

## THE HOLINESS OF TIME

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A Rosh Hashanah Sermon by  
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1982 - 5743

Ancient man viewed time from a different perspective than moderns do. For them, time was sacred. For most moderns, time is but one of many things that we think we are able to control. Ancient people were fascinated with the mystery of time. At daybreak, they would greet the rising of the sun as if it were a miracle that did not have to happen. At the spring equinox, the pagans would perform magical rites that they hoped would ensure the rising of the sun for another season, so that the crops would benefit from its rays.

The Hebrews did not attempt to control the alternation of day and night by the use of magical rites, but they looked upon the sunrise as a miracle, nonetheless. The miracle was that God in His infinite goodness chose to cause the sun to rise every day. Our morning prayer goes this way, "B'chol Yom M'chadesh Ma'ahseh V'raysheet, Everyday God renews the deeds of creation."

The way a civilization looks upon the meaning of time tells us something about the soul of that civilization. At the height of the Greek civilization, one of the popular sects known as the Epicureans had as its philosophy, "Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow you may die." There was a certain desperation about this Epicurean motto, for it revealed a pessimism about a meaningful future. In modern times, Jerry Rubin has been the guru of legions who compulsively tried to experience everything in life as quickly as possible without regard to the effect of the experience on their personality or character. "Do It," was the title of Jerry Rubin's best selling book, and millions of young people, especially, attempted to "do it," to do anything, whether it was the administration of drugs or the free participation in sexual relations. How do you know anything is bad, Jerry Rubin's disciples asked, unless you have tried it for a while? This glorification of experience in the present moment without regard to future consequences also reveals a pessimism about a meaningful future. The Rubinites, like the Epicureans, are really afraid of the passage of time. They have no faith in time and no patience with it.

During the era when the Romans dominated Judea, many Jews despaired of a meaningful future also. They banded together to form a group known as the Essenes. The Essenes said, "The Romans have deprived us of a meaningful life in the present, and we cannot hope to overthrow them. Surely there is no hope for a meaningful future on this earth. Let us channel our passions, then, and prepare for the life to come, for surely God will soon wash away the evil that men do on this earth." The Essenes were monastic Jews who tried to live the purest possible life, avoiding the normal pleasures of this world and preparing for the spiritual life of the hereafter.

Early Christianity has a great deal in common with the Essenes. Early Christian life, as we know from St. Paul, also despaired of the value of time in this world. It is better that you refrain from sexual relations as I do, taught St. Paul, and that you do not marry. For the early Christians, the end of the world, the end of time was near at hand. The monastic life took root much more deeply amongst Christians than amongst Jews.

The Essenes were a small minority party amongst the Judeans. The Pharisees were the majority party, and most of the people followed their teachings. The Pharisees had an entirely different view of time. We cannot despair about the future on this earth, taught the Pharisees, because if we did, we would betray the past. The present may not be without its pain, said the Pharisees, but we must salvage what joy we can from it and cherish it. The present, according to <sup>the</sup> Pharisees, is a cross section of the past and the future. The present is the trustee of the past and the foundation of the future. Therefore, said the Pharisees, the present is sacred, both for its own sake and for the sake of the past and the future.

The Pharisees taught that we must act in each moment as if that moment and that deed would be the turning point in the world from evil to justice, from death to life. Like the Epicureans amongst the Greeks, the Pharisees treasured the present moment, but for different reasons. The Epicureans looked upon the present as the only meaningful moment in time. The Pharisees said that all time is holy, and the present is the more holy because of its organic relationship to the past and the future.

Looked at from one perspective, Judaism is that religion which teaches us to use time meaningfully. Time, as we all know, is broken up into segments, into zones, into seasons. There is the season of day and the season of night. Judaism teaches us to use each of these seasons in terms of its particular opportunities. Instead of fretting that the sun does not shine at night, one sage taught, be grateful for the night and the opportunity to be with your family and to rest. There is the season of summer and the season of winter. Instead of complaining about the cold of winter, this same sage taught, be grateful that in the winter the earth is regrouping its powers and preparing for the outburst of springtime. Use time wisely, our sages taught, for we are like a child that grasps a sunbeam. When he opens his hand, he is surprised to find it empty and the brightness is gone.

The English poet Wordsworth bemoaned the swift flight of time that takes us from childhood to maturity and old age. He wrote, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy, shades of the prison house begin to close upon the growing boy, but he beholds the light, and whence it flows, he sees it in his joy. The youth, who daily farther from the east must travel, still is nature's priest and by the vision splendid is on his way attended. At length the man perceives it die away, and fade into the light of common day." "Heaven lies about us in our infancy," wrote the poet, "at length the man perceives it die away."

