STRESSED OUT
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Video of this sermon as delivered is available here:
https://youtu.be/my393tPh-gw

I have an app on my watch which monitors my heart rate. When my heart rate gets elevated, it buzzes my wrist and reminds me to breathe for 60 seconds.

It stresses me out.

We live in an incredibly busy world. The pace of life is often frantic, our minds are always busy, and we're always doing something.

Think: When was the last take that you did nothing? 5 minutes. Undisturbed.

I mean nothing.

No emailing. No texting. No Internet. No TV. No talking, no eating, no reading. Nothing. I mean nothing.

Consider this. What is the most valuable and most precious resource that each of us has in our possession?

Our minds.

We rely upon our minds to be happy, to be content, to be emotionally stable as individuals, and at the same time, to be kind and thoughtful and considerate in our relationships with others.

We also use that mind to be focused, creative, spontaneous, and to perform at our very best in everything that we do.

But, let's be honest. Think of all the time we spend maintaining our cars. Taking care of our clothing. Paying attention to our bodies. Tending to our hair – okay, maybe not **my** hair, but you see where I'm going.

The result, of course, is that we get stressed. You know, the mind whizzes away like a washing machine going around and round, lots of difficult, confusing emotions, and we don't really know how to deal with that. And the sad fact is that we are so distracted that we're no longer present in the world in which we live. We miss out on the things that are most important to us, and the crazy thing is that everybody just assumes, that's the way life is in 2018, so we've just kind of got to get on with it. That's really not how it has to be.

So, I want to ask you to do something radical. Just sit quietly for 3 minutes and breathe.

I want you to do this because I want you remember the definition of a sanctuary. It means a safe place. It means that this should be the place that offers us spiritual and emotional shelter against the storms.

And while you sit quietly I want you to breathe. In Hebrew, we call that kind of deep breathing *nishimah amukah*. The word for breath and the word for soul – it is the same word. Yom Kippur and the High Holy Days are all about focusing on our soul, providing us a time to breathe. Let your soul breathe for few moments.

[3 min of silence]

That was only 3 minutes. I wonder: for how many of us did it feel like an eternity?

Perhaps because in those three minutes – if we were lucky – we felt something <u>like</u> eternity.

What causes us stress? Do I really have to ask?

Work. Finances. Politics. The state of the environment. Technology. — are all adding to the load.

And our kids? What stresses them? This is what they tell me: friendships, grades, tests, family issues, homework, work, extracurricular activities, their love life -- and a big one that most of us never had to contend with when we were growing up -- their social media presence.

And those of us in midlife? Take your pick. Any kind of change. Divorce. The death of a parent. Career setbacks. Retirement worries. Worrying about our children – especially worrying about what is worrying them or stressing them out.

And in our senior years? Slowing down is stressful. Thinking about the conditions of the world. Physical pain. Physical discomfort. Spending too little time with children or grandchildren. Regret. Wishing that our lives had been different. Stress is stressful at any age.

A story…

One day, The Angel of Death was walking in a certain city. A man stopped him and asked him what he was planning to do in that city. The Angel of Death answered by saying that he was going to take 1,000 people that day. The man responded in despair. But, The Angel of Death reminded him that this was in fact his job. I take people when their time is ready. Today, 1,000 people would be taking their last breath and going into the hereafter.

Later on, in the day, The Angel of Death and the man caught up with each other again. However, this time, the man was furious with The Angel of Death. The man lashed out at The Angel of Death and told The Angel of Death that he had lied to him. This morning, you told me you would only take 1,000 lives and yet, according to all the reports some 7,000 people had died. 6,000 more people have died than you said you would take! The man accused The Angel of

Death of lying and of being greedy. The Angel of Death allowed the man to rant and then stopped the man. The Angel of Death told him: "Don't get mad at me, I only took 1,000."

"OK, so what about the rest?"

"Oh, them? You want to know what killed all of them?

"Stress and worry killed all the rest."

Those are the silent assassins – the three horsemen of our personal apocalypse. Stress, worry and anxiety. They create blood clots. They can lead to heart disease. They can bring on heart attacks.

Not to mention: cancer, lung ailments, accidents, high blood pressure, ulcers, stomach problems, panic disorders, headaches, problems with the nervous system, sleep disorders and chronic depression, and suicide.

Dr. Charles Mayo, one of the founders of the Mayo Clinic, said: "A person can worry himself or herself into bad health and even death. But you will never worry yourself into a longer life." Stress, worry, and anxiety can kill you.

There is no such thing as a life without stress. It comes with the territory.

You cannot live **without** stress. There is only one solution. You have to live **with** it.

This is what I am going to invite you to do. I am speaking as your rabbi. And as your doctor. I am not an actual doctor, but sometimes I play one on the Bema.

The first prescription; **Say no**. In Judaism, no is a complete sentence. Remember all of those "thou shalt nots." Thou shalt not fight every battle. Thou shalt not do those things that you don't have to do. "Thou shalt not work on the sabbath;" oh Shabbat – we'll come back to that one in a minute.

The greatest example of saying no is in the Torah, in the story of Moses.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law sees Moses sitting from morning to night judging the people and dealing with the disputes one at a time.

Jethro goes up to Moses and says to him, *"Mah ha davar hazeh saher atah oseh l'am?"* What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while the people stand in line waiting to see you from morning to night? You'll wear yourself out and these people as well."

