

*It's About Time*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Nearly all civilizations and cultures have been focused upon the importance of time. We Jews are no exception to this almost universal rule. By way of example, one need only quote the famous words of *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) as presented in the third chapter of his masterful examination of the human spirit known as *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes). Herein we encounter 29 instances of the word “time” in the context of his brilliant and aphoristic description of the trials and tribulations inherent in the cycle of human existence:

1. Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under the heaven.
2. A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot that which is planted.
3. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break and a time to build.
4. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time of wailing and a time of dancing.
5. A time to cast stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.
6. A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away.
7. A time to rend and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak.
8. A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. (This, and all Tanach translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

Time for modern and scientifically oriented man, however, has become a mere mathematical construct. As my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known to his students and followers as “the Rav,” aptly noted: “Modern physics has combined time with space, so that it is just one coordinate of a system within which

we try to explain the cosmic dynamics.” (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukah*, page 106) Judaism, however, views time in an entirely different manner.

Rather than viewing it as one more minutely measurable bit of data, time is, instead:

... a living entity. There is substance to time; it has individuality and essence, and one can ascribe attributes to it in the same manner as one ascribes attributes to people. Just as one can speak of a good person, a handsome person, a holy person, or an evil person, so, too, one can speak of holy days, or of evil days and sad days. (Ibid., pp. 106-107)

The notion of the substantive nature of time gives rise to one of Judaism’s singular contributions to the world: the holiness and sanctification of time (*kedushat hazeman*).

The Sabbath and the *Yamim Tovim* (the Festivals: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, Shemini Atzeret, Pesach, and Shavuot) are not merely days through which we live; they are, instead, transformative moments that imbue our lives with significance and meaning.

They are days wherein we reject the mundane activities of everyday life and embrace the uniqueness and holiness of time. As the Rav states:

...when we say the Sabbath and Festivals are days that have been endowed with *kedushat hayom*, we mean that they are endowed with uniqueness, that they are remote from ordinary days. They are set aside as days of cessation, interrupting our workday routine. The human routine, which has not essentially changed over the millennia, is beautifully described in *Barkhi Nafshi*: “The sun rises, [the young lions] slink away, as they hide in their dens. Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until evening” (Ps. 104:22-23). That monotony is discontinued on a *yom kadosh*, the sun rises; the universe is not physically different: man does not go forth to his work or to his labor. [Instead,] the distinctiveness of his schedule sanctifies and hallows the day. (Ibid., p.108)

Given the aforementioned, it is little wonder that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) were acutely sensitive to the fundamental importance of time. Thus, the word “*zeman*” (“time”) is used as a partial description for each one of the *shalosh regalim* (Pilgrimage Festivals). Passover is called “*zeman chaireutainu*” (“the time of our freedom”), Shavuot is named “*zeman matan Toratainu*” (“the time of the giving of our Torah”), and Succot and Shemini Atzeret are labeled “*zeman simchatainu*” (“the time of our joy”). These days

are inherently different from Shabbat, whose *kedushat hazeman* is independent from, and not determined by, man. Instead, Shabbat's holiness was established by G-d at the close of the sixth day of creation, immediately prior to the very first Shabbat of Creation:

Now the heavens and the earth were completed and all their host. And G-d completed on the seventh day His work that He did, and He abstained on the seventh day from all His work that He did. And G-d blessed the seventh day and He hallowed it, for thereon He abstained from all His work that G-d created to do. (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:1-3)

In stark contrast, the *kedushat hazeman* of each and every Festival day is completely dependent upon and determined by man. Throughout the entire Temple period, our calendar was based upon testimony regarding the appearance of the new moon. In the wake of the Second Temple's destruction, however, the fourth century Torah Sage Hillel II created a fixed and permanent calendar. In both cases, man, rather than G-d, was - and remains vested with - the obligation to establish the exact date of all Festival days, and the consequent holiness of the day. Therefore, our Sages formulated the following *bracha* (blessing) of *kedushat hayom* (holiness of the day) within the *Amidah* (Silent Prayer) for Festivals: "Blessed are You Hashem who sanctifies the Jewish people and the appointed times (i.e. the *Yamim Tovim*)."

In a few days we will be celebrating the festival of Shemini Atzeret – the festival *par excellence* of G-d's love for our people. May we be *zocheh* (merit) to treat this holy day as an intense and powerful moment of *kedushat hazeman*. May it be a time of joy, health, and happiness for the entire Jewish people. With Hashem's help, may it be our final Shemini Atzeret in *galut* (the Diaspora), and may we celebrate it next year in Jerusalem, with the one true Messiah in our newly rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

*Chag Sameach!*

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\*\*\* My **new** audio *shiurim* for Women on *Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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