

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2016

IT'S ABOUT TIME

A non- Jew attends the synagogue with his friend on Rosh Hashanah for the first time. He participates in the entire service, but afterwards asks his friend to explain a few things.

Why did we eat apples and honey at the end of the service? Ah, that's easy, to celebrate the sweetness of the New Year.

And why do they blow that horn? Ah, the shofar- we blow it to wake up, to announce the New Year.

And why do we rise when we open the ark? To express our sense of awe before God, especially in this time when we want to be inscribed for another year in the Book of life.

And why does the Rabbi take off his watch, and place it on the podium before speaking? Oh that, that doesn't mean anything! But it does. It means a great deal! On Rosh Hashanah, its ALL about the watch. It's all about TIME.

My children have pointed out that I have "a very interesting attitude towards time". Every clock in the house, every watch that I own, tells a different time. The big black and white clock hanging on my kitchen wall is always set ten-no maybe twelve- or is it thirteen? minutes ahead. I hope it's the latter because I am already running five minutes late. I make the mental adjustment, but never know exactly what time it is. The clock in my car is set ahead as well, but not so far ahead so that I can't begin to get a grip on "reality". My wristwatch- well, it never quite recovered from a trip to another time zone. And then, of course, there is the time indicated in big numbers on my iphone, which I regard the ultimate truth, only to be looked at in moments of extreme fear of tardiness.

Based on our own perceptions, time passes slowly, or rushes by. The Rabbi could take off his-or her watch (times change), making this a very slow evening. On the other hand, we live in an era when time, and its demands, has speeded up exponentially. There are still only 24 hours in a day, but the demands on my time are now relentless. The message “You’ve got mail” is no longer heralded with great joy! In fact, we have eliminated that cheery message altogether.

Time appears to speed by so quickly that we attempt to freeze and hold it with that grand arbiter of time, the cell phone. We snap photos of our last meal and send them round the world, rather than just enjoying the tactile pleasures of these wonderful ingredients, tastefully combined. My cell phone rushes to keep pace with the changes of my two-year-old grandson, no moment left unclicked. Like a tree in the forest, if I didn’t record it, did it really happen?

Linear time, we know, is an agreed upon construct. I know that I am breaking the rules and fooling myself as I set my watch ahead. I know that Greenwich Mean Time provides the benchmark time for Western civilization by agreement. We all simply agree to agree- except in cases of daylight savings time, which confuses everyone around the globe. Leap forward step back? Step back leap forward?

Linear time is based on a construct, an idea. Linear time just marches forward, each moment filled with its own unique potential. Cyclical time, however, endlessly repeats and returns, month after month, season after season.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times- the days and the years. And God made

the two great lights, the greater to illuminate the day, and the lesser light to illuminate the night (Gen1: 16-17).

Our ancestors looked at the heavens and lived by cyclical time, which endlessly repeats as nature completes cycle after cycle, in a rhythm ordained by the sun, the moon and the stars. Fall turns into winter turns into spring turns into fall all over again. We Jews are the People of the Moon, determining our months and seasons by the passage of the moon in as it waxes and wans. When is Rosh Hashanah? Well, it depends on the new moon of Tishrei. The entire Jewish holiday cycle, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Sukkot, Chanukah, Pesach and Shavout is calculated on the sighting of this new moon, right outside our windows tonight. This evening, the start of the month of Tishrei, always begins our Jewish New Year.

It is comforting to us to know that in this world of relentless change, our festivals remain constant. The secular date of the Jewish Holidays may be early or late, but the Jewish holidays always reappear in their exact same moon season, forming the rhythm of our lives.

As Jews, we live in both linear and cyclical time. We consult two competing calendars, one based on the sun and one based on the moon. No wonder my watch is a bit off! Even our Yartzeit list is confusing-do you want the Hebrew date or the secular date? If we know Grandpa's birthday, but not the Hebrew date, but we know the Hebrew date when he died, what do we put on the headstone? Of course we're neurotic.

The Ancients of all cultures marked their days according to the cyclical time as indicated by the sun, the moon and the stars. Our modern concept of linear time, relentlessly marching forward, simply did not exist. The sun and moon and stars were all worshiped as Deities, the Gods and Goddesses of time that brought planting and harvest, life and death. According to our Torah, the story of the Jewish people began when our

Father Abraham looked upwards and asked “*Mi Baal Habayit?* Who is in charge here”? He gazed, and understood that there must be a One God, a prime mover, an infinite being beyond the beyond the stars and the moon, beyond the limitations and markings of time. Abraham looks up, asks the question, and God says, “I thought you’d never ask. You, I can work with!” Lech Lecha, God says, and Abraham becomes the first Jew.

