

Shemini Atzeret 5772, 2011

It's About Time

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Nearly all civilizations and cultures have been focused upon the importance of time. We Jews are no exception to this well-nigh universal rule. By way of example, one need only cite 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 concept. 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 hayom*). 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. Shabbat's *kedushat hayom* is independent from,

and not determined by, man. Instead, its holiness was established by a divine fiat 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 hayom* of each and every Festival day is completely dependent upon and determined by man. Our calendar was established by the Sanhedrin (the highest court of Jewish law) prior to, and during the times of, the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), based upon the testimony of witnesses regarding the appearance of the new moon. Following the Temple's destruction, the fourth century Torah Sage Hillel II created a fixed and permanent calendar. In either case, 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. Thus, when a Festival occurs on the Shabbat, our Sages formulated the *bracha* (blessing) of *kedushat hayom* within the *Amidah* (Silent Prayer) as: “Blessed are You Hashem who sanctifies Shabbat, the Jewish people, and the appointed times (i.e. the *yamim tovim*).” Herein it is clear that whereas G-d sanctifies Shabbat and the Jewish people, it is the Jewish people who sanctify the Festivals.

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. With His divine beneficence, may it be a time in which we can truly express our understanding and sensitivity to the great responsibility of treating this day as truly a time of *kedushat hayom*. 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 and our newly rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Chag Sameach!

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdb718@gmail.com.