KOL TIKVAH YOM KIPPUR DAY 5760
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My Papa's name was David, I didn't learn that till the day of his funeral when the rabbi said his name before the kaddish prayer. Before that he had always just been Papa. Papa used to take me for walks on Saturday afternoons, they were shabbas walks, but I didn't know that either, to me they were just walks. We would walk around the block, and sometimes through my school yard. On our walks Papa always wore a baby blue sweater the kind with buttons on the front, with a little alligator on the chest, I learned later that it was called an cardigan sweater and the alligator was the logo of a clothing company, but to me it was just a Papa sweater, and I asked my mom to get me one so I could wear it like Papa on our walks. Before our walks Papa would always make me tie my shoes, even if they didn't need tying. he would say to me as I knelt with my laces in my hands, "make one bunny rabbit ear, make another bunny rabbit ear, cross the ears, tuck in the ears and pull." I learned later that this was called a yahooslip knot but to me it was always 'Papa's Bunny Rabbit Knot.'

Sometimes Papa would take me on a walk to the pond a bit further down the street, it was around the corner and past the school yard. I liked going to the pond because we would always bring some bread and feed the ducks. They would come right up and eat the bread out of my hand, or I would throw some in the water and they would dive down for it and scoop it up in their bills. On one such occasion, I turned to my Papa and said, "Papa when I grow up I want to be a duck." My Papa turned to me, without missing a beat and said, "Danny why do you want to be a duck?" I answered, "because ducks get to swim all day in the ocean, (I learned later it was a pond) and they get to play in the sand, and they have orange feet." To which my Papa said, "well, Danny if you wanna be a duck, I am sure you'll be a terrific duck." I learned later that little boys can't grow up and be ducks.

When did you first realize that you were an adult, think back on it for a moment when did childhood end and adulthood begin? When did your dreams of becoming a baseball player, a ballerina, a lion tamer in the circus, when did those get replaced with law school, real estate, or retail? Think about your prized collection of baseball cards, silver spoons, antique dolls, stuffed animals, do you remember when you didn't know, and didn't even care what they were worth? Do you remember when exercise was something you just got, not something you had to go and do. Do you remember eating candy without counting the calories? Do you remember playing? Not playing the stock market or playing on the internet, not playing in a softball league, or playing golf with your clients, but just playing. Playing that made you sweaty at recess, playing that got you in trouble with the lifeguard, playing games that didn't have any names, rules you made up as you went along.

There is a company in texas that for $500 will allow you to go back to kindergarten for a day. For $500 you can wear mismatched socks, finger paint, play

with blocks, drink apple juice, eat graham crackers and have nap time. They have a waiting list 3 months long.

We may love being adults, but we miss our childhood. Who among us has not looked longingly at our children playing with legos and not wanted to sit down with the multi-colored plastic bricks and create something again. We wish we could have some of that time back, we spend our childhood wanting to be grown ups, and as grown ups all we want is to be kids again. So for $500 we go back to kindergarten, for $5,000 we go away to baseball fantasy camp, we take pottery classes, we collect beanie babies, we go to boston market and order macaroni & cheese because it reminds us of when mom used to make it. We may love our homes, our cars, our credit cards, and the power they give us in the world, but secretly, or not so secretly we all yearn for the simplicity of youth. We would like to unlearn some of the stuff we now know, to be taken care of, looked after, to be tucked in for a change, instead of being the one who sets the burglar alarm and secures the house in the dark hours of the night.

If we could only be kids again.

Let me introduce you to two people I know and with whom I have worked.

I'd like you to meet Ellen. Ellen gets up at 6:00 every morning, drags herself in to a shower, puts on her clothes while its still too dark to see what kinda day it will be outside. If she hesitates at all during her morning routine, takes time to check her email, read the paper, catch the morning shows she will be late for her ride. Ellen doesn't eat breakfast at the breakfast table, but she doesn't eat dinner at the dinner table either. She grabs some sorta supercharged all-in-one cereal, nutrition, tide you over till your next meal energy bar. She gets a ride to her job, and eats breakfast somewhere on the Sepulveda pass.

When Ellen gets to work she is lost in a maze of endless hallways and windowless rooms. She gets 45 minutes for lunch, usually something from a vending machine or maybe some pre-packaged airplane food looking thing. When work is done she is not. She still has two hours of appointments and meetings waiting for her and then the hours of unfinished work on top of that. Ellen's day ends around 11:00pm as she falls asleep on her bed. She hasn't finished all the work she brought home with her, but when she wakes up 7 hours later and arrives back at work just a few hours after that she is sure to get more.

