CAREFUL OR YOU'LL END UP IN MY SERMON
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A video link to this sermon as delivered is available here

There is a sticker on the cover of my laptop, that cautions all who see me typing away - "Careful or you'll end up in my sermon".

This is that kinda sermon, this is a sermon about our three children.

I've never given a sermon about our kids before, in fact I have a rule that I do not reference them by name in my sermons or writings; it's hard enough being a Rabbi's Kid (RK as they are known in 'pray trade') when so much of their childhood is on public display.

Now don't get me wrong there are benefits to being an RK, when our oldest son Judah was six and at the temple preschool in Los Angeles I have the clearest memory of him leading a posse of his preschool classmates across the playground into the temple kitchen with the words, "follow me guys I know where they keep the Oneg cookies". But still it ain't easy growing up in the public eye.

So I asked their permission to share the following three observations about them that I have made over the past year, because they taught me lessons I think we could all learn for this New Year and years to come.

In Pirkei Avot - the Ethics of the Rabbis, Rabbi Ḥanina said: "I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them." Our children are of course our most important students, and therefore as our tradition teaches, they are our greatest teachers as well.

LESSON #1:
DEEP CUTS - finding the hidden jewels buried on the B side.

Last year for his 15th birthday Levi, our middle child, surprised all of us by asking for a record player for his birthday and of course a few vinyl records to go along with it. There is nothing unusual about a 15 year old wanting to blast music from their bedroom; I can remember many an evening when I would prepare whole playlists of teenage angst and parental protest songs as I tried to create a soundtrack for the heartbreak and hard fought battles of my teenage years.

It is exactly for those purposes that we have a family Spotify account with unlimited song choices. Where I used to thoughtfully mix tapes from my record collection or the radio, carefully timing the play-record button just right so I could catch the start of the next America's Top 40 song and cursing Casey Kasem if he talked over the final few notes as the song wound down;

Levi and his siblings have access to literally an infinite number of songs on the phone in their pocket. Anything they imagine they want to hear is just a few clicks away; furthermore they are digitally remastered and perfectly balanced. No needle drops, warped cassette tapes or scratched and skipping records. They don't have to get up to turn it over to the B-side or even go down to the record store to wait for the newest album to show up on the shelves. Magically it just shows up on their phone, often one aggressively marketed, TikTock trending song at a time.

So when Levi asked for a record player I was curious as to why? He gave a typically wise and thoughtful teenage explanation, "I don't know, I just like it".

We pressed a little further and he explained that he likes the way a record sounds, the imperfection and distortion, the needle drop. Scratches feel more authentic, like the scratches and imperfection that we all have. It was Leonard Cohen who sang, "Everything has a crack in it; that's how the light gets in." Another album I realize I need to add to his collection.

Levi told me, he likes holding the liner notes and looking at that big album cover artwork with its layers of context and obscured meaning. He even likes that it doesn't play forever and ever, that he has to get up to flip to side B.

When I went to the used record store to round out his gift with a few records for his core collection, by the way, Sharon did the same at another store, and as an affirmation that I picked the right partner - we chose many of the same albums.

When I went to the store I proudly told the salesperson, who is cool just by the very nature that they work in a record store in 2023, that I was buying records for my 15 year old son who was shunning his iPhone for this analog technology of my own youth.

To my surprise they informed me that I was maybe the fifth parent that had come in that week on a similar mission.

David Hayes, a researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto says, "the growing popularity of vinyl might be a form of resistance against the music industry's corporate taste-makers." In his research Hayes heard from many teens who say they like a record because it forces them to listen to the "deep cuts", those songs that are not there because they are Top 40 Hits but because the artist knows they will never be "Top 40 Hits"; and still included them anyway. In those songs the listener discovers what algorithm and mass marketing didn't want them to hear.