Wordsworth wished that adults could have the naive love of nature and of life that the child has, and he perceived that we became more melancholy as we grew in years. Wordsworth felt that the visions of youth "are yet the master light of all our seeing." They are the basis of our faith and optimism. Our Hasidic Rabbis of the 18th Century shared this view. They said that like children we should not be afraid to demand that the world satisfy our needs. We should have faith, the Hasidim taught, that we are the children of a great King who loves each of us separately.

Americans seem to worship youth more than they worship God. We all try to look and to act young. We begin to hate ourselves as we grow old, and we come to believe that life in our later years has little meaning. But the poet Robert Browning saw life differently. Browning spent much time with the Jews of England,

and he composed a famous poem dedicated to a Rabbi Ben Ezra. He quotes the Rabbi as saying, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made...youth shows but half. Trust God, see all, nor be afraid." Browning's Rabbi was full of optimism about growing old, for he taught that the flesh is only one part of humankind. The spirit is the other equally significant part. The Rabbi is quoted as saying, "As the bird wings and sings, let us cry, 'All good things are ours...Therefore, I summon age to grant youth's heritage.'" The Rabbi concludes, "Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure..."

Robert Browning, through this Rabbi, speaks Judaically. The meaning of any season of time depends upon one's perspective, and the Jewish perspective is that God has a plan for our seasons that undergirds each of them with hope. "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be," said the Rabbi. Browning's Rabbi was trying to tell us, among other things, that the mature person has a wisdom and a character that a young person cannot have, just as a young person has advantages an older person cannot have. A young person may run faster and be able to adjust to changes more quickly. An older person may well have a knowledge and a tolerance that only experience can bring. The truth is that each of life's seasons has its virtues, and the trick is to use the season wisely and well.

I shall always remember a story that Rabbi Chefitz once told me when he served us as Associate Rabbi. Rabbi Chefitz described his actions when he goes on a sea diving adventure. "At first," said the Rabbi, "when I dive into the water with a full tank of oxygen, I swim quickly all over the ocean floor trying to see all that I can as quickly as possible, ranging far and wide." "Then," said the Rabbi, "as my oxygen supply nears its end, I become more quiet. I locate one particular place of interest, and almost without moving, I peer intently into one piece of coral rock or at one fish. "It is then," said the Rabbi, "that I first begin to appreciate the beauty of the small things that are under the sea." In old age, we might not be able to move about as widely or as quickly as when we were young, but precisely because we have to stay in one place, we may see more in that place than we ever dreamed was there.

Time, you see, is related to speed, and speed may reduce the value of time. For example, you cannot see the little local things while you are travelling in an airplane. Travel by car can be much more interesting precisely because you are going slower, and walking has its rewards that driving a car can never give you. When you travel by car from Miami or California, there are a million things to stop and see. You can see Disney World going north, you can stop in New Orleans for Mardi Gras. You can make a stop at Houston, one of America's booming cities, and then swing north to Phoenix and the desert, the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, etc. But when you get into a plane from Miami to Los Angeles or San Francisco, you miss all of that, as if those places do not exist. You travel more quickly by plane, but you miss many wonderful experiences as you travel. Speed in travel has its rewards, but it also robs you of certain realities. The wise person has to use his time in accordance with his plan for his life. He has to use his time purposefully, for time is holy.

You may recall the story that has been making the rounds in recent years. The story applies perfectly to what we are saying. The pilot of a plane going from New York to Miami across the Atlantic at night, in a storm, suddenly puts on the microphone and announces to his passengers, "I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that our compass is not working, and we have no idea where we are or in what direction we are heading. The good news is that we are maintaining our forward speed of 600 miles an hour." Many of us share a problem with the people in that plane. We have lost our compass, if we ever had it, and we have no flight plan, but we are going forward at an intensive speed. Time has no meaning unless it is used in connection with a flight plan and a compass. Judaism offers both.

By way of helping us to fill our year with meaningful events, the developers of Judaism have prepared a calendar which lays out for us a series of observation points by which we might direct our annual flight. The calendar begins with Rosh Hashanah. It is as if we were given a map which says, start your journey here. Rosh Hashanah is an excellent starting point because according to our tradition, the world was created on this day. On this day, God tells us that no matter how bad things may be, don't give up hope, because all the power that made for the first creation exists now and is at work transforming the world into a happy and beautiful place. Sure, there are wars and disease, but if you do not despair, you will find that new beginnings are possible. Stay in the fight. Sure, there is trouble between husband and wife, between parents and children; sure there is crime and murder, but don't despair. Stay in the fight, and you will see that there are unseen forces which will come to your aid. Rosh Hashanah is the time to recharge one's batteries with faith and hope by hooking into the Source of faith and hope.

