

**Living in the Twilight**  
Erev RH 2023  
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In 1959 in through 1964, there was a TV series called the Twilight Zone narrated by Rod Serling. The show opened with the familiar, doooo, doooo....Serling's voice then stated, "You are traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind, a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of the imagination. Your next stop the Twilight Zone." This science fiction show featured people dealing with disturbing or unusual events that was described as the Twilight zone. It often had a surprise ending or a moral on greed or conformity and the like. I may have watched a few episodes but hardly would call myself a fan. However, the musical introduction is unforgettable and I am intrigued by the concept of a Twilight Zone.

For the creators of the show, the zone was a place where unexpected things could occur in a realm of fantasy and horror. When I think of the concept of twilight, though, I envision a time or space that is neither one thing or the other. It is neither day nor night. It is in between. It is twilight. This is something that is nebulous, uncertain, mysterious, and even mystical.

Perhaps it is intriguing because it can describe many critical moments of life itself. I mean how often are things absolute, easily understood, and predicable? We often say that there are no guarantees in life and as we age, we recognize the truth of that. How many of us ended up living or doing something that years earlier was unimaginable? As a youth, for example, I never could've foreseen myself as a rabbi. I was going to be a psychologist or an attorney like my father. In my twenties, I never thought I would ever live on the West coast. And even ten years ago, I never could have imagined getting a divorce. But here I am. And here you are. I know we say, "Never say never." And it's true because life is complicated, constantly changing, and so are we.

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus around 500 BCE, said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."<sup>1</sup> We can't go back to the way things were. Too much has changed. The circumstances of our lives, the people around us, and even the landscape have transformed. Heraclitus also states, "There is nothing permanent except change."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the only constant is change. Yes, most things in life are not enduring and everlasting. Not our health, our homes, and not our bank accounts. All can be in flux and things can change instantaneously. It doesn't matter if we like it or not. We and our lives continue to evolve, progress, and regress. And the demarcation between these varying states from our past, present, and future can indeed be blurry.

We are gathered here at the cusp of a new year. We are at the transition point between 5783 and 5784. The Hebrew date traditionally measures time since the creation of our world. As progressive Jews, none of us take 5784 literally, but it is a fascinating thing to ponder especially as we acknowledge the age of our planet being approximately 4.5 billion years old and humans starting to exist two million years ago.<sup>3</sup> And so what do you do with 5784 being the year since creation? Well, I start with imagining what occurred on our planet almost 6 thousand years ago, in the year 3761 BCE. Hmm... well this is close to the start of the Bronze Age. It is in the fourth millennium BCE, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in the cradle of civilization that the Sumerians appear. It is they who are the first to use bronze, invent cuneiform, and build large pyramid temples called ziggurats.<sup>4</sup> Humanity at this time took an incredible leap. Perhaps it makes sense to count this as the beginning of the world because you only have history, if there is someone to report it. And so, 5784 years ago, humanity as a people came into history.

Given the scope of our past as Jews and human beings, the transition between 5783 and 5784 can seem insignificant, but for us as individuals living our mortal life spans, a lot happens in a year and crossing the line from one year to the next can be important and yet perplexing all at once. It is mysterious, nebulous, and uncertain.

Maybe we live more often in this kind of a twilight zone than we realize. A place or a state where we aren't sure if we are one thing or another. There are so many transitions in our lives which aren't clean cut. The transition from child to teenager to adult is very murky. Yes, we have our Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual to welcome our 13 year olds into Jewish adulthood but we know and they know that they really aren't adults, not in a modern society at least. We do recognize a demarcation between being a teenager at 19 and then a 20 year old but whether they are considered a full-fledged adult is another matter.

Another example of a blurred state could be in the arena of love. It is a bit mysterious, isn't it? The transition from liking a person to loving them is usually a process as opposed to one day like when Harry met Sally, you realize your friend is your true love. Maybe its instantaneous attraction but lasting love can take some time in really getting to know the other person. It can be weeks, months, or years. But when do you know that you have crossed that line between fondness/attraction to ever-lasting love? Is it the beat of our heart, the longing we feel inside? How do you quantify such feelings? You really can't.

And then there are many transitions professionally. For me, once I was ordained twenty six years ago, I was officially a rabbi and yet I felt that I was playing catch up. Yes, I went to school for years. Yes, I worked at synagogues in many capacities. But my title felt like a garment that was two sizes too big. And so, I feasted on study and preparation and now years later, I fill out my rabbi clothes more than before, perhaps not this robe, but I'm working on it.

My point is that just because we have a degree doesn't mean that we feel like we are completely equipped to be what the document states. It can take time.

Oh and then what about the transition from work life to retirement? For some of you, it was final but for others, you kept working part time or taking on other initiatives that made it a more complicated process. Birthdays, yet another example, that comes around each year. Sometimes they are major milestones such as entering a new decade or gaining the privileges of driving, voting, and drinking. By the way, Gen Z, these three things should not be done together. And then there's the transition between sickness, health, and then dying. This is the ultimate twilight, living between life and death. I will speak more about this topic on Yom Kippur.

In Pirkei Avot (5:6), chapters of our fathers, it is written, “

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת,

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight.

Let's take a moment to take that in. According to Pirkei Avot, at the transition between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> day, a number of things were created at twilight.

