

Time: Appreciating the time we have

Morning RH:

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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 does a minute or an hour mean to you? You are spending here this morning about two and half hours. My sermon is about 20 minutes. For some, this is a very long time. For others, it's nothing. The passage of time and how we perceive it can vary widely. There are times when we blink and a day is gone and over. We comment how surprised we are that the years have gone by, the kids have gotten older, and we marvel at the stage of life we are at. For those of you who are younger, does time go slow for you or quickly? Ask a child of when their birthday is and they will tell you how many months or days until this special occasion arrives. Those of us who are older, we can barely remember how old we are. I'm fifty one. What does that even mean? I remember when I turned forty, I proclaimed in my bulletin article that I was now middle aged. Well, I don't know if that was accurate but there is no denying it now. I am a middle aged woman. Time moves forward, day after day, year after year and we can feel it in our joints and backs and see the transformations in our children and grandchildren.

But time is more complicated as well. Many of us can vividly recall the days of our youth but last month's events will evade our memory. We can feel as though we are a different age than our chronological age demonstrates. I remember my father commenting to me when I was 18 years old that he couldn't believe that he was old enough to have a child go off to college. Do you feel at times surprised that you are as old as you are? Time itself can be quite subjective.

In Judaism, there's a concept, "*Ein Mukdam v'M'uchar baTorah.*" There is no early or late in the Torah," meaning there isn't a chronological order in the Torah. We like to think that it all begins with Genesis, the creation of our world, and from there a linear development ensues to our people's enslavement in Egypt, our trek to freedom in the wilderness, and finally arriving at the cusp of the Promised Land. However, according to this Jewish concept, *Ein Mukdam v'M'uchar baTorah*, this isn't necessarily so. Rashi, a medieval famous commentator, points out that events in the Torah are not linear and can occur at different times despite their placement.

For example, when God finished speaking with Moses at Sinai and gave him the two tablets, the Israelites were given instructions to build the portable sanctuary, called the Mishkan. Shortly thereafter they lose faith in God and demand that Aaron builds for them a Golden Calf to worship. Rashi however states, “In the Torah, chronological order is not adhered to. The episode of the calf took place long **before** the command of the work of the Mishkan.”¹ Perhaps this is a way let our people off the hook or to demonstrate how the Mishkan served as a place of connecting with God, but it is intriguing.

There are many other references in our tradition about the timing of events in the Torah and how *Ein Mukdam v'M'uchar baTorah*,” There is no early or late in the Torah,” permeates Jewish thought. Incredibly, the rabbis like to look at the Torah as the blue print for creation itself. Somehow, it preceded even the formation of our world, and God actually consulted it, like an architect would a drawing. Regardless of whether one takes that teaching literally or not, looking at the Torah, we can see that it’s not as sequential as we like to think. For example, when Abraham has a conflict with the Philistines, we know from archeology that there is no way that Abraham, if he lived four thousand years ago, i.e., around 2000 BCE, could’ve met the Philistines. This is because the Philistines were part of the Sea Peoples from the Mycenaean empire and they only came to the coast of Israel around 1100 BCE. Also, there are tantalizing theories, about which book of the Torah came first. Most of us would assume that its Genesis but for Biblical scholar, John Van Seters, the book of Deuteronomy may actually be the oldest book of our Torah. This is fascinating for me but the point I want to make is about the variable nature not just of the Torah but of time itself.

Albert Einstein, the great theoretical physicist, asserted in the Special Theory of Relativity that time is relative. According to his understanding, one person watches a train goes by. As the train passes at the midpoint, a lightning bolt strikes both the front and end of the train. The observer believes that they happen simultaneously. However, another person riding on the same moving train, sees the same lightning strikes, and concludes that they didn’t strike the train at the same time because the light from the back takes longer to reach her. According to Einstein, they are both correct. So it’s the same train, same lightning strikes hits, at exactly the same time, but the observer’s perception of the timing is different.²

In other words, the rate that time passes depends on one’s frame of reference. This is rather intriguing isn’t it? It suggests that time is not fixed but rather is subjective and fluid. Hmmm, the implications! If one could speed up to the velocity of light, time would slow down or depending on where you are, time itself changes. It’s hard to conceptualize this but I’ll let my imagination take over. On a Science Fiction level, if time could be harnessed, then we could travel through it. Oh, the movies about time travel are many such as *Back to the Future*,

Terminator, X men-Days of Future Past, Avengers-End Game, and more. We as humans are fascinated with the idea of exploring different time periods.

And so, if you could time travel, where would you go? In the past, would you go back to witness Alexander the Great's conquest of the Middle East? Would you like to see Michelangelo paint, the Creation of Adam, during the Renaissance? How about seeing a life sized dinosaur? Or would you go back to meet your great, great grandparents or just revisit some decades of your life? If you could travel to the future, what would you like to see or experience? Would you want to see how your offspring turned out? Or how technology will continue to transform our way of life? Perhaps in our lifetime, we will be able to vaporize and rematerialize from far flung locations around the globe.

We will have to wait much longer though for technology to find a way to help us travel through time. In the meantime, at the very least, regarding the past, we can travel through our memories, reconstruct them with others who were there, read the accounts of those who lived before us. For the future, we can theorize, study, and imagine the possibilities. But for now, we are here, in the present. You are sitting in the sanctuary or Live Streaming from your home. And we have the time to reflect and think about the past year and where we are today.

