

SHAVUOT - CONFIRMATION 5781

MONDAY, MAY 17, 2021

Rabbi Jonathan Blake, Westchester Reform Temple

NEVER LOST, ONLY DELAYED

Dear Confirmation Class of 5781,

I recently made my first trip into New York City after more than a year away on account of the pandemic. My old MetroCard had expired so I needed to get a new one. As I followed the prompts on the screen, the kiosk presented me with an existential question.

“What would you like to add?” the kiosk asked me.

It then gave me two choices:

Add Value

Add Time

What kind of magical machine is this? I wondered. Does it know I’m a rabbi? Does it know I think about these kinds of questions all the time?

I’m sure you’ve been thinking about these kinds of questions too. What would you like to add? I’m sure most of us would happily hit the “Add Time” button if we knew it could bring back all the moments we’ve lost. All the missed classes, the summer camp that never materialized, the cancelled parties and family get-togethers, the empty seats at the Passover Seders. Even today, when we are so grateful to gather in intimate numbers, in person, here in our cherished WRT sanctuary—we feel these losses; we know that Zoom anything is no substitute for the Real Thing.

And these losses--it must be added--seem small, compared to the lost lives, the lost jobs, the lost relationships, the lost hugs and kisses, the lost joy. Cumulatively, the losses are simply staggering.

Perhaps you’ve heard references to what parents and teachers and mental health professionals are now calling the “Lost Year.” Adolescents, they say,

have fared particularly poorly during the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that “the proportion of emergency room visits that were mental health-related for 12 to 17 year olds increased by 31 percent from April to October 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.”

“And there’s no question,” the *New York Times* notes, “that witnessing their loneliness, difficulties with online learning and seemingly endless hours on social media has been enormously [stressful](#)” — not just for the kids, but also “for the adults who care about them the most.”

Students, parents, loved ones, and friends: We see you. We care about you. We share your sense of loss, bewilderment, and worry—worry about damage already inflicted, and worry about the long road ahead that will lead us to whatever “new normal” emerges on the other side of Covid.

These are extraordinary times that demand extraordinary resilience, courage, and hope. Above all, these accumulated losses require that each of us might summon a spirit of *Confirmation*, and I mean that literally: that we might confirm, each in our own hearts, that we must accept what we cannot change, and yet also *confirm* what our Jewish tradition teaches us to believe: that each one of us can change the world.

And that is why we come here today. I recognize that one Confirmation service—and what a beautiful and meaningful act of devotion you have made this service, Confirmation Class of 5781—cannot make up for all the lost time. If none of us were ever again to hear the phrases “hybrid learning” or “social distancing” or even “new normal,” which I used about one minute ago—let alone have to live with their meaning—I’m sure we could all be perfectly content.

But as we all know, there is no “Add Time” button on the Great Kiosk of Life. There’s no way to “Add Time” to our fleeting days.

All we can do is select the *other* option: “Add Value.”

Let me explain what this means, first with a Jewish text, and then with a little story. Yes, first a Jewish text. What? You thought this whole sermon would be about four words on the screen of a MetroCard Kiosk? So, yes, a Jewish text. This one, specifically, about the holiday of Shavuot that we are presently celebrating and to which our Reform Jewish observance links its time-honored ritual of Confirmation.

So, Shavuot is a holiday with a bit of an identity crisis. Nowadays most of us associate Shavuot with what we call in Hebrew *Matan Torah*, the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. On this holiday we renew our relationship with Torah; as a case in point, when the holiday began, last night, WRT joined with seven other local congregations for an online festival of Torah learning, including classes taught by our own Rabbi Levy and cantorial intern Isaac Sonett-Assor.

But in Biblical times, our ancestors thought of this holiday in agricultural terms. For fifty days following the onset of Passover, Israelite pilgrims would bring sheaves of barley—the first grain to ripen in the Spring—as a token of their devotion to God. And then, on Shavuot itself, when they could harvest the next crop to ripen in its season, which is wheat, they would bring all the so-called “first fruits” of the land, filling up baskets with fresh Spring produce and loaves of fresh-baked bread, and would present them to the priest in charge of the temple rituals, while making a declaration of gratitude to God.

The Torah says:

וּבְיוֹם הַבְּכוּרִים בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה בְּשִׁבְעַתֵּיכֶם מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם....

“On the day of First-Fruits, when you bring your offerings of new grain before God, on your observance of *Shavuot*, you should hold a sacred occasion...” (Numbers 28:26).

So that was old-timey Shavuot. Go gather your grain; go pluck your first-fruits; go fill your basket high; and go and offer it up. You say you had a rough harvest this season? Go gather the best of what you have to give, and offer it up. You say you haven’t had enough time to let the crops really get lush and

full, rich and sweet? Go gather the best of what you have to give, and offer it up. You say: There are so many other people whose gifts are bigger and better than mine; what use are these? Go gather the best of what you have to give, and offer it up.

