

Living in God's Time by Rabbi Stacy Schlein
2018 Rosh HaShanah Morning Service Silver Sanctuary
September 10, 2018

Every year there is a question. It is the same question - time and time again. It is THE QUESTION that is asked more than any other question regarding the High Holy Days. So perhaps, you might imagine it is one of great religious and philosophical importance. Perhaps, you might think if the request is repeated year after year, that it must be complex beyond all complexities. The sort of question that only a rabbi could be qualified to answer. Five years of rabbinical school and 17 years in the rabbinate maybe, just maybe I am now prepared to handle the weight and sophistication of such a request. "Rabbi, are the holidays early or late this year?" Over the years I have adjusted the response. In recent years, my favorite retort is, "The holidays are not early. The holidays are not late. They are right on time." Then comes the requisite raising of the eyebrow and all-knowing and insightful head nod admitting agreement with the larger philosophical concept. Followed by a dramatic pause and then... "Ah yes, I see what you mean rabbi, that is so very lovely, and so spiritual, but when is the holiday? Sometimes they are early and sometimes they are late ON THE CALENDAR." So perhaps, I need to adjust my answer: The

holidays are not early. The holidays are not late. The holidays are right on time. The real question is: ARE YOU READY?

While the initial question itself is strikingly simple, the reality behind the question is profoundly perplexing. Truly, how can we be ready, when we don't know precisely when the holiday will be? There is this underlying logic that IF we know the exact date of Rosh Hashanah, THEN we will be ready. I will acknowledge that there are details to tend to such as taking off work, making a meal, or going to temple. Once we know the date, we can create a checklist and then, WE ARE READY. The question taps into our instinctive craving to control and create time. As a society, we spend billions of dollars to suck every single second out of the day: Fitbits to track how far we walk, smart phones so our work will be with us wherever we go. How many times during the day do you catch yourself multitasking? We are on our phones while driving a car, and eating breakfast. We meet friends for coffee, while taking calls and texting others under the table.

According to an article by Deepak Chopra, an expert in mind-body healing, "the feeling of not having enough time is known as 'time famine'¹ in psychology parlance. You experience a time famine when you feel like you

¹ Sternbergh, Adam "Read this Story and Get Happier" in The Cut <https://www.thecut.com/2018/05/how-to-be-happy.html>

can't get everything you want done, or there aren't enough hours in the day to see your family and friends. About 48 percent² of Americans said that they didn't have enough time, according to a Gallup poll."³

This craving to control time is deeply embedded in our being. Even in the Book of Joshua, dated to approximately 640-609 BCE, we read that Joshua stops the sun during his battle against the Amorites.⁴

Approximately, 1000 years later, Midrash Pirke D'Rebbi Eliezer, explains how this was possible. Shabbat was upon them, and Joshua had too much to do before sunset so he "stretched forth his hand to the light of the moon and sun... and each one stood still for 36 hours in its place until the end of Shabbat."⁵ How often are we so overwhelmed by everything we want to do, we find ourselves wishing we could be Joshua and stop time in her tracks?

This year, if you asked me personally if I am ready for the holidays, I am sorry to say, but my initial response would have been no. You might be wondering, how is that possible? After all, Rabbi Schlein just said that the holidays are right on time. Last year, more than anything else, I wished that

² Newport, Frank. "Americans' Perceived Time Crunch No Worse Than the Past." In Wellbeing December 2015. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/187982/americans-perceived-time-crunch-no-worse-past.aspx>

³ Chopra, Deepak and Sehgal, Kabir "Money won't Make you Happier. Time Will" CNBC July11, 2018. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/deepak-chopra-money-wont-make-you-happier-time-will.html>

⁴ The Book of Joshua 10:13.

⁵Friedlander, G. (1916). Pirke D'Rebbi Eliezar English Translation. London. 52:8. Pirke D'Rebbi Eliezar is a midrashic work on The Torah, dated between 630-1030 CE.

I was Joshua - able to hold the sun and the moon in place until I was ready to let them go. The first reason, I don't know if you heard, but we had a big transition in leadership with the retirement of our Senior Rabbi Rick Block, and Rabbi Rosie Haim moving on. Then a few days later we welcomed our new Senior Rabbi Jonathan Cohen. The last two months have marked monumental moments of transition. Whether we like it or not, or whether we are ready or not, change is a part of life. The reality is that it can also be an opportunity for growth and development.

The second reason that I was not ready is that last year, eight special people in my life died: two dear friends of my parents, a cousin, an uncle, a high school classmate, the daughter of one of my youth group friends who also was my student, one of my rabbis, and most recently one of my friends from rabbinic school.⁶ Eight people and this does not even include all of the beautiful souls that I was blessed to know in our congregation and all of your loved ones who died this past year. I share this with you not in search of sympathy or to make all of us cry. I share this as a real question: when will we be ready to accept that love, loss, change, growth, life and death

⁶ I dedicate this sermon in loving memory of my family friends - Gary Melsher and Lenny Stern, cousin Byong Park, Uncle Alan "Buddy" Bernstein, high school classmate - Lyle Reed, a dear friend's daughter & my student - Abby Bendis, my rabbi - Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD and my rabbinic school classmate Rabbi Daniel Treiser.

are an intertwined and inescapable part of our reality. When will we allow ourselves to sit with this insight?

