

TIME TRAVELERS OR TRAVELERS IN TIME

Mattot-Masei

[Numbers 30:2 - 36:13](#)

Haftorah: [Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4](#)

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What is time? You can't touch it, feel it, smell it, see it or taste it. Its elusive nature leaves me with a feeling of queasiness because time isn't a material commodity to which I can relate. And yet, it is said that time is the most precious asset we have, for it is the most irrevocable. When it's gone, it's gone!

We measure time - in seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, millenniums. Most important, we speak of a lifetime, and this gives me a sense of importance. It makes me feel responsible because I can choose how to use my time. Some people seem to "kill" time, but I feel guilty if I waste time - that is, not using every minute for productive purposes. As a rabbi, even when reading the newspaper, a book or magazine, I'm always bearing in mind "How can I use this in a sermon or lecture?" Sitting in a waiting room for a doctor's appointment or standing still in traffic is a kind of torture for me because my precious time is being robbed from me, and I then feel resentful.

Some people try to pack too much time into our fast-paced world with our means of constant and instant communication: e-mail, iPhone, cell phone, iPad, Facebook, Blackberry, Bluetooth, tweeting, blogging and texting - but to what end? Does everything have to be instantaneous?

Time isn't life until you take time and do something with it.

Some busy people say, "The time has gone by so fast!" or "Where did the time go?" Others find too much time on their hands and say, "Is it only 4 p.m.? The day seems so long!" They must feel bored.

Sometimes people are frustrated by being so tied to a schedule that they don't seem to have a minute to themselves. And so they exclaim, "I wish I had more time!"

The Psalmist must have had such a concern in mind when he prayed, "Teach us to number our days so that we may attain a heart of wisdom."

Note that he indicates days, not years. Each day counts; each hour is important; each moment is precious!

Mattot - Masai: the Israelite tribes traveled - not in the sci-fi sense of being "time travelers," but rather as travelers in time - as we Jews all are! My teacher, the late

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his lovely and pertinent book, *The Sabbath*, proposes that all of Jewish ritual be understood as "the architecture of time."

This week's Haftarah is the second in a series of ten that are structured around the great "black fast" of Tisha b'Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the two Temples - by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., and by Rome in 70 C.E. The first three of these Haftarot are called "The Three of Admonition" [*t'lata d'pruanuta*]. They focus on a three-week period of mourning which begins with the 17th of Tammuz, during which time certain restrictions of personal activities and eating are prescribed. After Tisha b'Av - a day of communal shiva - come seven Haftarot of Consolation [*shivata d'nechemata*], and the mood changes. Such is Jewish liturgical time.

I never liked the joke about "Jewish Time" - meaning everything starts late - because it's misleading. We usher in Shabbat and Yom Tov at specified times. We have a "calendar of sacred time." This includes *Sh'mita* and *Yovayl* - a remission of debts and a provision for land tenure - governed by time in years. *Brit Milah* - circumcision - is held on the eighth day. We observe *S'firah* - the counting of days between Pesach and Shavuot, [which could well serve to teach us that we are not only to count our days, but to make our days count!] The Talmud even describes the proper times for the recitation of prayers [Talmud Bavli, tractate B'rochot]. This is "Jewish time!"

In the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes we learn, in part: "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born and a time to die; ... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to mourn, and a time to dance. ... A time to love, and a time to hate. A time for war, and a time for peace."

We yearn for eternity, but we know this - time - is all we have. So how do we find meaning in what doesn't last?

I usually look over the obituaries in the newspaper every day. Some notices serve to simply inform that such and such a person had lived.

Others speak of many significant accomplishments, so as to say that that person made a lasting contribution to society; that he had used his time allotted him to make a difference. And, then, accordingly, I look at my life and wonder what would be lasting. What feelings would I have if I were to read an obituary of my life as I have lived it up to now? Would I feel proud, satisfied, elated; or would I feel disappointed, pained or disillusioned?

In Judaism, time is considered not a burden, not something that we look to "kill," but rather as a gift. Each day we spend on this earth is a gift from God. In fact, the very first thing a Jew does upon awakening is to say, "*Modeh Ani* - Thank you God for another day of life, for more time." When I recite those words, I feel a sense of gratitude that another day has been granted me.

We Jews have always looked upon time as something that is to be hallowed and sanctified, and to be mindful of God's Divine Presence wherever we go in time or space. As a people we have sought to provide time with the texture of depth, sanctity and meaning. That is still the obligation for us to this day. May it be a challenge - not to fear - but to embrace with confidence and trust. Thus we become partners with the Creator in our creative use of time.