

Parshat Bo

Time After Time

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Parshat Bo chronicles the dramatic redemption of the Jewish people from a two hundred-year nightmare of backbreaking slavery and oppression. The great “night of redemption” is punctuated by celebratory rituals which ultimately become incorporated into the Pesach seder. However, before the Jews are informed of these ceremonies, they are instructed to reconfigure their calendar to designate the month of Nissan – not Tishrei- as the launch of the calendar year. This scheduling change delivers two lessons: Firstly, it installs Pesach at the start of each year highlighting the seminal nature of our liberation from slavery and our historical Covenant with G-d. Pesach is celebrated at the launch of a new calendar year, showcasing the importance of historical memory.

However, this mandate provides a more subtle message: Redeemed people actively “manage” their time rather than living outside or time as “victims of time”. Slaves possess no control over their daily schedule and, by extension, cannot administer or budget their time. Nights and days become indistinguishable as slaves live in perpetual survival mode. In addition to the absence of time management, slaves endure “time shrinkage”. Normal people meant to live ‘continuous’ time where present experiences are driven by our past and inform our future. A life of oppression provides no hope for the future and little interest in long term “crafting” of future. Crushing conditions in life also severs us from our past. Whatever successes and achievements we experienced in the past only render our current suffering more depressing. Seeking to avoid this all this frustration, we lock ourselves into our current state removed from our past and disjointed from any future. Oppressed slaves are trapped in a prison of timelessness without control over their schedule and without a sense of time continuity. The passage from slavery to freedom demands a reorientation of how we experience time on both a daily level and throughout the totality of our lives.

Oppressive tyrannies come in many forms and in many varieties, but the most overpowering ones are “faceless”. Modern man is no longer enslaved by a human tyrant, who strips us of time management or time ‘continuity’. However, we do inhabit a ruthless “time prison” - one which we have crafted on our very own. Technology, industrialization and mass agricultural farming have relieved humans from the difficult menial labor which saddled our ancestors and occupied much of their time. Additionally, mechanization of household chores such as cleaning, cooking, and laundering has liberated women in particular, from previously burdensome domestic chores. Yet, somehow, surprisingly, we reside in a world with even greater challenges to our time management. Technology – which has liberated time has also introduced unprecedented time pressures inconceivable to past generations. The bar of “productivity” has been raised high forcing us to work harder just to insure “output”. Scientists have traced what is known as a “productivity paradox”: As investment in technology – particularly information technology- spikes, actual productivity declines. These statistics are astonishing, but our own “experience” verifies this condition; in the modern world of productivity and efficiency, we work disproportionately hard just to keep pace with the maddening challenges of a frenetic world. “Communication technology” has created busier schedules and less ‘time’. Consider how many ‘contacts’ an average person interacts with on a daily basis compared to the amount of interactions engaged in merely fifty years ago. Similarly, imagine the volume of information and media which we process on a daily basis, given that our information flow is no longer “controlled” by organized media outlets but dispatched through social media. The torrent of information and communication has inundated our lives and compromised our time availability.

Of course, we live under time pressures not only because of the busy world we occupy but also because of the entertainment culture which has arisen in modern society. In 2018 most Americans spent up to six hours per day engaged in leisure activities; while some of this time was dedicated to developmentally vital experiences such as socializing and sports, much of it was dedicated to classic forms of “entertainment”- watching TV, surfing the internet, following sports and listening to music. Technology has delivered easily accessible, round-the-clock entertainment. Steve Jobs was heralded as an American icon or hero for the ingenious products he pioneered. In reality, most of these products merely

enabled greater consumption of culture and entertainment while robbing us of more and more of our 'time'. In this respect, he was more akin to Pharo than he was to Newton. A person who engages in six hours of entertainment, coupled with seven to eight hours of daily sleep, retains less than half of their 24 hours for "actual life".

A further time strain has emerged from dramatic changes in housing and transportation which have enabled people to live at distances from their workplaces. We live in comfortable suburban communities while commuting to our places of work in financial and industrial city centers. Without the revolutions in the automobile industry, such demographic patterns would be impossible. Indeed these living and working arrangements were unavailable to previous generations who necessarily lived closer to their workplaces. The resulting suburban sprawl has overtaxed existing infrastructure, and we all suffer suffocating traffic which further robs us of our time. Everyone complains about their morning commute and terrible traffic, but, in reality, most large cities are plagued by overbearing traffic congestion. You may be surprised to hear that a morning commute from Gush Etzion to Yerushalayim usually takes around an hour and a half. Traffic – a product of technology and changing living patterns- has further robbed us of time.

Basically, we have crafted a world in which, ironically, we possess less and less time while facing powerful technologies which aggressively vie for whatever precious time we do possess. We occupy a 'time prison' with invisible bars but one which is far more unforgiving than ancient Egypt. To live truly free in our world we must pay attention to how we manage our time.