

Rabbi Kulwin Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 5773

In the early *midrashim* of thousands of years ago, *midrashim* that spoke of God's power and wonder, the rabbis coined a phrase to indicate how quickly God could act, how rapidly the full force of his glory brought to bear. So much could happen, the rabbis said, *b'heref ayin*, in the "blink of an eye."

Every once in a while we encounter an image – from a piece of music, a newspaper or magazine article, a painting, a passage of literature – an image that is so strong, so arresting, so utterly compelling, that for a brief time is all consuming.

With me, it's usually music. I remember sitting in the Shed at Tanglewood, listening to the Boston Symphony Orchestra play Mahler's First symphony. I don't know why that particular performance, but for an instant I felt as if I understood Mahler with an intimacy I have shared with only a few people in my life. I react similarly when I listen to the second and third Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos. I often find myself in tears, the music touches me so.

But I was thoroughly unprepared for a similar experience a few weeks ago, as I sat down to read a slim, unassuming volume.

In 1995, Jean Dominique Bauby was on top of the world. A tumultuous domestic life had finally settled somewhat, his bank account was flush, and as the forty three year old editor of the French edition of Elle, he had one of the most visible jobs in the world of international fashion. Life was good.

In December of that year Bauby was test driving a new BMW. He went to pick up his son. As the car nosed out of the driveway Bauby began to feel woozy and lightheaded. He had a sudden, terrible pain in his head. A few moments later, the lights went out.

As Bauby explains in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, he awoke 40 days later and learned he had suffered a massive, massive stroke. He learned that he suffered from "locked in syndrome," an unimaginable condition in which his mind was intact but his body was paralyzed. "Locked in syndrome" has the right name.

So how did he write a book? Well, Bauby was not completely locked in. *B'heref ayin*. He could blink his left eye. That was all. That was enough. His assistant read the alphabet aloud, slowly, letter by letter, watching him. When she arrived at the right letter, Bauby blinked. And then the process would start over again.

The book is staggering. Bauby's words are unbelievably precise. His memory and his imagination become his greatest friends. They take him soaring from sea to sky, reliving past

glories, past adventures, past intimacies. They help him invent new ones. Bauby takes refuge in his mind, alternating between giddiness and despair.

I read the book in one sitting. And as I did so, as I accompanied Bauby on his journeys, I could not get the image of these ancient Jewish words out of my mind. *B'heref ayin*. In the blink of an eye. One letter at a time, unbearably slow, this was the only way Bauby could communicate. A few words an hour; a few hours a day. That was the most he could handle. That was all he could communicate.

His feat was extraordinary. And it seems all the more extraordinary because we live in an age where communication is, promiscuous. We have more ways of saying more things whenever we want than ever before. Whether it is worth it or not. Whether it is appropriate or not. Bauby, with so few words, spoke volumes.

It is impossible to read the book without wondering: What if it were me? What if I were in that car, what if I suffered that stroke, what if instead of Jean-Dominique Bauby I were locked in. What if I had become, *heref ayin*, the blink of an eye. Would I have the capacity not to go stark raving mad? Would I have the discipline and the patience to get out those few words a day? And maybe most intriguing of all, if I could...what would I say?

The power of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is the effectiveness with which Bauby brings us into his world, making it ours, making us wonder...what would I say?

The Rabbis of the Talmud may not have been familiar with locked in syndrome, but they were more than familiar with the use and abuse of speech. Pages of the Mishnah, our first law code, are devoted to the dangers of thoughtless words, and one passage *Kol tipesh milim rabot* – “the voice of a fool is in many words” – is an early version of Mark Twain’s famous advice, “better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt.”

The rabbinic literature is filled with admonitions to be precise in language, to use few words rather than many, to think much but say little. The rabbis knew. Words are powerful.