What are they? In Pirkei Avot, they list as number one, the mouth of the earth referring to the earthquake that swallowed Korah's rebels in the wilderness. Number two is the mouth of the well. This is the source of water for our people in the desert. The rainbow is number three and it was a beacon of hope after the ravages of the flood in Noah's time. Manna comes next that nourished our people in the wilderness followed by the staff of Moses that was utilized in bringing down the plagues of Egypt. The mysterious Shamir is subsequently listed. This was a magical worm or substance that was used to cut through stone. And then we are told that letters, writing, and even the tablets that our laws will be written on at Sinai were created in this twilight zone. And for an epilogue, this teachings states that, “and some say, also the demons, the grave of Moses and the ram of Abraham our father.”<sup>5</sup>

And so at this hazy time between creating the world, some things were put in place to save our people, give them hope, and enable them to move forward. It is interesting that demons are mentioned here. The legend is that as God was getting ready to create more life, time ran out because Shabbat began and so there are these creatures that can't always been seen but they are here creating issues and problems. There are a surprising number of teachings and references to demons in our Talmud but I'll save that for Halloween.

Transitional moments, in our own lives are unsettling, stressful, and challenging. Often we can feel frustrated that things don't stay as they are. One thing that can be helpful is to strive to see such moments as a time for discovery, achievement, and growth. It is precisely because

things do not remain constant that we continue to experience new events and ideas as we course our way through life. And perhaps when we are least certain, great things can come. Maybe it is because we are more open to instruction, support, and learning. When we lose the self-assurance, our shield of complacency comes down, we open ourselves up for greater insights. It is only in the twilight, the transitional moments of our lives that we can also feel so very alive and aware of what has passed and what can be.

In the Talmud, there is a beautiful teaching about when one can recite the morning Shma and its blessings that includes, “*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, Listen oh Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.” You are supposed to recite it every morning and night but how do you know when it is morning? In tractate Berachot, the rabbis explore how much light is needed in order for it to be considered morning. In the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that perhaps it’s when you can tell the difference between the blue and white threads of a tallit. And then another says, “It is when you can tell the difference between a dog and wolf.” *Aherim*, sages who taught anonymously, decisively state,

מִשִּׁירְאָה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ רְחוֹק אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת, וַיִּכְיֶרְנוּ.

“When one can see another person, who is merely an acquaintance, from a distance of four cubits and recognize him.”

A cubit, is an ancient measure of length used in the Torah. It is the length from one’s elbow to the tip of their middle finger, approximately 18 inches. So four cubits are approximately 6 feet. In other words, if we can recognize the face of someone who is a little distance from us, then there is enough light to recite the Shma. Quite powerful don’t you think? This is why Rav Huna said: The *halakha* is in accordance with *Aherim*.” When is it morning? It is when we can recognize the face of another person at a social distance.<sup>6</sup>

And so, in the midst of the transition between light and darkness, it is when we can recognize the face of another, we know we have come to the other side. I think there is a lot of wisdom to this teaching because it is in times of uncertainty we need each other more than ever. We need to know that we are not alone, that others have gone through similar experiences, and that we can see and lean on one another. I find in all of life’s big transitions, it is helpful to be able to reach out to family, friends, and community. It makes good moments more joyful and hard ones easier to bear. And it is just life itself, isn’t it, when you think of all the changes that we have under gone and we know there is much more to come.

To be able to see the face of another and know that they care, that they are there for us to hold our hand, embrace us in a hug, and offer support can make the twilight zone more easy to navigate. This is why Judaism places such a priority on community. We are to seek out a minyan, a group of ten Jewish adults to have a complete prayer service. We are to celebrate

holidays, life cycles, and study Torah with others. Relationships form in such settings, Judaism comes to life, and we are anchored in community, and our timeless Torah. You are here today physically or virtually as you connect with our people, it radiates out beyond this moment in through time. We are linked with past generations going all the way back, thousands of years to Abraham and Sarah. We are connected to our fellow Jews around the country and the world. And we are the link to the next generation who will study and experience Judaism in a constantly changing and evolving world.

Our sacred rituals such as lighting the candles help us transition from the week to our holy Sabbath and back to the week with Havdalah. On Rosh Hashanah, we sound the shofar and its shriek awakens us to the passage of time. Every month, we say a prayer for Rosh Hodesh, the new moon. And we mark the birth of our children with a brit milah or naming, we stand under the chuppah with our beloved, and recite the Kaddish at the death of our dear family and friends. These ancient rituals help to deal with sadness and pain and elevate great moments of celebration. It is in the twilight, the times of change and challenge, when we are uncertain of whether it is day or night, that life can be felt most intensively. It is with the support of others as we anchor ourselves in our rich Jewish traditions that we are able to navigate the many changes that life brings.

doooo,doooo....Serling's voice states, "You are traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind, a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of the imagination. Your next stop the Twilight Zone."

Maybe another way to rephrase this would be, "You are traveling through life full of dimension, not just of sight and sound but of mind, body, and spirit. It is a wondrous journey that cannot be limited by the imagination. We are in the zone of light, meaning, and being. And as we cross this twilight into the New Year, let us pray for sweetness and goodness for ourselves and our loved ones.

**Notes:**

1 [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/heraclitus\\_107157](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/heraclitus_107157)

2 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1110057-there-is-nothing-permanent-except-change-->

3 <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/darwin/the-world-before-darwin/how-old-is-earth#:~:text=Today%2C%20we%20know%20from%20radiometric,have%20been%20taken%20more%20seriously.>

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th\\_millennium\\_BC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_millennium_BC)

<https://www.history.com/topics/pre-history/bronze-age>

5 Pirkei Avot 5:6

6 Talmud Berachot 9b