Poetry has a way to document the world and our common experiences, to say what needs to be said in a direct, powerful and beautiful way. Poetry can be difficult to read, but it is worth the effort. Twenty years ago I fell in love with Hebrew poetry, especially the poems written by Jews who lived in Spain between the 9th and 12th centuries.

I know that many people have the perception, perhaps aided by Hollywood movies and Renaissance Festivals, that the Middle Ages were some kind of dark ages. They were tough times in some parts of Europe, but those three hundred years of Jewish life in Spain were creative and brilliant. We call them in Hebrew, Tor Hazahav, the Golden Pillar, the Golden Age of Jewish culture, the only such period in Jewish history.

And it is in Spain where Judah Halevi lived. He is considered the most accomplished Hebrew poet in the last 1,000 years. As is the case with all great poetry, when we read Halevi’s poems it is easy to see ourselves reflected in them, despite the great distance between his world and ours.

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, as he is known in Hebrew, did not live a life of comfort and wealth. Like most people then and now, he had to work to earn a living. Halevi worked as a physician full time, and only in his spare time wrote poetry and performed community service. Given that he is still admired and venerated as one of our greatest teachers, I think he did quite well in his spare time …

In some of his letters, Halevi expressed his frustration at having to work all day in his profession and having very little time to do the things that gave him fulfillment. Sounds familiar? It is nothing new that having to work to earn a living puts stress on our lives, on our families, our friends, and our involvement in Jewish things. All our relationships are
impacted and not always in a positive way. In one of his most celebrated epigrams, Halevi wrote:

עַבְדֵי זְמָן עַבְדֵי עֲבָדִים הֵם
עֶבֶד אֲדֹנָי הוּא לְבַד חָפְשִי:
עַל כֵּן בְּבַקֵּש כָּל
- אֱנוֹש חֶלְקִי!
“Servants of Time are servants of servants;
The servant of God alone is free.
And so when others seek their lot,
My soul says, “My lot is Adonai.”

Halevi has in mind the saying found in Pirke Avot, “Ethics of our Sages,” where Rabbi Joshuah ben Levi teaches,

אֵין לְךָ בֶן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שֶעוֹסֵק בְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה
“There is no free person but one that occupies herself with the study of the Torah.”

Because you see, for Halevi, someone who is a servant of Time had her life controlled by something that is already a slave of someone higher, that is, God. So, being a servant of time means being a servant of something that depends on God, so why don’t just go to the source. But perhaps there is another dimension to this short poem. In his book about Halevi, Rabbi Raymond Scheindlin adds:

“Time,” as often in Arabic and Hebrew poetry, represents all things that are subject to time, all mutable things, hence, the things of this world—possessions, honors, position, and even family. [...] Paradoxically, freedom from Time through servitude to God is the only true freedom.”
It makes more sense to me this way. We become servants of Time when we focus our lives on material things. What we consider is the right house, or the right car … or bike; and also what we perceive to be the right spouse or child. In the Middle Ages as today, we all do it: We turn to material things and, in doing so, we neglect our relationships.

Halevi teaches that we need to take time away from our society’s obsession with material possessions. We need to carve out time from our busy schedules in order to do the things that matter to us, while we still have time. Halevi wanted more time to study Torah, a noble goal, but I say, whatever enriches my life, your life, the life of the spirit, can only happen when we make time away from material things. Rabbi Scheindlin puts it this way, “[we need to find time] to devote sufficient attention to matters of ultimate importance.”

If we had all the time in the world, it wouldn’t matter how we spend our time, right? But we don’t, life is short and time flies, indeed! As we gather in this sacred space, on the holiest night of the Jewish calendar and examine our past actions, each of us must wonder about how much time have we dedicated to “matters of ultimate importance.”

It is not to make you feel guilty, although I admit, some of our liturgy has that tendency, but rather to make us think about those moments when we felt we were making godly work spending time on “matters of ultimate importance.” Yom Kippur focuses on the future, as we chanted in Kol Nidre, *miyom kipurim zeh ad yom kippurim haba*, from this Yom Kippur to the next: How could we spend more time not being servants of Time, but rather, doing what brings us fulfillment? In sum, we’ve got to MAKE time for what matters most: Relationships.

It is simple: The stuff we own, the positions we hold, the honors we aspire to, they all tie-down our time; time which we could use to build, sustain and repair our relationships. After all, isn’t this a day we are to spend on reflection so that it prepares us for the year ahead? I am saying this to you and to myself: We do not thrive on stuff, but on connections, on interpersonal connections.
Some of our prayers have a relational aspect in that we use them to connect with God and with each other. Some others are about relationships. The prayer *Ki anu amechah* is one of those, and it holds a special place in my heart. If my memory serves me well, I had my first solo ever in synagogue, at age 17, singing a verse of *Ki anu amechah*. This prayer is an anonymous, ancient *piyyut*, a religious poem, found in the liturgy of Yom Kippur. It is a fairly simple poem, 12 lines, all built in the same pattern: *Ki anu* “we are this or that,” *v’atah*, “and You are this or that.” It enumerates the many ways in which we relate to God, and how God relates to us. Our relationship is of people and God, children and parent, servant and Master, flock and Shepherd, vineyard and Keeper, work and Maker, beloved and Lover. They all evoke a human relationship. These metaphors about our relationship with God are a reflection of how we relate to each other as well.