My colleague, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove calls this, "'serendipitous stumble.' Not the book or song you went into the store or library looking for, but the book next to it, or the song after it, or the article beside the one that you were initially interested in reading. An on-demand world makes no allowance for the B-side dimension of life. "If not for the Beatles' "I am The Walrus," Rod Stewart's "Maggie May," Prince's "Little Red Corvette" and a million other literal and figurative B-sides, our cultural heritage would be rather impoverished." Cosgrove observed.

“More often than not, learning and culture and, frankly, life itself are to be had, not by finding what you thought you were looking for, but by flipping over that proverbial vinyl to discover that truth and beauty and love are to be found in unexpected places.”

The lesson I learned from Levi’s love of vinyl is that sometimes by not following the herd, you find your new community. That it's in the “deep cuts”, the B-side/alternative tracks of records and of life that we often find the most meaningful things, not in what we were looking for but in what we found while looking.

Teens have always been counter cultural and non-conformist. We often think of them as trend followers, but really they are trend setters, they see what is going on with their own mental health, how corporations and mass marketers are tracking and targeting them, and they're trying to make changes; we would be wise to follow them over to the B-side.

LESSON #2:
SETTING LIMITS - if you’ve only got one shot make it count.

I learned a different, but equally powerful lesson from our soon to be 12 year old daughter Estee - her birthday is Wednesday.

Every summer she goes to camp, and as per camp rules has to leave her phone at home. It's traumatic for most kids, most parents and camp staff equate some of those first days at camp to kids going through a form of detox. If you watch closely kids will reach for their pockets in the dining hall only to discover they are stuffed with friendship bracelets not Snapchat. We sometimes have to teach or re-teach campers how to have a face-to-face conversation, eye contact, active listening, etc.

One summer a few years ago Estee asked for a polaroid camera for Hanukkah, point and shoot cameras are allowed at camp and she wanted to take pictures of her friends.

Instant cameras, like record players, have had a resurgence, and there were a number of new, colorful and inexpensive models available. The film however costs an arm and a leg, close to $2 per photo. So we got her the camera but only a couple of packs of film. We carefully explained how it's not like taking a picture with your phone where you can just press the button a dozen times till you get the perfect shot. At $2 per shot you’ve got to make sure it's something you really want to capture. You need to frame it right the first time, consider the lighting, the background. You quite literally, “get one shot” so you need to make it count.

When she came home she made a photo album of all the polaroids she had taken and those she had traded with her friends; a treasured memory of camp that sits prominently on her shelf and one she returns to with reverence and joy. She has a phone full of pictures she has taken with her friends but they don’t mean as much to her as those color faded imperfect polaroids.

The lesson from Estee's Polaroid Camera is about our responsibility to set boundaries and limits for our children, and for ourselves. Limitations make moments, experiences and possessions that we do acquire that much more irreplaceable.

A woman once asked her rabbi a very perceptive question. While studying the first chapters of Genesis she asked, "Why is it that God's first commandment to Adam and Eve is a negative commandment? 'Do not eat of the tree of knowledge.' Why didn't God give them a positive commandment instead?"

The rabbi answered her, "I don't know, for I am not God, but what I do know is that most of the things that I said to my children in their first years of life were phrased negatively; "Don't touch the fire, don't walk here, don't run, don't interrupt, etc, etc." Evidently, in the process of growing up and becoming adults, we need to learn the things that we are not allowed to do before we can learn what we should do.

Limits are love, boundaries are by their very nature defining. The Talmud declares, 'In making limits, one makes blessings.' (Talmud, Berakhot 33a)

Similarly, 2,000 years ago the Roman philosopher Seneca wrote, "To be everywhere is to be nowhere."

He was writing about people who spend their whole life traveling abroad. They end up having plenty of places where they have visited but no place where they have lived, planted roots.

Infinite choice is no choice at all. A hundred digital pictures are not more meaningful than just one very intentional polaroid, they are just more, and probably less.

LESSON #3:
WITH G-D's HELPING HAND - the book of life is written in ink.