Aaron Copland was most famous as a composer, but he was also a serious thinker and writer about music theory and history. In his famous book *What to Listen for in Music*, he invites the reader to imagine a room, silent, sunlit. A man sits at a piano. Copland asks the reader to imagine, suddenly, that the man plays a minor chord. What happens? In the blink of an eye, the room becomes a little dark, a little moody, a little ominous.

Then Copland asks the reader to imagine the minor chord changing to a major chord. Again, in the blink of an eye, the light returns, the room becomes a cheery, friendly, warm place. All because a single note on the piano went up a half step.

We sit in a room. Another person enters. The first words out of our mouth are the verbal equivalent of that minor chord. The room is tense, dark, uncomfortable. Or our first words are the verbal equivalent of the major chord. The room is fresh, and comfortable, and kind. The difference is palpable.

Sometimes the point is not even the words themselves. A congregant calls. Things are not good at home. Am I free? Can we get together and talk? Of course.

The congregant arrives and sits down in my office. The burden is on me. If I am distracted, and glance at my watch, and through my posture somehow indicate that I am not completely with them, I not only do not help them, I make them feel worse.

If, on the other hand, my posture shows I am with them, and look at them, and clearly engage, then I can begin to make them feel better before a single word is spoken. They know someone cares.

Words are powerful. And so is silence.

Communication is complicated. We often make it more so.

A few weeks ago I attended a rabbis' meeting at the Jewish Family Service office. A dozen or so of us were gathered around a table. Just about everyone had a Blackberry or an I Phone or a Tablet in front of him or her. Throughout the meeting, while our discussion took place, these devices were in use. Quiet buzzes made the table vibrate while rabbis composed or responded to e-mails and texts.

We were a bunch of rabbis. We were not policemen. We were not firemen. We were not medics. No life or death situation demanded our attention. If we went offline for 45 minutes, the earth would not cease to spin. But because we could go online, we did. Because we can be connected, it is our right. How dare someone protest?

Were those present fully engaged in the moment? Were they listening? And how does it feel to speak and, rather than look into a dozen pairs of eyes, look rather at the tops of heads that are turned down to face tiny screens?

I think about Bauby some more. I think about the words he chose to say. I think about being in that situation. All in the blink of an eye. I think about what words I would choose and...I cannot imagine it. And then I begin to think that perhaps I am looking at it all wrong. The focus should not be on what he chose to say. The focus should be on, to whom.

Bauby writes with animation about those who come to visit. Of his friends, his partner, especially his young daughter and son, Celeste and Teofile. His friends visit frequently, with

news of the outside world, gossip, the latest goings on from the fashion industry. His partner sits with him for hours, his children cuddle up on his bed, content to be in his presence. This is not ideal. It is not even good. It is horrible. But under the circumstances, it is the best that could be hoped for. Even though there is so little of Bauby to be had, those who love him will take whatever they can have.

And perhaps therein lies a lesson. The words Bauby chooses, the words we would choose, are the words to loved ones, the words that maintain the bonds between us intact, alive. Or put another way, our goal should be that if such a thing ever happens to us, may we have lived in such a way that there are people who love us and care for us enough that they will want to hear even the mere handful of words that we can muster. Even if it is one word. They want to hear that one word, because so much of us, already, is inside them.

Bauby died unexpectedly fifteen months after his stroke. Ironically, in the blink of an eye, as it were. Doctors thought he would improve, but a sudden case of pneumonia had other ideas. Thanks to his book, one can have a sense of what his final months were like. One can only imagine the effort that went into writing the book, all in his mind, then dictating it, letter by letter, just a bit each day. But those who loved him must be so very glad to have it.

Bauby never really explained just why he wrote the book. He thought he would eventually get better and in part this was no doubt to be a chronicle of the bad times. A professional journalist, perhaps writing was for him autonomic; even if he did not want to write he could not help himself.

Among the things he wrote about, and fretted about, as he lay there helplessly, are things that might not even occur to us. Television, for example.

