecurity were so pervasive that people readily submitted to force – to the power of the commanding will.

When you stop and think about it – it is our lives today – one of arts, letters, progress, justice, security – that are the exception. Given the nature of the human creature, and mindful of our propensity to do harm, and aware of the damage we have wreaked in the past – it is our period that is unusual. We have evolved to trust in each other’s integrity and good intentions enough – so as to make our lives better, longer, more prosperous and more peaceful than at any other time in the troubled history of humanity.

But these gains are incomplete and fragile. They rest on faith – faith in the essential goodness of the human creature. And when we lose that; when we lose our trust in each other’s benevolent intentions – we risk losing it all.

I end with a brief description of the life and times of Witold Pilecki. As the Chief Rabbi of Poland wrote: “When God created the human being, God had in mind that we should all be like Captain Witold Pilecki.”

He was a Polish cavalry officer who fought the Nazi invasion of his homeland. On September 19, 1940 – seventy-nine years ago tomorrow – he deliberately walked into a Nazi roundup in Warsaw – so that he would be sent to the new concentration camp of Auschwitz. At the time, it held Polish prisoners of war. The Polish military had heard rumors of horrific acts taking place there – and Captain Pilecki volunteered to be captured, so that he could discover the truth.

Pilecki was the only person who ever volunteered to go to Auschwitz. He spent two years and seven months in that hell – living through its transformation from a prisoner of war camp for thousands into a death camp for millions. In 1943, concluding that he needed to tell the allies the full story of Auschwitz, Pilecki and some comrades staged a daring escape, somehow making it back to Warsaw. He fought courageously in the 1944 uprising against the Nazis. His heroism boggles the mind.

The reason Pilecki's story is not well-known in the West – is that the Polish Communist government suppressed it for decades. After the War Pilecki backed the democratic government in exile and fought against the Communists.

In 1947, his former comrades – a number of whom were with him in Auschwitz— arrested Pilecki, charging this hero of the Polish nation with treason. The noble military captain, who volunteered for, survived and escaped from Auschwitz, who continued his fight against the Nazis until their ultimate defeat, was executed in 1948 by his own comrades, his own government.

A devout Catholic, Pilecki spared no words describing the inhumanity of Auschwitz. It was brutal and barbaric from the start:

“Around 10:00 p.m. the train stopped. This is the moment I bade farewell to everything I had hitherto known on this earth and entered something seemingly no longer of it. Our concepts of law and order and of what was normal – all those ideas to which we had become accustomed on this earth – were given a brutal kicking.”

Even as his strength diminished – Pilecki kept writing:

“It was a daily surprise that we were still alive – when we seemed to have crossed far beyond the threshold of what the strongest man could endure. We developed respect for this strange human nature – strong for possessing a soul – and containing something apparently immortal within itself.”

The righteous live by this faith. They develop respect for this strange human nature – strong for possessing a soul, and containing something apparently immortal within itself. The growing good of the world depends on these faithful souls. Many of them are anonymous, their stories untold, their tombs unknown.

Like Witold Pilecki. He was executed somewhere in Warsaw. No one knows where. He has no grave. No final resting place. Only a monument to him where he was captured by the Nazis.

Nonetheless – as George Elliott wrote in these final words of her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*:

“The growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in un-visited tombs.”