At this moment, when the sliver of the new moon hangs in the sky, Rosh Hashanah the first of Tishrei 5777, Jewish New Year, October 2, 2016, we exist in three time zones at once.

Rosh Hashanah is late-It’s already October. Rosh Hashanah is on time, exactly as indicated by that sliver of moon. And at this very moment, we are also entering the zone of God’s time, infinite time. The rabbi removes her watch because we are now in an “*et ratzon*,” a propitious time, when the gates of heaven are open. We are now in God’s time, soul time. It is at the intersection of these time zones, the infinite and the finite, where we can ask God for forgiveness, and, it is said, even reverse the some of the damage we may have done in our limited lifetime. The windows, or the gates, remain open until the closing hour of Neilah, ten days from now, as we seek to repent and reorder our lives. If we have tried our best to reset our lives, and reach out to those from whom we must ask forgiveness, then *Etzem HaYom M’Kaper*. The very day of Yom Kippur brings forgiveness, if we have truly brought our lives, in all humility into that sacred space.

Every week, we have an opportunity to leave our ordinary, secular time behind, and enter sacred, infinite time. This has been called the “Gift of the Jews”. On Shabbat we put a pause on the relentless time pressures of our daily lives. If we choose,

we can spend twenty-five hours in holy time, infinite time, God's time. We start and end with sunset, but a watch isn't really necessary for the time in-between.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the greatest Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century, wrote:

“ Judaism is a religion of time, aiming at the sanctification of time. Shabbat provides the nexus, the connecting point between holy time and holy space, where the infinity of God's time interfaces with the days of the week. The Holy time of Shabbat exists to bring our consciousness back to the source of life every seven days, so that the spark of renewal can bring new vitality and connection to our lives. The Shabbat gives us a chance to experience holy time. Our task, is to bring that consciousness into the work days of our week, and thereby sanctify our lives”.
(REPEAT)

Only now do I really understand why we love Shabbat on the Beach. It's not just about the food, the wine, and the company. As we stand and watch the sun sink into the sea, and look upwards at the stars and the moon making their way across the sky, we know that we are at one with the primordial moment when “ *God set them in the expanse of the sky... to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness.*” We look up, and like Abraham, perceive the oneness of God's infinite, timeless energy as it intersects with the markers of time; the sun, the moon and the stars. Who is in charge here? We are grateful to the Holy One, who made heaven and earth. We stand at the intersection of time and space, right here in our own backyard. We are so blessed.

Twenty years ago, long before we dragged those first chairs out onto Westward Beach, I wrote the following:

We are in the presence of a great teacher of time, the Pacific Ocean, our Source of life on these shores. What better guide could we have to the mysteries of the rhythms of eternal life, the ebb and flow of time as it laps between the shores of the Temporal and the Eternal? Each wave is separate and distinct in its shape and pattern, yet the ocean is a unified whole. Separation and unity are both part of the greater reality that is the sea. The only constant, we are reminded, is change. Hour by hour the sea responds to and creates patterns that run the gamut from the glass-like calm of a early Malibu morning, to the stormy winds of a hurricane sent northward up the coast from Mexico. One cannot always predict when life's storms will suddenly swell up, buffeting us with illness or loss. Life's timing, like that of the El Nino that threatens our shores, (this was in 1997) is not our to determine.

There have been so many storms in our lives since that time. So many nights on our blessed Malibu beach watching the sun sink into the sea.

When I first moved to Malibu our friend Ruth Rubenstein gave me a small care package, and in it was the Malibu bible. As most of you know, its a little green book (now blue and white) that tells you the exact moment of low and high tide each day. Those of us who live near the beach consult those books daily as if it were the Torah from Sinai. How else will I know when I can walk on the beach? The term wet/dry takes on a whole new meaning here in Malibu. If I want to walk on the shore, I must honor the tides as pulled by the moon, or my 7:00 am walk may be underwater.

Twenty years have passed. Ruth Rubenstein, despite all of life's storms, is still here. Some of the beach is not, as we face the

changes wrought by climate change, and we do not know what the next twenty years will bring.

On that same Rosh Hashanah, 1997, I shared an observation about the tide charts that has remained with me, and perhaps with some of you as well:

The lowest tides, called minus tides, are marked in red. It occurs to me that in “Malibu Bible” terms, we are now, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, at the Red Minus Tide of the Jewish year. This is the moment when the sea recedes, revealing a whole world of tide pools and rock formations, organic life forms and seaweed forests that are usually covered by the ocean’s waters. At this moment of poise, of balance, it is as if the Divine waters have receded, bringing us back to the Source of Life. At this propitious, sacred time, we can see clearly what lies underneath us, before God allows waters of life to rush back in and replenish us with a new vitality, a New Year.