The holiday of Sukkot is the next observation point on the flight plan of the Jewish calendar. On Sukkot, the original Thanksgiving holiday, we are asked to pause from our hectic routine to think about the miracle of growth. In most parts of the world, Sukkot is the time of the fall harvest, and in Jewish life we build a Sukkah and hang the many examples of miraculous fruit and vegetables on the ceiling and walls of the frail hut. Rejoice, the theme of Sukkot tells us, for the spirit of growth abounds! When you are melancholy, our ancestors said, think about the miracle of the seed, which, buried in its tomb in the earth, is resurrected as food and sustenance for the human race.

One of my favorite holidays, or observation points, in the Jewish calendar is the holiday of Simchat Torah, which comes at the very end of Sukkot. On this holiday we read from two Torahs in the synagogue. We read the very end of the first Torah and, without pause, we read the beginning of the second Torah. The end of the first Torah tells us that Moses became old and died. The beginning of the second Torah tells us that God created the world. In the Jewish tradition of time, death and creation are bound together. It tells us that if you, like Moses, dedicate your time to doing God's work, you are bound up in the never ending process of creation, and for you there can never really be an end of time.

Judaism seeks to remind us of the holiness of time by a whole string of holy days or observation points like Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Purim, Passover, and Shavuot, each of them with its distinctive theme and yet all pointing towards our ultimate destination, which is a meaningful life as God would have us live it. The holidays mean nothing, of course, unless we celebrate them. As we employ their rituals and rehearse their themes, we are reoriented to our path of flight. We are pulled back on the flight path, as it were, so that we can avoid the storms and wind shears along the way.

The most significant observation point for Jews, however, is the holiday that comes the most often, Shabbat. The Sabbath is the most important Jewish holiday, our most precious compass point, precisely because it occurs once a week, often enough to have a strong impact on our life. If you wanted to become a jogger, you would not go out and jog only once a year. You would have to jog a little every day or, at the very least, several times a week. Similarly, if you are serious about trying to be Jewish, you can't come to synagogue once a year and think you are being Jewish. Being Jewish is a matter of viewing time in a certain way. Time, we say, is precious. It is to be used for personal and group enhancement. It is to be used for these purposes regularly, which means weekly, and even better, daily.

On the Sabbath, our tradition says, we are to rehearse the ideal world. That is to say, we are to act as if the Messiah had come, as if violence and prejudice had been conquered, as if kindness and compassion ruled. On the Sabbath day, our tradition says, we are to seek and grant forgiveness. We are to act as if we had achieved the Garden of Eden.

To help promote this attitude on the Sabbath, our tradition developed certain ceremonies which I believe help us rehearse the ideal world, and I commend them to you. I have described one particular ceremony in a pamphlet I published several years ago entitled, "Taking on a New Soul, A Recept for Young Lovers." (The pamphlet is available from my secretary.) I require all of my newly married couples to promise me that they will observe this ceremony throughout their marriage. Let me take a few moments to describe the ceremony and to commend it to you.

This particular ceremony is designed for twilight on Friday evening, a moment when regular time, as we know it, becomes suspended, and we enter into the idealized world, a world without time. At twilight on Friday evening, the woman of the household is asked to light the candles. Candles are the spiritual symbol par excellence, because they give heat and light even while they are themselves consumed. As soon as the woman lights the candles, our tradition says, the husband is required to sing her a love song. The tradition supplies the song and the melody. It is taken from the Biblical Book of Proverbs, "Aset chayil mi yimtzah, A woman of valor who can find, for she is more precious than rubies." Now, I am not suggesting that you, if you are the male, must sing your wife that love song or any song. I am suggesting that you follow the tradition which requires that the male express his love for his wife at precisely this moment. Some of you may be able to do that with a song, some with a few words, some with a physical gesture. The point is to employ your own creative style in grasping the opportunity this tradition supplies.

After the father sang a love song to his wife in the tradition, he then gathered his children around him, embraced them, and expressed his love for them. If you saw "Fiddler on the Roof," you watched the custom. Tevya put his hand on the head of each child and sang, "May the Lord protect and defend you, etc." The music was created for "Fiddler," the words are traditional. Again, I am not suggesting that every father has to follow the tradition in the specifics of this Shabbat custom. I am saying that it would be a wonderful thing if each father could bring himself, at this precious moment when time has been suspended, to let his child know that he loves him or her. I have hundreds of couples performing this ritual today, and uniformly they tell me it adds a dimension to their lives.

What our ancestors were trying to tell us with this Shabbat ritual is that Shabbat is the time for rehearsing our love relationships, and twilight, erev Shabbat, is the setting for the love moment. I think they were also trying to tell us that love is the bridge between this world and the next, between the world of strife and the world of relaxed and cooperative relationships.

Our religion teaches us to try to transform the meaning of time from a zone in which we try to acquire things to a zone in which we share things with others. Ken y'hi r'tzon, so may it be, with help from each of us.