Time and Meaning

Each Second, Each Moment

by

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“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

Henry David Thoreau is unequivocal in his harsh assessment of the way in which most men move through their lives. The question is, How is his judgment relevant to our discussion of time?

I would suggest that the “desperation” that Thoreau refers to is the result of a life lived without meaning. Further, I would suggest that this lack of meaning is the result of a life lived enslaved to time, rather than in mastery of it.

It should not be this way. God would have us all live in mastery over time. God has created the world so that we can engage with it in a meaningful way. But we cannot do so unthinkingly. The natural world will overwhelm us.

To understand how, we need only consider time and space, those two components of Einstein’s famous continuum.

When we think of space, we consider physical dimension. A walled space ten feet by ten feet is one hundred square feet, like every other walled space ten feet by ten feet. However, if we consider a *particular* walled space ten feet by ten feet, say the bedroom where we grew up, then the space is profoundly different from every other walled space. It is *our* space, filled with our memories and the experiences of *our* life. In short, it has meaning to us.

How much more so time!

While even the dullest among us can appreciate that physical space varies – from valley to mountaintop, sea shore to the desert of Sinai – time flows out before us in an endless series of indistinguishable ticks of the clock. One second following the next, one minute after another, hour after hour, day after day, year after year. From birth until death. Tick, tick, tick.

We have to ask, Is there any way we can make one tick of the clock different from the previous one, or the next? Is there any way to imbue time itself with meaning? Is there any way to free ourselves from our “desperation”?

*Ha’chodesh ha’zeh lachem rosh chodashim –* “This month shall be for you the beginning of the months.” (Exodus 12:1) I emphasize what I think the verse intends to emphasize, for you. In this injunction, Moshe and Aaron are given the first *mitzvah* to proclaim *this* month, Nisan, as the first of the year. Okay, fine and good. God is giving Moshe and Aaron a calendar.

But why *lachem*?

Our sages also focused on this aspect of the injunction. The Talmud understands *lachem* to mean that the Bais Din HaGadol, the High Court in Jerusalem, was granted full authority to establish and regulate the calendar, to vary the lengths of the months and, if necessary, to declare a leap year. In other words, “*lachem*” teaches us that our calendar, our months, and our festivals do not simply happen, nor do they occur by God’s declaration. Rather, it is *our* involvement that tames the movement of time through the year.

Rosh Chodesh does not simply *happen*. It requires two witnesses to *see* and *observe* the new moon. Then, they must appear before the Beis Din and report the particulars of their witness. The Beis Din must then proclaim the Rosh Chodesh. Then, and only then, does the new month commence and with it, our festivals and sacrifices. Without this human involvement in time, there is no calendar, no festivals, no Jewish liturgical time.

*Lachem* teaches us that with this very first mitzvah of the Torah, the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hachodesh*, we are given mastery over time. For us, time is not a burden. We need not be weighted by desperation. The calendar and all its joys and mysteries are set by us!

How powerful this message must be to those of us confronted and bedeviled by the modern world! We live in a world of the *now*! Our many, efficient devices ever-quicken our step through our days. PDAs. iPads. Computers. Instant messaging. Microwave ovens.

“Time saving” devices.

Are they?

We are being crushed by the “need” do everything and to do it *now*. Time is our relentless master and it is moving faster and faster and faster. We have turned our backs on our mastery of time and instead we have allowed it to burden us, sapping it of meaning.

In a commentary on this verse, the Sforno explains that, as slaves, the Jewish People had not been master of their time. As free men, they were given the gift of time. *Hachodesh Hazeh lachem*!

Rav Soloveitchik taught that when the Jews left Egypt they had to “undertake the almost impossible task of metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a ‘nation of priests’.” While we were slaves in Egypt, we were exempt from time-bound mitzvot. Why? Because our time was not our own. However, once freed we were delivered the choice – and the power – to decide how to use our time; whether to sanctify it or waste it.

The first task in sanctifying time, in filling it with meaning rather than desperation, is becoming aware of how time dominates our lives. Most people are bowed low by the weight of time without even realizing it. They eat at dinnertime rather than when they are hungry. They wake up when their jobs demand it rather than when they have had enough sleep. They close their eyes when the television program is over rather than when they are tired.

Clocks and calendars are no longer tools allowing us to find meaning; they are the masters that hold us in servitude.

Remember our first instruction. *Lachem*! It is yours to order time, not the other way around! More than our ability to individually invest time with meaning, it is our communal ability to give time meaning that lends brilliance to our Jewish existence and survival.

Unlike the nations of the world, which use a solar calendar to mark time, we rely on the phases of the moon to measure the months and the seasons. The *S’fas Emes* says this is because the nations of the world can only function and exist when the sun shines and conditions are favorable to them. When the sun sets, so do their empires. We, on the other hand, continue to thrive even in moonless night. We continue to shine, even when persecuted and humiliated, just as the continually moon lights the world even in the darkest night.

Kohelet proclaims, “There is nothing new under the sun.” He is right. The sun is constant in size, rising and setting at predictable times. Always the same, day after day, like the ticking of the clock, one second no different from the next. The moon, on the other hand, is forever renewing itself, disappearing from view and then emerging anew, creating months (*chodashim* from the Hebrew word *chadash* – new). The months in the solar based year are arbitrary, fixed units of time. Months in the lunar year give rise to birth, to new life; they wax and wane; they have personalities; they follow the mystery and mystique of the feminine cycle, leading to the possibility of pregnancy and birth, and rebirth.

When people of hope and trust, people of integrity and faith appeared before the sages of the High Court in Jerusalem to testify that they had seen the new moon in all its splendor, it did not matter from how far afield they’d traveled, new days of celebration and festivities would be declared.

Jewish hope and optimism would always be maintained when human eyes detected the appearance of a new moon.

Just as Jewish life and survival is never static – *can never be static* – so too the movement of time cannot be static. It moves according to the meaningful witness and rhythm we give it.

The desperate mark time in equal and discreet units, always the same, unrelenting. They quickly become slaves to the unending pressure of time. But we Jews, when we embrace the commandment God has given *lachem*, to us, we imbue time with beauty, with meaning, with the richness of ebb and flow.

Time becomes human, synchronized to our experience. For us, tomorrow always has the potential for greatness, even if today is painful. Hope. Meaning. Mystery. Time carries all this and more for us.

Only to the desperate do we become lost in a relentless synchronization to time.