What Changes When We Count?

by

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We count the *Omer* and mark the days from our redemption from slavery to receiving the Torah. We are told to count down the days but what does our counting accomplish? It neither quickens the days nor lengthens them. Time is unaffected by us. It moves on, second by second, tick by tick, regardless of our efforts. The future becomes the present becomes the past. Over and over and over again.

And yet we are told to count.

Many years ago, Mick Jagger first sang, “Time, time, time is on my side…” The sentiment expresses, of course, the naivete of youth. As the years pass, as the future becomes present becomes past, we cannot help but be aware that time is *not* on our side, is not on *anyone’s* side; it is not on the side of anything ephemeral.

Time is neither our ally nor our enemy. It is, like the mechanical movement of an eternal clock, unrelenting. It is the marker by which we measure our days and it is the fundamental reality of corporeal existence.

Time moves on, unchanging, and yet we, carried along by it, change constantly. With each moment and each day, as we transform from infant, to young man, to old man we move closer and closer to the end of the finite number of days our tradition teaches have been allotted to us.

God gives us each a predetermined number of minutes, days and hours in which to live – the exact amount of time needed to complete our mission. Not a single moment too many, not a single moment too few. The *Zohar* teaches that, “Each and every day does its work.” Each day we must show some accomplishment. Indeed, each *hour* we should do so. And that accomplishment must be the sanctification of God’s name.

The ticking of the clock is unending and unrelenting. Time does not give meaning to our lives. However, God’s grace is that we can give meaning to time. Unlike the beasts of the field, we can choose what we *do* with the time allotted us; we can choose to bring meaning *to* time.

We can count.

Time may be a monotonous landscape but we, like a gardener, can cultivate that landscape. It is not time that has meaning but how we engage with God’s *mitzvot* in time that gives time – and us - meaning.

By counting, we engage time consciously and mindfully. With each and every moment, we *choose* – for good or for evil; we choose and in choosing, we give meaning to our lives.

The beasts of the field are incapable of marking the passing of the days but we Jews are constantly aware of time and its significance; not its mere passing but *in that passing* our opportunity to honor God. With each circle of the sun, we can once again observe *mitzvot* we have not been able to observe since the year before – making *kiddush* on the first night of the *Yom Tov*, sitting in the *Sukkah* the first night, eating matzoh at the *Seder,* lighting candles the first night of Chanukah, reading the *Megillah* on Purim. We take note of these moments by reciting the *she’hechiyanu*. That is, we pause to recognize and thank God for allowing us to be alive and well, for allowing us to arrive at this moment, this *la’z’man hazeh*.

We are never more aware of the movement of time than we are in this season, when we pause each day to count the *Omer*. Day by day, week by week we count the temporal distance between slavery and Sinai, between pain and hope, between being lost and having meaning.

As we count, we learn again that experience is linear. Nothing happens “all at once”. The days accrue as we work toward our goals. We count the minutes and hours as we move toward our destination.

In doing so, we make each moment *matter*.

“The grass withers, the flower fades; because the breath of the Lord blows upon it – surely the people is grass.” (Isaiah 40:7)

Our lives are gone in what feels to be the blink of an eye.

When God identifies Himself by name from within the Burning Bush, the name by which He identifies himself is derived from the Hebrew root “to be”. Although often translated “I am who I am” it is more correctly translated, “I am as I always will be”. That is, God’s name speaks directly to a deep truth of God’s essence. He untouched by time. He is unchanged and unchanging. He is *beyond* time.

Perfect.

God exists outside of time. God is perfect. But He has created us to exist *in time*. In order to give our lives meaning, in order to approach perfection, we must approximate God’s reality of existing outside of time. We count and by counting we pause time for the briefest of moments and in doing so we glimpse what it means to be unchanging.

Time is always the same but “Jewish time” is not. Jewish time is dynamic and ever changing. The days of the week quicken as they move toward Shabbat and, with Shabbat’s arrival, we experience celebration. At *Havdalah*, time slows, and we reluctantly start the cycle again.

The secular year is an unending, unchanging landscape. The Jewish year is an *uneven* temporal landscape, dotted with festivals and holidays, solemn observances and fasts that alter the meaning and significance of what would otherwise be just another day or season.

In this way, Jewish days are not mere collections of hours. A day, *this* day, calls us to act; 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 moment, in its wholeness, has the potential for perfection in our lives. Catch it! Use it! Before it moves on to the next. Count it!

We are *passive* bystanders to secular time, but we are *active* participants in Jewish time.

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*. From the second day of Passover through Shavuot rather than measuring the ticking of time we mark the day with the counting of the *Omer*.

In Judaism, our accomplishments are reason for joy and 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*. Even at the *siyyum* we understand the moment will not last. Ultimately Jewish time also exists in secular time. We cannot hold on to the “perfection” of the moment. It slips away from us, like sand through our fingers. Even in our moments of joy, time is still time. It moves on, relentless. Even in moments of great joy, there is the awareness that the moment does not, *cannot*, last.

It cannot help but be so. As Jews, we count and in counting we impose an “unevenness” on time, we give moments meaning and, in doing so, seek to slow it down if only for the fleeting chance to glimpse unchanging perfection.