

Time flies or does it? Reflections on time and my sabbatical

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A man was taking it easy, lying on the grass and looking up at the clouds. He was identifying shapes when he decided to talk to God.

"God", he said, "how long is a million years?"

God answered, "In my frame of reference, it's about a minute."

The man asked, "God, how much is a million dollars?"

God answered, "To Me, it's a penny."

The man then asked, "God, can I have a penny?"

God said, "In a minute."

What is time? What is it worth? Gathered here, we are marking another year has passed. Our Jewish calendar now says that it is 5777. Did the year fly by or did it pass slowly for you? We know time is measured by the rotation of our planet, with its sunsets and sunrises, and its circuit around our sun with its seasons. Time is set and can be measured but our perceptions are more subjective.

I read a blog entitled "Does time fly as we get older" by Jordan Lewis from Scientific American. Jordan suggests by quoting William James, a prominent 19th century philosopher and psychologist, that our perception of time is affected by memorable events such as our first kiss, college experience, or having a child. As we age, we have fewer and fewer novel experiences and this hastens the passage of the years. I'm not sure if I agree with that. Aren't there memorable events as we age such as changing jobs, going back to school, becoming empty nesters, developing new interests, retirement, or travel? Maybe it is true that the quantity of new experiences is indeed greater in our youth and therefore time appears to move more slowly.

Another reason in this article for perceiving time as fleeting is our age. When we are ten, for instance, a decade is our whole life but when we are sixty it is just one sixth of it. It's odd for me think that I have lived almost 47 years. No wonder a year seems just part of the ocean of my life experiences while for my thirteen year old son, there are so many things that happen. A third reason, Jordan posits, is as we grow older, we pay less attention to time. For example, we may recall eagerly looking forward to our birthday when we were a child. For most of us, though, after twenty one, our birthdays sort of blend into each other. How many of you forget how old you are? We never did this when we were children. Finally, the more stress we have, the more we feel that we don't have enough time to do all the things we wish. This causes time to go by

fast. I can relate especially to this last reason. There are so many things I want to do, so many goals, that there just isn't enough hours in the day to do them.

I've been thinking about time because I was given the gift of six months this past winter and spring in the form of a sabbatical. Rabbis generally get a sabbatical every seven years or so for physical and spiritual rejuvenation. I've been an ordained rabbi for more than 19 years, served at Temple Beth David for thirteen years and it was time. Our congregation was stable, our lay leadership and staff were and are excellent, and it was time for me to take some time to step away from the stress of congregational life with the goal of being able to serve for years to come. It was time to develop other parts of myself.

My sabbatical started in February. The first day, I went to the Cerritos library. I walked past its floor to ceiling aquarium with pink coral and iridescent blue and yellow striped fish. There's an impressive archway of giant books leading into the children's library. As I walk by, I can see a rocket ship, a life sized dinosaur, and a huge tree beckoning children into the jungle of imagination. I climb the steps to the expansive second floor and sit down at a cubicle next to a big window with a view of lush Jacarna trees. As I opened up my lap top, and I felt a wave of gratitude. I was so happy to be there sitting at this desk with an opportunity to write about the Biblical Deborah. This was a book I envisioned years ago, started and shelved due to work and parenting demands, and now finally it was time. Time to create a story of a woman who lived three thousand years ago having to wrestle with the limitations of her gender as her people struggled to survive in the rugged hill country of Israel.

During these months, I have also pondered the passage of time. Last fall my daughter started high school. In the initial weeks, I announced to my husband what I've heard from so many, that before we know it, in the blink of an eye, Gabriel would be off to college. I was deadly serious as I tried to imagine her life in college and beyond. Panic and loss began to grip my heart. Paul looked over at me and said, "Okay, let's try." He stood up straight and dramatically closed his eyes. He inhaled deeply, opened his eyes wide, and exclaimed: "No," he said nodding his head. "She's still here. She's still a freshman. We have a long slog ahead."

That turned out to be very true. I spent a lot of time this year trying to figure out how to help our daughter. She made the school softball team and gave it her all at the daily practices and many games. Gabriel also, as a freshman, auditioned and was accepted into the intermediate drama program. From the very beginning, her grades dropped. She just needs more time, I thought. We eliminated other activities, tried to clear out her weekends, but still it wasn't enough. There were clues. I noticed not only teenage clutter but chaos, forgetfulness, and genuine frustration from her. I finally had time to think and brought it to the attention of her

neurologist who treats her for headaches. “It looks like ADD,” said her Physician Assistant. “What?” I uttered. “She was an honors student in Junior High, wouldn’t we have known this earlier?” “No,” consoled the doctor, “Smart kids will compensate until they get really busy and they reach a breaking point.” My husband and I put her on Vyvanse and met with the guidance counselor. We were advised to ask her to dump the backpack on the table regularly, have her organize her folder, ask about her planner, and put her in the front of the classroom. Then my gaze turned to my son who was having his own challenges. It was April and I said, “Shane, show me your planner.” He sheepishly opened it up. It was entirely blank. Well, I have learned that the force of ADD runs strong through my family veins. We are learning to use it, harness it for creativity, accomplishments, insights, and for overall good. “Use the force, young Jedi.”

One of the blessings of ADD, is the ability to live wholeheartedly in the present. My husband Paul is able to laugh and savor the now. He literally stops to photograph every unique plant or flower and notices every creature that soars through the sky or creeps on the ground around him. I’m sure on an unconscious level, I embraced this quality in him to help me balance myself because I live almost entirely in the future. I think ahead, plan for the upcoming year, and worry about the years to come.

