TO LIFE!
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Judea
January 19, 2007

My best friend and colleague Rabbi Rick Steinberg has a theory. He and I share our High Holy Day sermon drafts with each other every year, and Rick's theory is that every rabbi has 10 sermon themes that they give over and over. We may dress them up differently but under the surface and behind the stories one of 10 themes will usually emerge.

Tonight I am fully aware that I am preaching about one of my 10 themes. While what I will share with you tonight is entirely original, in that I constructed these remarks this past week, it will sound very familiar. Indeed you might say to yourself I have heard this before or what and obvious topic.

You would be right, you have heard this before not only from me, but probably from every rabbi who has ever given a sermon, and yes it is an obvious topic, so obvious in fact that we over look its importance and simple wisdom everyday, and so it bares repeating – not only repeating - indeed because of its obvious but oft disregarded message it should be shouted from the rafters till we wake up and listen and incorporate its profound wisdom into our lives.

Before I reveal the topic, let me give you a little background on why I have chosen tonight to speak about it, or to speak about it again.

This past week was a tragic week for our congregation, indeed this past month has been a particularly difficult month for so many families in our community. On Thursday, Rabbi Wissot and I officiated at the funeral of our congregant and friend Darren Sugar. You may not know Darren, but yet we all know Darren; because Darren was each one of us. I say that taking nothing away from this unique and genuine and delightful man, who I knew well and respected and enjoyed deeply.

But at his core Darren was not unique at all, in fact in he was rather ordinary, far too ordinary.

Darren was 44 years old, just 3 days shy of his 45th birthday when he died last week after putting his kids to sleep. The coroner says it was heart related but we are still waiting for results of some tests.

Darren left behind his wife and high school sweetheart of 25 years Carole and his 2 beautiful children, Alec who was just Bar Mitzvahaved on this bema in May and Samantha who is 10.

This middle aged father of two and young man of 45 was like so many of us, indeed I think he was like most of us, I know he was like me.

He got up early every morning to get a jump on the day, rushed off to work, where he would hustle and stretch to get the client or make the deal. He loved his job, was doing what he always wanted to be doing.

He'd come home late, not every night but a few nights, and how many nights are their in a week? Sometimes he would make it for dinner, sometimes not, he'd help his kids with their homework, maybe play a game with them, watch TV, tuck them in, spend some time with his wife, maybe a little email, either finishing up the work from the day or getting started on the work for tomorrow, often a little of both. Go to bed late and get up and do it all again the next day. Does it sound familiar?

On weekends he would try and squeeze as much family time into 48 hours as was humanly possible. You know the drill, soccer games, day trips, school projects, maybe some personal time for golf or to watch a football game, Saturday night was date night, dinner out with friends, a movie. In the midst of all of this their was often work to do as well, calls to make, emails to attend to. Like many of us his weekends were nearly as exhausting as his weekdays, he needed a weekend from his weekend.

He was a master in his field, at the top of his game, loved by so many, a good friend to everyone, a wonderful father, a loving husband. He was a man in constant motion, a mover, a shaker, a provider, a husband, a father, a son to his aging parents and he had the stress and the long hours that went with his hard earned success to prove it.

I don't judge Darren's life, and I am tempted to apply the cliché, "it is not mine to judge.' But then I realize, it is my life too, it is so many of ours and while I would never judge another person's choices about how they choose to spend their days and live their life, I am obligated to judge my own.

And so when your 45 year old friend dies on a Thursday night after tucking his kids into bed and kissing his wife as he gets in the ambulance with her following behind to meet him at the hospital. When something like that happens you take stock, you better take stock, you better stop and say hey what is going on here?! None of us are given a guarantee we know that every minute of life is a precious gift. But when your friend dies so young, instinct demands that we look at our own life and ask ourselves, "if I died tomorrow would I have any regrets, would I feel my life was unfinished, that I had wasted or squandered my time on those things that were not most important, just most pressing? Am I living my life the way I want to be living it? Because, and this is the part that will sound so familiar, this is the only life I get and it's not a dress rehearsal, and the time I waste is just that, its wasted time and then its gone, you don't get more time.

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

> "Why are you rushing so? He asked him.
> "I am after my livelihood," the man replied.

> "And how do you know," continued the rabbi, "that your livelihood is running on before you, so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it is behind you, and all you need do to encounter it is to stand still."

It is the oldest sermon in the world, every rabbi has preached it and every congregant has heard it, but so few of us listen to it. SLOW DOWN!!! In fact STOP, just for a moment, Ask yourself, is this what you want to be doing, is this how you want to spend your time? Are you living your life the way you want to live it?

They say time is money, but if someone offered you $5 or 5 minuets, what would you rather have? Not enough money, $500 or 5 minutes, what's really more valuable? Its not easy to slow down, its not easy to take stock of our life and reprioritize what's important to our soul. I know I find it hard. A friend sent me the following quote from Rabbi Harold Kushner, the man who wrote the "When Bad Things Happen to Good People Book." Rabbi Kushner was invited to address a class of newly ordained rabbis on their occasion of their ordination. He said the following to them:

"There will be Friday evenings when you will rush your family through dinner so that you can get to service on time to give a sermon about the Sabbath as uninterrupted family time.

There will be days when you will leave a sick child at home or a child studying for a test, while you go to teach religious values to the synagogue youth group.

There will be Sundays when you cancel plans for a family picnic to officiate at a funeral."

I printed out that quote and it hangs above my desk at the office, I'd move it to my study at home but I see it more at work.

There is a similar quote for every one of our professions, for everyone of our callings, life is full of trade offs and compromises, we know that, I know that, were we all independently wealthy we could spend our time exactly as we choose, and even then, even then [or so I am told] we would have to prioritize our priorities. But they call it earning a living for a reason. We must remember to live what we have earned, to spend our time wisely and on what matters most to us.

The most important lesson you learn in life is that life is finite. Because once we learn that all of our priorities and all of our values and decisions about how we will spend our time become crystal clear. It's the reason 16 year olds drive 90 miles an hour on a Saturday night and new parents drive 20 miles an hour on the way home from the hospital. Teenagers think they will live forever and new parents realize they won't, no one does. We have all learned it, but we forget it, and we start to go 90 again, maybe just to keep up.

I have a favorite story from Jewish tradition, it is the story of Zusia a great and pious Hasidic rebbe. The tradition relates that one day Zusia, came to his followers; his eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear.

"Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!"

"The other day, I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusia turned his gaze to heaven. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"

His followers persisted. "So, what will they ask you?"

"And I have learned," Zusia sighed, "that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

One of his followers approached Zusia and placed his hands on Zusia's shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, the follower demanded, "But what will they ask you?"

"They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"

Friends, we don't have to be Moses, we don't have to be Joshua, we don't have to be Zusia, we are not slaves or beholden to those ideals, but we do have to be ourselves, the very best version of ourselves we can be. May we always remember that life is a blessing, don't waste a minute of it - live the blessing.