Today. Everyday.

Change and the Challenge of Life

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

*There is nothing permanent except change*

- Heraclitus

.

It is told of a king who once offered his beautiful daughter and half his kingdom to anyone who could provide for him something that would make him happy when he was sad and sad when he was happy. Despite death being the consequence to anyone who tried but failed, all the knights and nobles vied for the prize and, one by one, they suffered their fate.

Everything brought before the king accomplished one or the other of the terms – either it cheered him up, or made him sad. Never did it do both.

Finally, a pauper approached the throne. The king’s courtiers tried to dissuade him from trying. After all, how could he succeed when such great warriors and wise men before him had failed? But he insisted on going forward. When he stood before the king, he bowed and handed him a small box. The king took the box and opened it. Then he stood and declared in a loud voice, “This man has won the prize!”

What was in the small box that was worth such a prize? Just a ring, upon which was inscribed the words “This too shall pass.”

The passage of time changes everything. This morning becomes this afternoon becomes this evening, becomes another yesterday. Can we do nothing to stop the relentless passage of time? We hear it constantly. Tick, tick, tick. In equal, perfectly differentiated, precise segments, moving on. One second after another. Tick, tick, tick. A minute. An hour. One day. Another. Then a week. A month. A year. A lifetime. “The grass withers, the flower fades; because the breath of the Lord blows upon it – surely the people is grass.” (Isaiah 40:7)

We pass as quickly as the blink of an eye.

When God identifies Himself by name from the Burning Bush, His name is derived from the Hebrew root “to be”. I am as I always will be. Unchanging. Untouched by time. Perfect.

Perfection stands outside of time.

God is perfect, beyond time but He has created us to be the opposite; we have been created to be subjective, to engage with the world and with each other in such a way as to animate and give meaning to our experiences within the context of time. To give meaning is to approach perfection only insofar as it doing so approximates stopping time and allowing us to be, for a brief moment, unchanging.

Of course, this implies a contradiction. If perfection is beyond time and, therefore, unchanging, how can we, creatures of time and change, subject to the relentless movement of time, ever approach perfection? How can we approach “timelessness”?

We do this by acknowledging that, while “time” is monotonous in its sameness, Jewish time is anything but uniform. The week is a continual crescendo to the Sabbath. With the Sabbath’s arrival, we celebrate joyously only to reluctantly say farewell at *Havdalah* before we start the cycle again. The Jewish year is an *uneven* temporal landscape, where festivals and holidays, solemn observances and fasts alter the meaning and significance of what might otherwise be just another day or season.

In our lives, certain moments and days are imbued with more significance than others. The birth of a child or grandchild. A wedding.

While our modern culture tells us to “stop and smell the roses” (even as it pushes us relentless forward!) it is not so much that we need to stop what we are doing so much as we have to *prioritize* what we are doing so that our lives have value and meaning. Our teachings are clear. Rather than put aside all tasks, there are two tasks for which we should feel an unrelenting urgency – to learn Torah and to repent. The Torah is clear about this urgency in the *Sh’ma*: “These words, which I command you *this day*, make them as a sign upon your heart and between your eyes…”

Our Sages comment that the word *hayom*, “this day” means that “the Torah should be ever fresh in your mind, as though you received the Torah today.” As for the duty to repent, Rambam teaches, “A man should always regard himself as if his death were imminent and think that he may die this very hour, while still in a state of sin.

“This day”! Now! Each day *matan Torah*. Each day Yom Kippur – and with it a chance to claim the day, find the moment and bring meaning into our lives.

This day. This moment. This has the potential for perfection in our lives.

During no period are we any more conscious of the movement of time *toward* a festival as we are now, during the *s’fira*, the counting of the Omer. Each day, as we count the period from the second day of Passover through Shavuot. Each day, rather than measuring the ticking of time, we are to mark the day with the counting of the Omer. Our *s’firah*, or counting, is celebrated first on the thirty-third of the counting, *Lag BaOmer* and at the culmination of the counting, Shavuot.

Why “pause” at Lag BaOmer to celebrate when the Torah makes no mention of the holiday? One reason for the holiday is that it is the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Another, more prevalent reason to celebrate for Modern Jews, is the link between Lag BaOmer and the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Roman Empire.

In both cases, we see a clear example of finding meaning and significance in a moment in Jewish time and, in that moment, a reflection of eternity and perfection.

We count time and find meaning in the events that define moments in time.

When we anticipate and prepare for an occasion, our actions and our thoughts bring us into ever sharper focus on the event and the celebration. If these moments simply “happen upon us” then the meaning and significance that we find would be fleeting at best, an accident of sorts. But when we make the moment meaningful, then the moment has power. Indeed, the occasion itself can be seen as a culmination of anticipatory moments. Isn’t this the sense we have when we celebrate a *siyyum*?

In Judaism, we learn that our accomplishments are reason for joy and religious satisfaction. For a religious and learned Jew, there is no greater joy than that found in celebrating a *siyyum*; celebrating the privilege of having had the opportunity to complete a significant part of Torah.

And yet… and yet… we find that we never enjoy *unbridled* joy when we celebrate a *siyyum*. At the *siyyum* we understand the reason that the king proclaimed the pauper the winner. This too shall pass.

We cannot hold the “perfection” of the moment because time slips away from us, like sand through our fingers. Even in our moments of joy, when time seems to be the repository of such powerful meaning, time is still time. It cannot be what it is not. It moves on, relentless. So, in addition to our accomplishments, there is the awareness of finality, of passing a moment of which the long road of life has fewer and fewer ahead.

Our ability to anticipate is diminished not by the anticipation itself but by our awareness that the road ahead is shortened. It is a blessing to celebrate an eighty-fifth birthday but can one celebrate such a birthday without the awareness that there cannot be more than a handful of such moments yet ahead?

The genuine Jew wants not only to celebrate the joys of yesterday, but even more to anticipate the hopes of tomorrow. But the awareness of time continuing cannot help but begin to color that anticipation.

This too shall pass. It cannot help but be so. As Jews, we impose an “unevenness” on time, we give moments meaning and, in doing so, seek to slow it down if only for a second so that we might glimpse unchanging perfection.