I have always been like this. When I was a child in elementary school, I became aware of my mortality. It dawned on me that not only do characters on TV shows die but that my parents would die and me as well. Late at night, I grew more and more alarmed. My parents came in and said, “Nancy, we aren’t going to die for a long, long time. You are not going to die for a long, long time.” I can tell you that these words were not comforting to me. I was hoping that there was a way around this. In third grade, I mournfully presented my will to my parents with instructions for my favorite game called “Run yourself ragged” to go to my little brother Nathan and my slippers to middle brother Bennett. I begged my parents not to send me to bed because the magic 8 ball confirmed that I was to die that night. “Go to bed, Nancy,” they said firmly after a kiss. Spoiler alert! I survived.

If I live in the future and Paul and my children live in present, what time zone do you live in?

Do you live in the past? As individuals, there can be great pleasure in going down memory lane. There we have vivid recollections of our grandparents, parents, siblings, and friends. It’s fun remembering the days of our youth. The freedom, lack of responsibility, and mischief can bring a smile. Our first loves and later ones. The birth of our children, the places we have lived, the countries we have visited and our loved ones are there in our minds. We remember too the hard times. All that we have endured has made us into who we are today. As Jews, our past is important. We continue to recount our history over thousands of years. We relive our people’s

trials in Egypt, their long journey through the wilderness, and the challenges in the Promised Land. We wouldn't be who we are today if we had not endured and experienced the past.

Do you live in the present? Are you able to be present, focused, savor the coffee, sip the wine, and enjoy living? The whole purpose of mindfulness is, well, being mindful. Stopping the rush, slowing the clock, and appreciating the moment. The present is important in Judaism as well. We are supposed to look at revelation of Torah as not just relegated to the past. Instead, we are standing today at Sinai. We are freed from Egypt. We stand before God, responsible for the commandments handed down to us. We are the ones who light the candles, study Torah, bake challah, and support the Jewish community. It is now the year 5777. While our people have lived for millennia, this is our moment, our time. This is our opportunity to wrestle with our ancient teachings and make them relevant to the 21st century as our people have done in every place and in every era.

Do you live in the future? Are you looking forward to that great trip coming up? Can you hardly wait till your grandchildren are born, raised, and get married? Does retirement loom large for you? Do you have your IRAs, is the house paid off, and have you made pre-funeral arrangements so as not to burden your children? As Jews, much of what we do is for the future, it's for the next generation. There's a famous account in the Talmud about Honi Hamagel, Honi the circle maker.

One spring day he rode on his donkey in the country side. In the field, he saw an old man shoveling dirt. "Shalom Alechem. How are you?" He called out to the bald man. "Aleichem Shalom!" the man stood up wiped the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve. Honi dismounted from his donkey and walked over to him. "If you don't mind me asking, what are you doing?" With a smile, the old man said with a grin, "Why, I'm planting a carob tree." Honi's forehead creased, "I don't mean to offend but it is unlikely that you will live long enough to enjoy its fruits." "Oh," the old man smiled, "I am not planting this tree for myself. When I was young, there were trees for me to enjoy. I am planting this for my children and grandchildren." So much of what we do as Jews is for the next generation, for our children, and for those who will follow.

Past, present, and future; all are significant for us as individuals and as a people. However, we can't just live in one time zone. There are serious drawbacks if we do. If we live only in the past, we will give up on our future. We can be more prone to this when we grow older and face hardships. Also, if we live only in the present, we will not plan adequately for what is to come. And if we live only in the future, we miss the blessings of being alive. We need as individuals

and as a people, to draw the blessings of past, present, and future. It's in the balance. It's relative to our personal needs. But time doesn't have to feel rushed.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book The Sabbath teaches that time is sacred. We focus too much on things in space and too little on time itself. He writes, "A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time. We all live it and are so close to being identical with it that we fail to notice it. The world of space surrounds our existence. It is but a part of living, the rest is time. Things are the shore, the voyage is time."² Heschel teaches that things in space expire, our bodies do indeed die, but time does not. Time is even beyond categories of past, present, and future because we are only aware of these time frames through events that happen to us.

One of the great blessings of our holidays, is that it gives us some time to stop. We cease from work, school, and ordinary chores, to focus on who we are, why we are here. Heschel teaches that 'it is only within time that there is fellowship and togetherness of all being.'³ We can experience that here in the sanctuary but it is not limited to the synagogue. We can take time after our worship to share a meal with a friend or family member. We can take some time to walk or sit outside. We can take a moment to feel, to be, to live.

I used my time during my sabbatical. I went on a guilt trip to New York City at the urging of my younger brother and the plea of my history professor. I worked at Camp Newman, our Reform Jewish camp up north. I finished a draft of the entirety of my novel. I took time to delve into many family issues. And I did one thing that was fun. I became part of Chris Erskine, a columnist from the LA Times, happy hour hiking group.

How much is time worth? Is it worth a penny or million dollars? Heschel writes that "In the realm of the spirit, there is no difference between a second and a century, between an hour and an age. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch cried: "There are those gain eternity in a lifetime, others who gain it in one brief hour." One good hour may be worth a lifetime; an instant of returning to God..."

However we experience the passage of time, may we use this High Holy season as an opportunity to appreciate who we are, the journey we have been on, the blessings of today and the love of our family and friends, as we forge ahead to a good, sweet, and healthy new year.

¹<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/mind-guest-blog/why-does-time-fly-as-we-get-older/>

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² The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel pg. 96

³ “ “ pg. 99