

As If Time Stood Still

By Toby Lieder

It was as if time had no hands on the clock and the time had stood still.

I looked through the window and saw the same old street, with the same tree and the same crack in the sidewalk, that had been there for what seemed like forever. On the outside, it was all the same, but inside my humble home, time didn't stop there! Every time I turned around, it was someone else's birthday! Another year has gone by. How did that happen?

I thought it was a night like any other night. I was folding the laundry, listening to my daughter sing her heart out in the shower. Then my throat tightened and I felt panic set in. When did I last wash her hair? I ran to the bathroom and opened the door so I could yell inside, "Chayala, do you need any help washing your hair?" Her reply brought tears to my eyes, "No, Mommy, I'm fine."

I've always tried my best to appreciate every day with my 14 children, to live by the motto I adopted for myself ever since I had my first child: "Make sure they remember the joy of yesterday, experience the joy of today, and anticipate the joy of tomorrow". I just didn't know tomorrow would come so soon. I'm a firm believer in kids playing hard and getting dirty, and my two oldest daughters and son sure did that. Every day, they were out in the Aussie sunshine – climbing, digging, swinging, and getting very, very dirty. Children need to get dirty. It's a universal law. And I'm not about to tamper with universal law. But with dirt, comes baths. I remember when my two oldest daughters, Chayala and Shterny, would take baths together. I would wash their hair, then let them play in the bathtub for awhile. It was our routine.

Then they got older. Baths turned into showers, but I was still there to come in and help them wash their hair. Then the hair washing turned into just helping them rinse out the shampoo. Then the rinsing turned into the occasional, "Let's go back in the shower and I'll help you rinse that one spot on top of your head." Then came, "No, Ma, I'm fine." Here's the deal with motherhood: It's our job to raise independent kids, but no one tells you how to handle it when it really happens.

That night, it happened. I thought back – when was the last time? When was the last moment I rinsed the shampoo out of her hair? Why didn't I know it was the last time? If I would have known, I would have done a better job, or made it last longer, or kissed her head, or something. I would have done something!

I couldn't see the laundry anymore because the tears blurred my vision. But I kept folding. Folding and praying. "Hashem, help me remember how quickly this is going by. Help me appreciate every single day – even the hard ones. Show me the beauty in each moment – even the bad ones." The cure isn't to slow down. That's impossible. The cure is a heart of wisdom. The wisdom to know that broken dishes, stained clothes, lost pieces of puzzles, and spilled food are never reasons to lose your temper. The wisdom to know that school assignments can always be done later, after the sun sets and the mud puddles have all dried up. The wisdom to know that every moment is a sacred moment – changing diapers,

snuggling on the sofa, swinging at the park, even washing hair. They're all sacred, if you can just slow down enough to notice it.

There will be a last fort with chairs and blankets.

There will be a last story and Shema before bed.

There will be a last outfit put on a doll.

There will be a last swing at the park.

We don't need to know when the last one will be. We just need the heart of wisdom to appreciate each one. I took a little longer brushing her hair tonight. And I lingered as I put her hair into a single braid down her back. When I kissed her goodnight, it lasted a couple more seconds than usual. Because after 14 children and years of thinking I had all the time in the world, I realized something. Life will run off with you if you let it. Sometimes, you just have to stop and breathe it in.

Thank you, Hashem, for braids before bedtime.

Thank you for messy kitchens and Legos on the floor.

Thank you for loud music that can't compete with my yelling.

Thank you for the mess left after a birthday celebration.

Thank you, Hashem, for last-minute rushes before Shabbos and all the yelling orders to light the candles on time!

Thank you, Hashem, for the guests that left a huge mess, and all the kids' friends who went back home and left the house looking like a tornado had hit it!

Thank you for noisy dinner times and late-night conversations, for forts, baby dolls, lost school shoes, late-night homework assignments, being late for doctor appointments, finger-paint on the walls, and bedtime stories.

Thank you for broken wrists and shampoo for brunettes.

Thank you, Hashem, for the 15-seater minivan that provided us with memorable vacations, Darling Harbor Sunday trips, weekly trips to the supermarket, and fun Sunday outings, with each kid bringing along a friend!

Thank you, Hashem, for a husband that falls asleep at Sunday picnics, because at least I have a husband!

Thank you, Hashem, for all the headaches and school pickups when kids are sick, because it means I have kids to pick up!

Thank you, Hashem, for my back hurting from shlepping kids back to their beds each night, because it means I was shlepping diamonds on my back!

Thank you for teaching me to number and appreciate my days. And, Hashem, when I forget, please give me a nudge and number them for me