The third lesson I learned from my children this past year comes from our oldest son Judah. Judah, very much his father, is tantalized by technology. But there is one particular tool that Judah relies upon that is about as "old school" as you can get. Judah loves fountain pens.

I watch him carefully write in his notebooks for school or for his various activities and I realize that people born in the last 30 years who have grown up in a purely digital age are accustomed to typing and erasing, copying and pasting their way through all composition. They can type whatever they are thinking and come back to refine it later.

Writing with a pen and paper requires more thought. The writer must think through their topic and ideas before they begin writing. Yes, white-out and erasable ink still exist, but they can be a pain and give your work a sub-par appearance. Writing by hand Judah is learning that he can achieve the best results when he organizes his ideas thoughtfully in his mind before committing them to paper.

This particular throwback practice offers a different lesson than finding meaning in the “deep cuts” of Levi’s vinyl records or the blessing of boundaries Estee experiences with a roll of Polaroid film. In Judah’s fountain pen I’m reminded of the Jewish custom of writing B”H (ב״ה / BET-HEY) as an acronym for the Hebrew words b’ezrat Hashem (“with the help of G-d) or BS”D (בס״ד / BET-SAMAYCH-DALED), an acronym for the Aramaic phrase b’syata d’shmaya (“with the help of heaven”) at the top of every hand written letter, some even type it at the top of emails. I haven’t seen it yet on a Facebook or Twitter post and maybe that’s the problem, and the lesson.

The practice is very much connected to the careful thought we are commanded to put into what we commit to paper, the historical act being akin to making a promise or a vow because it lives on forever. When you think about it, even in the digital age when our social media posts follow us from university application to job interview to our dating life and beyond the thought and intention that we should put into what we write down or even type would most certainly benefit from G-d’s helping hand.

We generate and publicize by hand or by finger taping more words and feelings than perhaps any other era in history. In 1500ce the printing press took Judah’s ancient act of scribing ink to paper and permitted its mass reproduction. 500 years later personal computers reached the mass market and almost overnight, a powerful leap in the human ability to transmit, store, and share information in real time refashioned numerous aspects of life irreversibly. The impact of our written words has never been more powerful and potentially harmful.

On this night of Rosh Hashanah, as we prepare to write the next chapter in the story of our life, making the final edit on the chapter that is just now being completed, G-d prepares to inscribe our names in Sefer HaHayim, the book of life. Our machzor reminds us that everything is written and recorded, numbered and counted. The great ledger and record book of life is open this very night before it is sealed on Yom Kippur.

The lesson I learned from Judah’s fountain pen is that we should think very carefully before we put pen to page, keystroke to screen or before we take any action that cannot be so easily undone. If we organized and considered every word we wrote and shared (let alone those we speak and what we do) just as one does when they have no ability to backspace, erase, copy, paste, undo and delete we might truly come to understand the pleading of the prayer, “Oh G-d, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception.”

As I reflect on what my children, my students who have really become my teachers have taught me this past year, I think there are profound insights that can guide me and many of us through the new year ahead.

That there is beauty and meaning to be found in places we must seek out, beyond what's placed right in front of us. Look for the deep cuts, the serendipitous stumbles that reveal what was hidden in plain sight.

That by setting boundaries and accepting constraints, we enable ourselves (and our children) to value the weight and importance of our choices, and to cherish even the blurry moments as special and worth treasuring. Focus on what is most important and then capture the moment.

And that by slowing down, by measuring our words and actions, considering our intention behind them, the impact of what we say and do remains as potent as ever. That our careful crafting deserves the guiding hand of the Divine, may we be inscribed for good in the Book of Life.

In this new year may we venture into the "deep cuts" of life, seeking the profound amidst the ordinary. Establish boundaries that nurture meaning and connection, finding richness in the deliberate and finite. And in all we do, may we unearth the extraordinary within the ordinary, setting boundaries that focus on what's important and may we write our stories, share our thoughts, with the intention and care befitting the sacred power of our relationships.

Shanah Tovah.