Moses tries to explain that he is the only one qualified to judge the people.

Jethro doesn't buy it. He is the true father-in-law looking out for the man who is now providing for his daughter. He tells Moses: the task is too heavy for you. You can't do it alone. You need to establish a system of lower courts to hear the smaller cases – and you deal with the big stuff.

For the first time in history, someone listens to an in-law.

Moses listens to his father-in-law. Moses reduces his stress, his worry, and his anxiety – at least for now. Because he learns how to say no.

Second: **take care of yourself**. *V'nishmartem m'od et nafshotecha*. Take care of yourself. Watch over your soul, we read in the book of Deuteronomy.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev once observed a man hurrying along the street, looking neither right nor left:

"Why are you rushing so?" he asked him.

"I am pursuing my livelihood," the man replied.

"Maybe your livelihood is behind you. Maybe you just have to slow down to find it."

I see so many people rushing all the time always doing for others and sacrificing themselves in the process. Life is a marathon, not a sprint. But if you look at our calendars, particularly those of parents with school age children you'd think it was an Olympic Triathalon, with a big timer counting down the seconds.

We are always rushing from here to there, schlepping, planning, organizing, limit setting, role modelling, advocating, cooking, cleaning, the clock is always ticking, there are never enough hours in the day, or days in the week.

And then the coach calls an extra practice, or it's a Pro-D day, or a work email needs more than a minutes' attention, someone gets sick, we get sick and the house of cards; which is life in 2018; comes crashing down around us. No wonder we can't breathe, we are out of breath.

We need to stop, slow down, take care of ourselves, all of us, so we can be present for those we love. It's the oxygen mask on the airplane, rule, you have to put it on yourself before you can take care of others, to make sure you can breathe.

Diet and exercise. Those help us to take care of our bodies, but what about the soul?

For the soul, Judaism gives us Shabbat, a forced day of rest. We are commanded to unplug from the world and plug into our soul, our essence. What separates free people from slaves? Slaves never get a day off. To free yourself of ***StressWorryAnxiety*** we are commanded to take a day off and take care of our soul.

How do you do it? Take minute**s** of silence. Pray. Find a ritual that you love. Read. Study. Go deep into your soul, the essence of who you really are, not who you are required to be. Breathe! Just breathe!

Third: **Find community:** Find a place to belong and feel support. Nobody can do this alone.

In Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Fathers our tradition offers the following: "*Aseh lecha rav*," make for yourself a teacher, "*uk'neh lecha chaver*," and get yourself a friend. It suggests that we require people in our lives, individuals, who will be there for us when we need to refocus and deal with the ***StressWorryAnxiety*** of life.

A student was visiting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in the middle of the visit the great scholar of Jewish thought got word – a friend's sister had just died. Heschel rose from his chair announced to his student, "We have to go."

They got in his car, they drove, to Boston an hour away and went to the house. Heschel walked in, hugged his friend, and sat beside him on the sofa for an hour. He didn't mumble a single word, not one cliché, not, "How old was she?" Not, "Time will heal." Not, "I know how you feel." He just sat there in silence for an hour and listened; when his friend was done talking he got up, he hugged him again and he left.

On the ride back the student asked Rabbi Heschel, "did you know her well, the sister of your friend who died?" Heschel responded, "I'd never met her." The student was puzzled, "then Rabbi Heschel, if I can ask, why did we drive an hour to sit in silence on his sofa?" The great rabbi responded, "because that's what he needed."

I have sat with hundreds of families at times of their greatest stresses in life: the death of a loved one; waiting for test results; or the outcome of a surgery. In every one of those instances the strength to endure the ***StressWorryAnxiety*** of those life altering moments came from the friends and family that surrounded them, brought food, comfort, a listening ear, a warm hug, the gentle empathy that only our closest friends know what to say, when to say it and when to just be quiet and listen.

That's what a synagogue community such as ours can do so well. I have learned and come to admire so many things about our congregation, but the quality of our shul I admire most, and the one that I know I inherited from the leadership of Rabbi & Cathy Bregman and the generations that built this synagogue community is that the members of Temple Sholom are always there for each other. Being part of this community is one of the best ways to cope with ***StressWorryAnxiety.*** We should probably put that on our membership forms.

Rabbi Alan Lew, in his book, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, says: "The ten days of Teshuva are days of renewal, days when we are not only concerned with change and transformation, but also with reinvigorating, refreshing and reimagining our lives…"

Three simple things to cope with ***StressWorryAnxiety***:

1. Say no, set boundaries.
2. Take care of yourself, body and soul.
3. Find community – nobody can do this alone

They may be simple, but simple isn't easy. Simple is actually quite hard sometimes.

Remember the exercise we did a few minutes ago, when we just sat and did nothing?

Doing nothing is hard, it takes intention, it's work. But it's holy work, that is why God commanded that we should have a sabbath once a week and a day like Yom Kippur, what our tradition calls *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the "sabbath of sabbaths" once a year.

Because sometimes, like the app on my watch, we have to be reminded to breathe. Sometimes we need to be commanded to breathe.

In this New Year, don't click the dismiss button, don't swipe it away for when you have more time. The time is now, the clock is ticking, and if that stresses you out, even the more reason why we need to follow this prescription. Our lives quite literally depend on it, it's as essential as breathing!