

Rosh Hashana Sermon 2007/5768

By Rabbi Chaim Landau

There's a lovely story about time. Two elderly Jews who haven't seen each other in fifty years, meet, slowly recognize one another, and embrace. They go back to the apartment of one of them to talk about the days long ago.

The conversation goes on for hours. Night falls. One asks the other, "Look at your watch. What time is it?" "I don't have a watch," says the second. "Then look at the clock." "I don't have a clock." "Then how do you tell the time?" "You see that trumpet in the corner? That's how I tell the time." "You're crazy," says the first, "How can you tell the time with a trumpet?" "I'll show you." He picks up the trumpet, opens the window and blows a deafening blast. Thirty seconds later, an angry neighbor shouts out, "Two thirty in the morning, and you're playing the trumpet?" The man turns to his friend and says, "You see? That's how you tell the time with a trumpet!"

Roughly speaking, that's how the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages, Moses Maimonides, explained why we blow a shofar (ram's horn) on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which we celebrate in six day's time. It is, he says, God's wake up call, His way of asking us, "Do you know what time it is? This life I have given you, how have you used it? For yourself, or for others? To hurt or to heal? What have you done with the year you asked Me for twelve months ago? What will be your entry in the Book of Life?"

We go through life, says Maimonides, for much of the time half-asleep. Day follows day in a daze. We go through the motions of waking, working, eating, relaxing, more conscious of the minutes than the years. We feel the tyranny of the clock but forget the larger calendar of a life. As the years pass, all too often we renounce the dreams of our youth and settle for a routine which oscillates between the escape from boredom called work, and the escape from work called leisure. Sometimes it takes a jolt - a car crash, an illness, a crisis - to make us ask, who am I and why am I here? What am I doing with my life?

It's part of the beauty of Judaism that it asks us, on Rosh Hashanah, to ask just that question. Time is God's greatest gift and one of the few He gives each of us on equal terms. Whether we are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and a span of years that is all too short. For each of us (as for Moses) there will be a future we will not see, a River Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter. Therefore we have to make choices, and the most consequential is how we use our time.

Once asked, the question almost answers itself. No one ever died wishing he or she had spent more time at the office or ruing the lack of the latest mobile phone. Most of the wants we chase after are artificially contrived, and many of the things we have no time for - family meals, long walks with our children, helping strangers, saying thank you to our marriage partner and to God - are of the essence of a life well lived. Once a year we

need that trumpet-call to remember time and use it to make a difference, to be a blessing, to love.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -the great festivals of the Jewish New Year – are the times when we're most conscious of time itself. We ask God for another year of life; and we reflect on how we've used the past year. Did we use time well? Did we bring blessing into lives other than our own? Did we become agents of hope? The history of time isn't just about how we measure it but also how we understand it and use it.

Ancient civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt of the Pharaohs – developed the first ways of measuring time. They tracked the movements of the sun and stars.

They invented the first calendars. And they made the first clocks. But for them time was a circle that went round and then returned because that's how time is in nature. The cycle of the seasons. The revolutions of the stars. The phases of life: They believed that all things return to where they began. They wouldn't have understood words like history or progress. They believed that the world didn't change. What would be in the future already had been in the past. There's nothing new under the sun.

It was in ancient Israel, the people of the Bible, that a new idea of time was born. Time as a journey with a starting point and a destination. Time as a story with a beginning, middle and end. Time where the future isn't destined to be just an action replay of the past. How did it happen? Through the central idea of the Jewish New Year itself.

Teshuvah, the word we translate as 'repentance' but which really means turning, changing direction: the idea that by acknowledging our mistakes and committing ourselves to act differently in the future, we can begin again. We have the gift of freedom: to change the direction of our lives. And, if we can change ourselves, we can begin to change the world. That allows us to think in a new way about time: time is an arena of change, where we can make a difference, to ourselves and to others.

To try and understand what it means to hope let me introduce you to two people; first of all, Gena Turgel, a survivor of the holocaust who has spent much of her life since, working with young people.