Ellen is so over loaded and stressed by her job that it gives her nightmares, she wakes up from the few short hours of sleep she gets worrying about projects she has not yet finished, deadlines she hasn't met. Ellen turns to her colleagues for help, but they are just as swamped and stressed. She tries to schedule some time to relax with friends, maybe see a movie or go shopping, get some exercise but she has no time, no time that is not already taken up something else.

Ellen is like many of us, she wants to be a kid again, except Ellen is not like us, Ellen is a kid, she's 15 years old, a sophomore in high school and she is worried that if she can't keep up now, she'll fall behind some imaginary line between advanced and not advanced students, she wont get into AP classes which means she'll never get into a good college, which means she'll never get a good job, and at age 15 as she hurriedly tries to finish her homework on the ride to school with her breakfast in one hand and her future in the other, she is afraid that if she can't keep up her life, at age 15 will be ruined.

I'd like you to meet Steven. Steven is going into sixth grade. He also gets up at 6:00 and is at school by 8:30, after seven hours of school, Steven spends an extra hour with a tutor helping him with his math homework. He's good at math, but the algebra they are teaching in his 6th grade high school prep class is really hard. When he gets home from school he heads straight to the family office. Sitting at the computer he bangs out a one page book report on J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." After half and hour of work, Steven takes the paper upstairs and gives it to his mother to proofread. Mom jots some corrections. "Why don't you say, this is the best book i ever read; teachers really like strong opinions like that."

He makes the corrections, now time to kick back, call a few friends and get ready for Felicity, right? Not even close. Next Steven pulls out his math assignment, more than 100 fraction and long division problems. Once he slogs through those, Steven labels all the countries and bodies of water on a map of the middle east. He's not through yet: he then reviews a semester's worth of science, including the ins and out of the circulatory system.

By 5:30, after doing 2 hours of homework, Steven sits down at the piano and practices for an hour. He'll barely have enough time to eat dinner and touch up the book report before crashing. Steven's mom sits in my office on one of the two days a week that he adds Hebrew school to his hectic life and admits. "I didn't feel stressed till I was in my 30's, it hurts my feelings that my son feels that way at 11."

I could go on, I could tell you about the 12 year old Bat Mitzvah girl who sat across from my desk and pulled out a fully loaded Dayrunner™ as we both tried to figure out when our schedules would permit us to meet again to work on her Torah portion.

Or the parents who call me in crisis because their child's dance troupe is preparing for a competition and must rehearse 2 hours every night. They're sorry they tell me but, the teacher won't let their kids dance if they miss even one rehearsal, is there anyway I could give them Hebrew school work to do at home. The child looks at mom with this pained expression, "Now I'm gonna have more home work?!"

It would be comical, how the lives of these young people so mirror ours in our adult world with our adult responsibilities and stresses. It sounds like something out of some parallel universe where the kids are the adults. But its not make believe and its nothing to laugh at, our kids are growing up before they can grow up. They have no free time, no play time, they are told everything they do from 5th grade on counts towards high school, towards college, for scholarships, for placement. They are stressed, they are tired, they are driven by goals and expectations placed upon them by a society and a culture that says "your never too young for anything," "its never too soon to start." We lobby congress for V chips for our TVs, more stringent ratings in our movie theaters, warning labels on music, on video games, but where is the warning label on childhood? Where is the blinking red light in our society warning, "Don't let our kids grow up too fast!"

Advanced Placement, Advance Standing, College Prep, High School Prep, SAT Prep, Early Enrollment, After-School, Morning School, all of these really mean only one thing, do it before every one expects you to do it, and society will reward you with the opportunity to do even more sooner. Our children have lost their childhood, parents have lost their family time, becoming trapped in an endless deluge of worksheets, vocabulary list, and 3 hours research assignments, supposedly made easier because of the internet. And most fearful of all, our society has created a generation of children that aren't really children. They skip right over adolescence and into adulthood, becoming what one major news magazine calls Adult-oids. Children, with adult stresses, adult anxiety, adult work loads in teenage bodies.

On Yom Kippur we are commanded to perform Heshbone Ha-Nefesh to examine our soul and our life with a critical eye, to note what we do well and what we need to do better. How we can improve and how we might use our skills and abilities to help others? For a moment lets do a little Heshbone Ha-Nefesh on the state of childhood in our community. With that same critical eye that tells us we have to get more sleep, we have to spend more time with our families, we must find time to exercise, to relax, to stop and enjoy life before it passes us by. With that same critical eye, lets look at what has become of the youth of today. Looking past their clothing, music, and body piercings, statements that every generation of teens has made since long before Woodstock, let's see their stress, their work load, their well learned mantra that society wants them to grow up faster and faster, to do more and more, sooner and sooner.