What do we see underneath the surface in our Red Minus Tide moment? If we take the time for introspection, a moment of quiet to re-evaluate our lives, we will see the slippery rocks that lurk below. We will see the patterns that have held us captive, enabling us to repeat the same mistakes, year after year. We will see the barnacles of old resentments that lie just under the surface, releasing small bubbles of anger whenever our buttons are pushed. If we look deeper, we will see the deep troughs of old wounds, and the bedrock of long-held beliefs about our limitations and the limitations of the others. We are given a glimpse of what lies beneath the surface in order to help us to reassess and re-evaluate our lives in this moment of sacred, Holy time.

Rosh Hashanah is our opportunity to change. But before we can change, we must empty ourselves out, making room for

new energy to pour into our lives. The stale, the old, the energy that no longer serves us must be released and swept out to sea.

This is the process of T'shuvah. T'shuvah, the key word for the High Holy Days, means "to return". What energies, what angers, what false stories will return to engulf us again when the water sweeps back and another year begins its cycle?

In these precious ten days, when the quality of our lives for the year is held in the balance, we are asked to repent the actions that have led us to accumulate the barnacles and slippery moss that cover the shoals of our lives. We must scrape. We must clean. We must reach out and say-aloud- I am sorry -to those whom we may have harmed by our actions or our thoughtlessness. One by one, we must pry loose the fungus, the barnacles that no longer serve us. We must make space for forgiveness, towards ourselves and towards others. If we allow murky resentments to fester beneath the surface, there will be so much debris that we soon have nowhere left to stand. We are given this time, a propitious time, to literally clean up our act before entering a New Year.

Here on the shores of Malibu, the sea has remained our constant teacher and guide. In the words of the poet Gerald Stern:

Dear Waves, what will you do for me this year?

Will you drown out my scream?

Will you let me rise through the fog? Will you fill me with that old salt feeling?

Will you let me take my long steps in the cold sand?

Lucky life is like this. Lucky there is an ocean to come to.

Lucky you can judge yourself in this water.

Lucky you can be purified over and over again.

Lucky there is the same cleanliness for everyone.

Lucky life is like that. Lucky life. Oh lucky life.

Oh lucky, lucky life.

This year, at our last Shabbat on the Beach, and the last Shabbat on the Beach that I will lead before becoming your Rabbi Emeritus, heaven and earth came together in a heart-stopping moment. It was the evening “The Dolphins Danced the Hora.”

There were well over a hundred people on the beach, young and old, members and guests, and even thirty students from a Religion class at Pepperdine. We stood, as always, and watched the sun melt like molten lava into the sea. *Eli, Eli*, we sang, *I pray that these things never end. The sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens, the prayer of the heart.*

We bowed to the Shabbos Bride, wearing her skirts of white foam, and raised our cups in gratitude not only for the wine but for all creation. The clock was counting down, as there were but a few moments of daylight left, but we had already entered God’s time, boundless time. “Dance”? The Cantor signaled to me.” Why not”, I said. It’s our last night, even in the dark.

Usually, a small group comes forward, and everyone smiles and watches them dance. This time, everyone rushed to join the circle, and soon there were a hundred people dancing the hora together, old and young alike. Suddenly, I looked up, and there they were: An entire pod of dolphins, perhaps twenty of them, had come to dance. They leapt and flipped their tails to the music, dancing right along with us. In the words of Psalm 148:

Praise the Lord O You who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths... youths and maidens alike, old and young together.

There we were, young and old, humans and beloved creatures of the sea, dancing together in praise of creation. We had entered the Holy of Holies, right here on Westward Beach.

A close friend of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reports that before his death in 1972, Heschel suffered a near fatal heart attack. When he regained consciousness, Heschel said that his first feelings were not of despair or anger, but only of gratitude to God for life, and for every moment that he lived. "Take me, O Lord", Heschel said. "I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime". Exhausted by the effort, he paused for a moment and then added:

I DID NOT ASK FOR SUCCESS, I ASKED FOR WONDER, AND
YOU HAVE GIVEN IT TO ME

I did not ask for success, I asked for wonder. And you have ALL given it to me.

I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to be your rabbi in a place of such wonder and awe. I am so grateful to all of you for sharing the wonder of life with me.

Lucky, lucky life.

May we all be inscribed for another year in the Book of Life.