In a commentary to *Mishkan Hanefesh* we read:

“In N’ilah we turn from the soul-searching of Yom Kippur to the world of relationships in our daily lives -encompassing love, responsibility, and commitment. [...] above all it suggests a theology that is relational, build on our capacity to respond to the Other [God].” (*MN*, p. 650)

We relate to each other in three ways, through RESPONSIBILITY, through COMMITMENT and through LOVE; these are matters of ultimate importance for which we must set time aside. Our daily lives are packed with stuff, with work, with people and situations that need our attention, yet, we must make time for the connections that ground us.

First, we need to make time to relate to each other through shared responsibility. On Yom Kippur we confess out loud our communal transgressions, and we ask for forgiveness. But that is not the end, our confessions should encourage us to ask difficult questions about our responsibility in our own relationships with others individually and with our community. What does it mean to take responsibility for our individual actions? It begins by acknowledging the role we play in our
own life – the good, and the bad bits. Rather than looking around for someone or something else to blame, we must accept that we are in charge of what is going on.

Sure, other people and factors have an influence, but we are responsible for our own actions and anything that happens within the boundaries of our control. When we were in school, if we were responsible for doing our homework, then it meant that we were an autonomous agent who could decide whether or not to do your homework. Likewise, today, it is up to no-one else to decide but you.

Responsibility means that we are held accountable by others with whom we have a relationship: Our bosses, our teachers, our parents, our spouses, and hopefully, true friends. They hold us responsible for our part in the game. Nobody wants to be called “irresponsible,” if they can help it. Our responsibilities take time, and they may not seem fun at times, but like any other relationship, they make us who we are and we must honor them with appropriate time.

Second, we need to set time aside for our relationships based on commitment. Philosophers teach that a commitment involves a sense of dedication that transcends all other considerations, unswerving allegiance to a given value. It involves intention and resolution, a vow that reaches into the future. As we examine our past actions, we see clearly our shortcomings. In the creative confessions in our Machzor, we find lists of our failures in our commitment to work toward social justice.

In light of our past, we look into the future. We commit to give tzedakkah, to give money to those in need, even when one may not approve of their life choices. We commit to act with chesed, with compassion, towards all persons who seek to live among us. Our Torah demands love for the stranger and concern for those less fortunate than us, for the weak and dispossessed in our society. We are committed and we must take action. We must express our commitment letting our elected officials what our religious tradition teaches. And, if a citizen, we should vote and vote our values.
Here at Beth Torah, we are committed to show *chesed* to the stranger by learning about their situation first hand. One of our afternoon study sessions tomorrow will focus on DACA recipients, and how we can help out here in Kansas. Indeed, we need to make time for our commitment to helping make a change in our community.

At our congregation, we show our commitment to *tzedakkah* by collecting items for the JFS food pantry from now until the end of Sukkot. Also, we are committed to continually work for civil rights. During our *Tikkun* service, our service for healing the world and our relationships, we will recall the many struggles that Jews and non-Jews alike have faced so that we could build a more just and equitable world. Yes, the work of justice takes time, but it can be the most fulfilling time too, spent in connecting with others through working toward a common goal and building relationships between us and members of the community at large.

Finally, we need to take time to dedicate to our *loving* relationships. Spending quality time with our spouses and partners is essential for maintaining healthy relationships. It is hard to juggle all our obligations, but remember that we must not become servants of temporal stuff. Sooner rather than later, we learn that none of the stuff we accumulates matters, but love.

Love in the family, with our children, with our siblings. Love in our relationships with friends and fellow congregants. Nothing makes us think about missed opportunities like the *Yizkor* Service on *Yom Kippur* does, correct? Every year we come to *Yom Kippur* and we ask for forgiveness and we forgive each other, yet every year we hear about the rift that separates family members and friends. Here is an idea: What can we do so that next Yom Kippur is different? The last thing we want is to feel remorse at *Yizkor* because of the quality time we did NOT spend with our loved ones. No, don’t feel bad about it, but instead, let us make time for our loved ones this year, this month, this week. And if a relationship is already broken, let us resolve to use our time wisely and
repair that relationship. We are still alive, they are still alive, we must find time to heal and be reconciled!

As we begin a New Year, and we gather here, many of us fasting, we are asked to examine our past actions. We are asked to consider what went wrong and how we can do better. We look at how and when we have been servants of temporal things, slaves of the material world.

On this holiest night of the year, we pray, Adonai, help us acknowledge that we have spent way too much time on things, time that we could have spent on relationships. In this New Year, help us God make time for matters of ultimate importance by fostering and nurturing our personal connections. May we all come to realize that quality time does matter, and that time spent NOW on relationships will fulfill our lives like no material thing could ever do.

Ken yehi ratzon, and may it be God’s will.