

## Two Approaches Toward Time Va'era 5779

### I.

The late great Torah scholar, Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky, who was world renowned for both his erudition, and even more so, for his gentility and integrity, was not, by any standard a wealthy man. And yet, on the occasion of his son's Bar Mitzvah, he made sure to put aside enough money to purchase his son a Bar Mitzvah gift of some significance. Before giving his young son the gift, he told him, 'what I am about to give you is the most important thing in the world. You must learn to use it wisely. It is the most precious commodity you will ever have.' And then, he handed him a brand new watch.

### II.

This first Shabbat of 2019, which also happens to be *Shabbat Mevarchim*, provides a unique opportunity to reflect on, and ultimately, to contrast, two different perspectives on time.

Most likely, we would all agree that the most conspicuous and famous image from New Year's is the "ball drop", thousands of people waiting passively, and freezing all the while, to rediscover the law of gravity. It is the very epitome of relating to time as

something which happens to someone, a force which acts upon us. All we can do is, as the New Year's revelers are wont to do as the ball drops, count along. And surely, three hundred and sixty days from now, the experience will once again be the same

### III.

In contrast, as Judaism not only relates to the solar year, but to the lunar one as well, we found ourselves this morning not merely passively observing the passage of time, but actively consecrating it. Of course, in ancient times, when the new month was still sanctified on the basis of actual witness testimony- individuals who would see the first sliver of the moon would come and testify in the court- where their testimony would be scrutinized. If valid, it would lead to a remarkable back and forth, a call and response, where the leading Sage of the court would call out *שְׁמוֹרָה*, it is sanctified, and all of those present would respond, *שְׁמוֹרָה שְׁמוֹרָה*, it is surely sanctified.

And then, the real action would begin. Messengers on hilltops waving flags would signal and transmit the news, not of the passive arrival, but the active consecration of the New Month to all corners of the land of Israel, and from there, the messengers would go out, and bring the news to the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, a process that would take weeks.

The sun itself, like the New Year's revelers, as it appears to us, is entirely static. The moon, as we know, is dynamic, waxing and waning, calling us, to sanctify her, to live dynamic lives in our own right.

It is no accident, as we will read in next week's Torah portion, that the very first mitzvah we were given as we emerged from bondage was the sanctification of the new moon. A slave, by definition, has no sense of time. One day runs meaninglessly into the next. He has no agency, and no ability to determine how we will sanctify his own limited time here in this world. As we were about to become free, God handed us his own proverbial watch, the mitzvah of *kiddush ha-Chodesh*, of sanctifying time, of *carpe diem*.

#### IV.

If our time is sacred, and it is, and if our time is limited, and it is, then we must draw two clear conclusions about how we will utilize it.

First, we must resolve, to the very greatest extent we can, to master our time, to utilize the hours of our days and nights well, involved in those things which we value.

Highly intelligent people have been employed at companies of great size and influence to addict us all to various devices which, while useful for certain purposes, can cause us to waste frightening amounts of time. Let us not be ensnared.

At the end of each day, we should be able to take an accounting, what did we achieve this day, were we involved in things that mattered, things to which we aspire, did we achieve all that which we might have.

The second conclusion we must draw concerns our relationships, with the Almighty, and with the people around us. Every minute is precious. On some level, as difficult as this is, we should treat every conversation with a loved one as if it could be our last.

This past week, two of my students, one who graduated this past year, and one who is a current student, suddenly lost their sister, a vivacious, remarkable woman of only 26.

At the funeral, one of them said to me, ‘Rabbi, your always telling us to try to make the most of things, how precious every day is, but I didn’t understand it until now. What I would do for more time with my sister.’

It’s a terrible way to learn such an important, crucial lesson.

No one knows when the good Lord will call. If we're blessed to have loving relationships, let's not spend time fighting over pettiness, but let's consecrate the time that we all have together.

We could spend our whole lives waiting for the ball to drop, just counting the seconds, and minutes, and hours, and days, and weeks, and months, and years, and decades, pass us by. And, the amazing thing is, the more of them that are behind us, the faster it all seems to move.

Or, we might, consistent with our ancient traditions, strive to take ownership of time, **ראשון הוא לכם**, **החדש הזה לכם**- it is *ours-ours* to make conscious choices, *ours* to be purposeful about the actions we take, *ours* to be mindful of both the magnitude and the finitude of our earthly existence, *ours* to value our relationships and to cherish each moment we share together.

In the words of our ancient Sage, Hillel, that have indeed transcended time, “if not now, then when?”

אם לא עכשיו, אימתי?