"If the TV is turned on, it is vital to have made the right decision. It is almost a matter of strategy. Three or four hours are likely to go by before the return of the kindly soul who can change channels. Sometimes it is wiser to forgo an interesting program if it is followed by a tearful soap opera, a silly game show, or a raucous talk show."

Bauby's mind was all there. But except for his left eye, his body lay utterly inert. Bauby seems to bear them no animus, but many at the hospital seemed to regard his mind as no better than his body. There was no regular checking in to see if something might be changed. It would only have taken the blink of an eye. It just does not seem to have occurred to them. Yet think how important the television would have been. How wonderful to have the time maximized turned to a station he would enjoy most. How terrible to have no choice, to be forced to watch hours of television he found odious.

Many of those working in the hospital, the very ones who should have known better, were clueless. They simply took what they saw at surface level. And could trouble themselves to go no deeper.

One of the greatest lessons I ever learned came from a woman named Gladys Bruckner. Many of us knew Gladys. She was a member of Temple B'nai Abraham nearly her entire life. A former sisterhood president, she passed away a week ago at age 100 and a half.

A few years ago, I visited Gladys's home for the first time. As far as I was concerned, I was simply visiting a congregant. Standard rabbi stuff. That was true. But there was more.

Gladys was an artist, a sculptor. Her immaculate apartment was filled with original pieces. I am no expert in art but even I could tell these pieces were made with intelligence, passion and skill. They conveyed emotion and meaning. They were a delight to look at, consider, and even put your arms around.

I was enchanted. I said to her, Gladys, why didn't you ever tell me you were so wonderful an artist? She looked at me quizzically. She uttered three words: "why would I?" It was a good question. I had no answer.

As I left her house, I felt disappointed in myself, even ashamed. Not that I should have divined that she was a true and for-real artist. How could I? But I was surprised...because my mind was not even open to the possibility. It would only have taken *heref ayin*, the blink of an eye. I already had her pegged. Based purely on what was on the surface – your basic nice old lady – I catalogued and categorized her appropriately. I assumed that was that. And it is not only that, like the French hospital staff, I was wrong. Like the French hospital staff, I was also unfair. To be wrong is simply to make a mistake. To be unfair...that's more serious.

The Torah is filled with characters who confound expectations. The shepherd Abraham becomes the leader of the Israelites. The spoiled brat Joseph becomes Prime Minister of Egypt. Moses who flees Egypt and longs for the simple life in Midian, devotes the last 40 years of his life to freeing his people and leading them to the Promised Land.

One wonders. Why are these Biblical leaders almost never to greatness born? Why is the path to greatness always unexpected? The answer, I think, is simple.

It is not natural for us to see beneath the surface. It is not natural for us to imagine that greatness and wonder, kindness and chivalry, insight and erudition, that such things can come where we do not expect to find them. Or we can put it another way.

We drive down the street. We see a homeless person picking through garbage. We think it is their own fault they are there; that they lack some sort of personal wherewithal. We do not

blink an eye. We do not think of them as trapped in a downward spiral they did not create. But both are possible.

Fifteen hundred years later, the warnings of the Mishnah remain valid. There are more words today than ever before, but do we hear better than we used to? We are exposed to more ideas, more actions, more people than ever before, but has our vision improved? Do we see better than we used to? Does the range of our hearing pick up more voices? The range of our vision encompass more people? Do our own words and actions seek to touch in ways that are genuine and true and meaningful?

B'heref ayin, in the blink of an eye, we can say a word of kindness or a word of scorn, a word that brings closer, or a word that pushes away. *B'heref ayin*, in the blink of an eye we can perform an act of kindness or an act of vanity, an act that soothes or an act that ignores.

B'heref ayin, in the blink of an eye, we can be the person we want to be, and can be, and should be.

We ask God's blessing on this Day of Atonement. May our prayers be heard; may our fast be accepted. We humbly ask O God that you help us to speak better, hear better, see better; for only thus can we truly appreciate Your glory. Amen.