As a community of caring individuals, and for many as parents of these young people, let us ask ourselves, "What do we want our kids to be when they grow up?" I don't think there is a person in this room that would not simply answer, that we want our kids, above all else, to just be happy. We work as hard as we do, so that they

shouldn't have to, so that they can live life while it is still largely theirs to live without the stresses that we face everyday.

Perhaps we can say that those stresses build character, and teach coping skills that they will need later in life, but even then is this the process by which we want our children to learn how to handle stress and manage their time?! Perhaps it takes a village to rise a child, but the village wants more from our kids, more from our families, earlier in life then it has a right to expect or demand. Who says you have to speak fluent french in 8th grade?! Who says third graders have to write research papers?! Who says our high schoolers must be in advanced placement to be considered on track in their schooling? The village is on fire, a fire fueled by a misguided sense of what really matters, and we, this very day must rise up to put it out, to quench this lust for over-achievement and advanced placement before it consumes what remains of childhood, what remains of the few sacred hours of family time we have left.

When I was growing up, it was very clear to me, and everyone who visited our home what was important to my parents, what they valued most. Because those things, the pictures I drew in hebrew school that showed my creative side, the note I got from my teacher for having a good day, for treating others with respect, the ribbon I got for sportsmanship, the picture they took of me and my Papa in our light blue sweaters before our shabbas walks, those things were all displayed prominently on our refrigerator. When I went to that green monolith to get some juice or a snack, there, staring me in the face, was the stuff that mattered most to my mom and dad. With magnets, with tape, this stuck on top of that, the refrigerator doors were a record of my childhood, and holding it all together was one clear message, "we are proud of you for what are not how much you do."

Let us think about our refrigerators for a moment, what is on there? What message does it send about our family? What are the things we value so dearly that we have attached them to such a sacred place? Is our refrigerator filled with sports schedules, class rosters, carpool lists, meeting notices? Are these the things that we hold sacred, are these the things that most represent our families and what they are striving to be? Can we still see the pictures, the positive notes, the awards for being a good sport, buried beneath the layer of have-to's, to-do's, should-do's, find time to do's?

In our tradition we are commanded to make our home a m'kdash m'at a sanctuary in miniature. If our home is a temple then the refrigerator is the holy ark, and just like those in our synagogues that hold the sacred words of our people, what is on their doors, even more than what is inside them tells who we are and what we are striving to be.

Go and look at the doors of our Kol Tikvah ark and you will find written there the Ten commandments. There could be no clearer message to all who see it what the Jewish people hold most sacred:

- the belief in one God,
- telling the truth,
- respecting our family,
- honesty in our dealing with one another,
- honoring our parents.

Examine again your own ark, the center piece of your home, and I don't mean the TV. What message does it send to those who see it, what message does it send to our children? Is it the message of the village: where how much you do is what is valued most? or is it the message of your family, perhaps covered over by soccer schedules, carpool lists, and to do lists? A message that affirms quite clearly, that above all else, what is most important is the quality of our child's character, his love for his family, her respect for her peers, his youthfulness, her creativity, their compassion for others. Does your refrigerator still say that your child is a *mensch*?

As you leave this sanctuary today you're going to be given a magnet, it says quite clearly that very idea, "my child is a *mensch*". Its only a symbol, but it can be as powerful as the shofar blast on Yom Kippur. May this magnet and the ideal it represents pull our village, our community together, toward one sacred goal, may we give back childhood to our children, may we say to them above all else, "we want you to be a good person, we want you to take your time, to enjoy what life has to offer you on your journey." And may this magnet send a message to all those who see it, our time with our family, our Shabbas dinners, our family walks, our time talk and tell our children of our own childhood dreams. This time is more important than any homework assaignment, its more important than any soccer game, and the village must be reminded of that! We will not give over the sacred years of childhood and family time to endless soccer practices, nightly dance rehearsals, high school AP exams, far-off college admission requirements, the black hole of resume-inspired extra-curricular activities. No, our children will have time at home just to be kids again, and we must have time to be a family, because it is in that sanctuary, as well as this one, that they, our children, learn what it is to be a *mensch*. It is in the home and synagogue that they learn to sanctify life as God's most sacred gift. To fill life with meaningfullness and love, <u>not just to fill life.</u> Let us tell the village: "Give them back, their childhood and give us back our families." So that the village, and all of its inhabitants -- will once again hear the sounds of children at play. Will once again see families sitting together at the Shabbas table. So that our village will become itself, a *m'kdash* a holy sanctuary and we a K'hillah Kedushah a Holy Congregation.