



## SERMON KOL NIDRE: TIME

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Tuesday 4 October 2022  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 The comedian John Finnemore once did a wonderful sketch about the author of a book called *500 Things to Do Before You're 30*.<sup>a</sup> The author revealed that his book was actually an updated edition of a Bronze Age book called *2 Things to Do Before You're 30*: (1) survive, and (2) procreate.
- 2 Then, suddenly, he did an about-turn: "During the course of this interview," he said, "I've become overwhelmed with shame. And I've realised that while there's nothing wrong with telling people about exciting or interesting things they might not have thought of doing, it's pretty twisted to turn that into a guilt trip that uses people's natural anxiety about making the best use of their time on earth as a stick to beat them with. So we're going to go back to basics, call it *2 Things to Do Before or After You're 30*, and give it away free on a postcard. It's going to read (1) be kind, (2) have fun".



- 3 I probably haven't done the comic side of the sketch justice, because it has at its heart a real and serious point on which I want us to focus. Humans do, as a whole, have a natural anxiety about using our time on earth wisely. Yom Kippur can really raise the volume of the clock's ticking, and closely aligned with that ticking clock is primordial fear around that Bronze Age imperative: survive.
- 4 The rabbis provide us with an incredibly vivid story showing that these fears and concerns genuinely do go back to the dawn of time. They imagine the trepidation of Adam immediately after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It was still the first day of his life, so he had never seen darkness before. He had no experience or knowledge of night-time. Imagine, then, just how terrifying it must have been for him to see the world around him getting dimmer and dimmer, shadows appearing and the light vanishing. And he fasted in dread.<sup>b</sup>
- 5 Of course, he eventually realised that the cycle of darkness and light is simply מנהגו של עולם, the way of the world, and made his peace



with it. We are in a similar position now: the hourglass is running down, yet, like in any good Western, we know that we have until sundown tomorrow to put things right.

- 6 Rabbi Toba Spitzer finds the idea of a ticking clock, or an expiring hourglass, to be an incentive, rather than (or at least as well as) an inducer of anxiety. “Yom Kippur,” she writes, “is intended to jolt us, to wake us up out our spiritual lethargy. None of us really knows how long we’ll be here, so we need to stop putting off the things that we need to attend to. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that we are mortal, and that we can be reborn – that tomorrow our life begins anew. This is terrifying, but it is also invigorating.”<sup>c</sup>
- 7 This idea, taking fear and turning it into something positive without obliterating it altogether, is entirely in keeping with the overriding theme and spirit of Yom Kippur. We address our sins and wrongdoings, we commit ourselves to turn, **לשוב**, towards good, and we hope to do so with a minimal chance of obliteration! We do not erase past sins but seek to outweigh them with mitzvot and



lovingkindness; we cannot totally quell fear of our diminishing days, but we can seek to divert that nervous energy into inspiration and stimulus.

8 It took Adam, seeing the first nightfall in history, quite some time to work out that night wasn't a world-ending disaster. That doesn't mean it wasn't scary; quite the opposite. Darkness is scary, but in amidst the fear it provides new and valuable opportunities: stargazing, sleep, sex, the night-train to Edinburgh.

9 Likewise, Yom Kippur highlights our dwindling timespan left on earth, and the impending deadline we face. But that provides us with an opportunity to change now, to enhance and harness our remaining minutes.

10 Earlier this evening, we blessed God as the One **בתבונה משנה עתים**, whose understanding changes times and seasons.<sup>d</sup> But this is not a power that accrues to the Holy One alone. All of us can use our understanding – understanding which will, God willing, be honed



and sharpened over the next 24 hours – to change the meaning of time. Let us go forward into the new year less burdened by fears and energised by spiritual awakening – and let us be kind and have fun! **בן יהי רצון**, may this be God's will.

<sup>a</sup> John Finnemore. *John Finnemore's Souvenir Programme*, series 1 episode 1 (BBC Radio 4: 18 September 2011).

<sup>b</sup> b.Avodah Zarah 8a

<sup>c</sup> Rabbi Toba Spitzer. "From anxiety to agitation", Congregation Dorshei Tzedek (September 2010): <[https://www.dorsheitzedek.org/divrei-torah/rabbi-toba-spitzer?post\\_id=357237](https://www.dorsheitzedek.org/divrei-torah/rabbi-toba-spitzer?post_id=357237)>

<sup>d</sup> *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*: 179.