Let's look back. During all these months, did you perceive time to move slowly or did it race by? With the shut downs, many were forced to avoid the office, school, and entertainment venues. And so, we spent more time at home. What did you do with your time? During the Inappropriate moments of humor on Friday night, I would joke about all the ways I spent my time such as watching terrible shows on Netflix such as the Tiger King, catching up on celebrity gossip and happily noting that Brad Pitt was still single, purchasing ridiculously sized bags of flour and stocking up on wine like it was the only liquid I drank. A number of you took advantage of the classes taught on line and utilized Zoom, Live Stream, to learn and connect with others. You explored hobbies such as cooking, baking, gardening, reading, writing, and drawing. We peered into each other's homes and smiled at those who were the true beneficiaries of the pandemic, our pets. We are going to need a lot of anti-depressants for our dogs and cats as we spend more time away from home.

During the pandemic, were you able to live more in the present? It's not an easy thing to do. Mindfulness is being fully in the present. Taking the time to notice what's around us and being aware of ourselves and others. When done purposefully, it can help anchor ourselves. Since we are here anyway, let's take a moment right now. What does the material of the chair you are sitting on feel like? Is it soft, textured, or sleek? Does it give firm support or is it cushy? What is your body posture? Are you upright, slouching a little, or laying down? Can you wiggle your toes? Are your feet planted on the ground or crossed over your body? Try tightening the muscles in your leg. Release. Can you sit upright with shoulders back? How about shrugging

your shoulders? Up and down. Back and forward. Let's move our head gently to our side, slowly. You will not only feel the muscles in your neck but you may notice who is sitting to your right and left. Take a moment to notice. Do you know them? If not, maybe afterwards you can introduce yourselves. And now, what are you thinking? How are you feeling?

The present is here and now. We are living it, minute by minute.

The most famous Jewish theologian who spoke about time was none other than 20th century Abraham Joshua Heschel. In Heschel's book The Sabbath, he teaches that time is sacred. Heschel 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."³ 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. Heschel emphasizes the importance of observing Shabbat because it helps us rise up beyond the world of things and helps us connect with the sanctity of time and with God.

The gift of living Jewishly is that we are given opportunities to celebrate and connect with our history, our people, ourselves, and God throughout the year. Rosh Hashanah is one such occasion. We are taking time out to reflect on our lives, how our past year has been, where we are today, and what we want for our future. We can finally take some moments to reflect on who we are and how we wish to better ourselves. It is a gift, an opportunity and it can be hard work for those who take it seriously, but we are not alone.

Heschel teaches that 'it is only within time that there is fellowship and togetherness of all being.'⁴ These times that we take to connect, remember, celebrate, and observe with others can create or strengthen the bonds between us. It is in such moments that we become aware that we are part the vastness of life itself. As the Kabbalists teach, we are merely waves, rising up and coming back down but we are part of the ocean of existence. There is the spark of life that permeates everything but we can only become aware by taking the time to notice. Time to notice other people, time to connect with them, time to look at the incredible diversity of life around us from the small insects scurrying beneath our feet, to the vine sprawling over our wall, to the bird soaring up in the sky. We can peer at the night sky and feel a sense of awe that our planet is 4.5 billion years old, our universe is over 13 billion years old, and there are over a 100 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy alone. And that humans have only been walking on earth for two million years and Homo sapiens only for 200,000 years. 200,000 years seems like such a small number. And then our life spans, 70, 80, 90, or over a 100 years. Maybe this is a good time to slowly take a breath. Let it fill our lungs and be grateful for the wonders of oxygen that gives us life every single minute.

The years of our lives can appear to short and small but then again look at what we do with our time. Just think about what you have done just today. Not just getting up and getting ready for services, but your interactions with others, what you have read or watched, or the many thoughts that you have had. Even within just an hour, we can think and do so very much. And here, you have been listening to me for around 20 minutes. Time passes both slowly and fast. It's a paradox. It's subjective because time is fluid. The past can blend with the present and the future affects our day to day lives.

The Jewish teaching, *Ein Mukdam v'M'uchar baTorah*, there is no early or late, perhaps is relevant for us to see the complexity of time itself. The relativity that Einstein teaches that time isn't as linear as we believe. And can inspire us to take Heschel's teachings to heart that the way to live a meaningful life is to sanctify time. 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 who 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..."⁵

And so, let's commit to living as fully as possible even in time of uncertainty. May we come to see that each and every day is a gift from God. It's an opportunity to connect with others, to know that we are part of the vastness of life on planet earth and the universe. What a privilege it is to live, to breathe, to know, think, to love. May we be able to infuse greater meaning into our lives and may this upcoming year be one of new discoveries, joys, and appreciation for the time that we have.

Notes

- 1 . <https://www.thetorah.com/article/highlighting-juxtaposition-in-the-torah>
Sources for Ein mukdam ([Mechilta de Rabbi Yishmael 15:9](#), [Sifrei Bamidbar 64:1](#), [Ruth Rabbah 4:5](#)),
<https://www.thetorah.com/article/highlighting-juxtaposition-in-the-torah>

ויתן אל משה וגן אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה. מעשה העגל קודם לצווי מלאכת המשכן ימים רבים היה, שהרי בשבעה עשר בתמוז נשתברו הלוחות, וביום הכפורים נתרצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל, ולמחרת התחילו בנדבת המשכן והוקם באחד בניסן:

Rashi is based on Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tissa 31:

עשה שם אלול כלו ועשרה מתשרי וירד בעשור והיו ישראל שרויים בתפלה ותענית ובו ביום נאמר לו למשה סלחתי כדבריך וקבעו הקדוש ברוך הוא יום סליחה ומחילה לדור

- 2 National geographic article. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/einstein-relativity-thought-experiment-train-lightning-genius>
<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/einstein/time/a-matter-of-time>

3 “[The Sabbath](#) by Abraham Joshua Heschel” pg. 96

4 “ “ pg. 99

5 “ “ pg. 98