In her own words, Gena says: "Well first we were in Krakow ghetto and then Brashov and then we went into Auschwitz and then Bugenweld and Bergen-Belsen which was known to us as a (unclear) finishing camp. From there there's no escape. We were completely like sardines and I seen heaps of bodies lying and in every sense of the word they were skeletons, you could not distinguish whether they were men or women, children, you can't possibly imagine whatever you see in films, its nothing, and I said to myself, I'm not going to die like that. There was so many difficult times and whatever I'd been doing, I always felt that this is not only me I'm doing, there's some sort of power about me, power or powers that guided me through those difficult times. It was really miracle that I, that we came out alive G-d gave me a strength to go through that in order to bring, to broaden the people's horizon, especially young people of today... I am

so thankful to God that I am alive today and able to contribute something to this society out of pure appreciation that I am alive... I always tell them, respect teach other, understand each other, be good to each other and treasure life.”

Gena called her autobiography, *I Light a Candle* – and a candle is a symbol of memory and hope. We remember those who died because of their faith by trying to create a world in which people no longer die because of their faith. We share our memories with the young so that they can learn not to repeat the errors of the past. For me Gena represents the difference between optimism and hope. Hope isn't optimism, though we often confuse the two. Optimism is the belief that things are getting better. Hope is the belief that together we can make things better. Optimism is passive; hope is active. It needs no courage to be an optimist – only a certain kind of naiveté. But it needs a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do about the past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Judaism, even after the Holocaust, never gave up on hope. Perhaps the greatest lesson of those years is that we can't be by-standers when we see other people suffering. We have to become agents of hope.

Andrew Mawson left school at 16 and became a telecommunications technician. But then he decided to change direction. One of the things he did was to set up in South London a club and hostel accommodation for young people who were homeless or in care or had drug problems. Eventually he created this, the Bromley by Bow community centre, home to a vast range of programs and facilities.

In his own words, “I think the key is to believe in people, it's to believe that people themselves have it within themselves to change the world. And that it's a bit like the tent in the church, not all of us can pull up the pegs and move on so we can change the way we see each other, the way in which we relate to the world. Many of our bureaucracy in our society tie us into the world in a way that we feel cannot be changed and many people get very frustrated by it. What I knew what I wanted was a tent where the pegs could be pulled out and we could move on together, because when that can happen as we travel together we build relationships together... It's about time as a journey and about life as a journey and I think all of us experience this journey in many different ways. And the journeys of course always have side roads and opportunities appearing all the time. And er but to embrace that journey, one has to know ones own journey.

Gena, and Andrew, in their different ways, have asked the ultimate question: what do we do with God's greatest gift – time, our life, a span of years that, however long we live, is all too brief. Do we use it for ourselves, or do we share our time with others? Do we leave the world as we found it, or do we try to make a difference? Do we believe that nothing changes? Or do we understand that if we can change ourselves we can begin to change the world?

One of our greatest rabbis, Moses Maimonides, said that the shofar, the ram's horn we blow on the new year is God's alarm clock, waking us up from the sleep-walking routine that fills so many of our days. Whatever you do, says God, don't take time for granted.

Don't waste it. Use it to make a difference wherever you can, however you can. And there isn't one of us who can't make a difference.

One of the finest men I knew, the late David Baum, dedicated his life to children, to pediatric medicine. He made several medical discoveries that lowered the rate of infant mortality. He died of a heart attack in 1999 while taking part in a sponsored cycle ride. And there was a story he used to tell, a famous story, but one he lived by. (An old man was walking on the beach one day and he saw a young man picking up starfish stranded by the retreating tide, and throwing them back into the sea one by one. He went up to the young man and said, what are you doing? There are hundreds here; and hundreds more on the next beach and the one after that. What you're doing won't make a difference! The young man looked at him, then looked at the starfish in his hand and said: To this one it'll make a difference.)

That's what David believed; it's what I believe. You don't have to save the world altogether in one go. You can change the world a day at a time, an act at a time. A single life, said the rabbis, is like a universe. Save a life and you save a world. Change a life and you begin to change the world. In the coming year let us be agents of hope and begin the mission of changing many, many worlds. AMEN.