Rabbi Alan Lew in his book *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* explains that as human beings on some level we know that we are going to die, so instead we set up affirmations in life. He says, “Against death, which we see as the ultimate failure, we offer up success. Against death, which we see as the ultimate emptiness, we offer up the acquisition of objects. Against death, which we see as the end of all feelings, we offer up the pursuit of pleasure. Against death, which we see as the final stillness, we offer up a ceaseless rage of activity. Against death, which we see as the ultimate impotence, we offer up the glorification of our own power.” Rabbi Lew continues, “But in the process, we give up our nefesh – (our soul which is) the nothingness out of which life arises, the emptiness that gives our lives meaning. And we give it up because we are frightened of it. It reeks of all we are trying to deny. Consequently, we’ve become a nation of workaholics, a people who have come to believe that we can conquer death by dint of our own powers, by a ceaseless swirl of activity.”⁷

Jennifer Stern, a Licensed Social Worker in Beachwood articulates this

⁷ Lew, Rabbi Alan, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Little Brown and Company, 2003, page 119.

concept with slightly different language, “Time passes so quickly, even when the days feel long. We become so consumed by our goals, obligations, to-do lists and relationships that we often overlook the moment we are in.”⁸

My friends, I stand here before you to tell you that we are being tested and to tell you that we as a society are failing because we are afraid. This fear is making us unable to embrace and enjoy our lives fully, no matter how long or short it may be. No matter how many times we hear, understand, experience or live this lesson. As a result, we are not allowing ourselves the sacred opportunity to face Rosh HaShanah, and strengthen our soul. Rabbi Lew uses the Hebrew word nefesh, but I prefer to Neshama when referring to the soul. The words has the same root as Neshima – breath. According to The Book of Genesis when we were created, “God blew into the nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living being.”⁹ Our lives are powerfully connected to our breath. This is the reason, that The Holidays are not early. This is the reason that The Holidays are not late. This is the reason that the Holidays are right on time. We need the High Holy Days now more than ever to remind us that all life resides in our

⁸ Stern, Jen. “Creating Pause,” Beachood Buzz September 2018, page 39.

<https://www.beachwoodbuzzmag.com/magazine/1809.pdf>

⁹ Genesis 2:7 <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.2.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

breath. The holidays provide the pause to acknowledge our neshama – our soul and our breath so we are able to embrace who we are and who God intends us to be. Rather than trying to control or create time, we should focus our energies on taking a breath and simply allowing our souls to be in the moment.

This call is loud and clear each year, when we read The Akedah – The Binding of Issac. We are told that Abraham¹⁰ is tested to see if he is willing to sacrifice his son for God. Even if we acknowledge that this passage is a polemic against existing cultures at the time, it is still painfully problematic. I invite you to suspend that type of thinking for a moment so we can imagine that it is a test of something else. Instead, what if it is a test of Abraham’s ability to be in the moment – to connect his Neshama – his soul and his Neshima breath. On three separate occasions, within the span of 11 verses, Abraham is called. On all three occasions he responds, “Hineni” – Here I am. Each time, the call cries to wake up Abraham. The third time “Abraham stretched out his hand and takes the knife to slay his son Isaac and a messenger of Adonai calls to him repeating his name twice before receiving a response, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ And Abraham said:

¹⁰Genesis Chapter 22. <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.2.11?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

‘Hineni – Here I am’.”¹¹ It is then, and only then, that he lifts up his eyes and sees a ram caught in a thicket. How long, had the ram been there? Was God really asking him to sacrifice his son? Was it possible he was not paying attention to what was unfolding right before his eyes? Many of us, look at this passage in disgust trying to imagine how and why God could ask such a question and maybe even worse how Abraham could respond to such a request. And yet, we are the very same people who find ourselves sacrificing our loved ones through all of our distractions and obligations in an effort to control time day in and day out.

We stand here today, on Rosh HaShanah knowing that it does not need to be this way. We hear the call, and we can respond Hineini – Here I am. Jennifer Stern, whom I quoted earlier explains “I can always gift myself moments of peace and gratitude. I can offer myself a reset at any time, I can deeply breathe in the calm that exists and is always available to me when I take time to create pause.”¹²

As we begin this New Year, we acknowledge that love, loss, change, growth, life and death are an intertwined and inescapable part of our reality. May we have the strength and courage to stop trying to control time. May

¹¹ Genesis 22:10-11

¹² Stern, Jen. “Creating Pause,” Beachood Buzz September 2018, page 39.
<https://www.beachwoodbuzzmag.com/magazine/1809.pdf>

we gift ourselves moments to attach our Nishima to our Neshama – our breath to our soul. When we do, we will discover what it means to live in God’s time to allow ourselves to breathe in and appreciate this moment that we are gifted. The holidays are not early. The holidays are not late. The holidays are right one time. The question is, are you ready?