This is the wisdom of Shavuot, the secret of the First-Fruits, which has also been the secret to this Confirmation year. Confirmation class of 5781: life handed you some lemons this year. And you gathered them up, made the best of what you had, gave the best you had to give, and made some very tasty first-fruit lemonade for us all to savor on this Shavuot. Whenever conditions permitted, you showed up with masks on and smiles behind them. (Yes, you can always still tell when someone is smiling behind the mask; it's in the eyes.)

This past fall—I'll be the first to admit—I was pretty cranky heading into the so-called Confirmation "Retreat" that wasn't: for the first time in my 18 years serving WRT, we wouldn't be jumping on a bus to our beloved URJ Eisner Camp in Great Barrington. There would be no camp-style sleepover, no frosty morning walks by the lake, no early morning coffee runs with Rabbi Levy to fuel us up for a long day of sacred work and play. We were "retreating" only as far as the back parking lot of Westchester Reform Temple for a bonfire and some individually wrapped, super safe S'mores, after a long day of bonding and learning and praying and singing (*quietly* singing, so as not to infect anyone).

And guess who brought their first fruits, showing up with *ruach* (that's Hebrew for "spirit") and joy? Confirmation Class, I am delighted that the only infectious thing you brought to our Retreat this year was a great attitude. And you've just continued to bring it, and bring it again, even when the chips were down. And you are most definitely bringing it tonight.

I am grateful to have learned from you, this year, a lesson that many of us struggle our whole lives to learn: that we have no choice about what does or does not happen *to* us in life. We *do* have a choice—we *always* have a choice—about how we shall respond. Rather than ask "Why?" of life, we *should* ask, "Okay, life, now what must I do? Now who must I become?" And we become our fullest selves when we keep showing up, keep bringing our first fruits, the

best of ourselves, day after day after day, for fifty days and fifty years and so on for a lifetime.

Because, you see, there is no “Add Time” button when it comes to life. There is only the “Add Value” button. And, let me share my personal view, that embracing and living your Judaism with dedication and eagerness is one—only one of many, but one—excellent way to add value to life.

Now, I also promised you a little story so here it is. A number of years ago my wife, Kelly, was performing a solo cabaret benefiting the Arizona Theatre Company. She’s actually done a few performances there over the years and she always returns with wonderful stories and cherished memories.

This one time, however, she also returned *without* something, and that was her luggage. A snowstorm had diverted her flight from Phoenix through Chicago O’Hare and she made it back to New York but her checked bag did not. So, she filled out a form and took a toll-free number and headed home empty-handed.

In the days that followed, Kelly was assigned a case manager for her missing luggage, a gentleman whose accent gave him away as having come from the Indian subcontinent; we would not have been surprised to learn that he was speaking from a call center in Bangalore or Sri Lanka. He was friendly, and he was lucky that Kelly is *also* friendly, as a general rule—even in situations like this, which I, as a general rule, am not.

Days turned into weeks and the matter of the lost luggage became less an episode and more a saga. Eventually, around three weeks after the flight, with still no sign of her Samsonite, Kelly said to her friendly case manager, “I think that at this point, we should just admit that the bag is lost.”

“Madam,” said he, not skipping a beat, “I must ask you, please be patient, just a little longer. Bags are *never* lost. Only delayed.”

“But sir,” Kelly began—

“Madam,” he repeated, “*Please* be patient, just a little longer. Bags are never lost, only delayed.”

This charming refrain did keep us—just barely—sane, while we waited it out. This, of course, would not be the last time she called; indeed, the weekly call to our friendly case manager persisted for quite some time, inevitably concluding with a plea that began, “Madam, *please* be patient, just a *little* bit longer,” and which ended, “Bags are never lost, only delayed.”

(As an aside: to this day, on the website of this airline, you can still find information pertaining to “delayed or damaged” bags, but nothing referencing bags that are “lost.”)

This story does have a happy ending. After **ten weeks**, Kelly and her luggage were reunited. The airline had finally located the bag... in Belgium.

So, here, Confirmation Class of 5781, I want to share with you something I’ve learned both from this story and from this last year, which is that time is never lost... only delayed.

Behind us, we look back on a strange and trying year. Hopes and dreams have been subverted and diverted. Not lost. Only delayed.

Ahead of us, we have nothing but time: time worth spending wisely and well, time worth spending making life better for ourselves, and especially, time spent making life better for the numberless lives in need of your help.

Confirmation class of 5781, you have so much value to add to life.

May God speed your steps and strengthen your resolve.

And mazal tov. We’re proud of you.