

A Thought For Shabbat
By Rabbi Shaul Robinson

D Day and The Counting of the Omer

These days, many of us feel we have too much time on our hands, and time seems to go by frustratingly slowly. How do we think about time? This week's parsha, which deals with the counting of the Omer, helps us think about time.

Teach us, Hashem, to count our days"(Tehillim 90,12). It's relatively easy to count the Omer, because although we count up and not down, we know how long we will need to count for. Our current Coronavirus lockdown / pause/ isolation is very different. Because we don't know how long it will last - and even when it's 'over' we will for a long time live with the awareness that it could rear up again at any time. So how do we manage? I want to suggest that we deploy the intricately complex jewish approach to time. Unlike the Omer, the least productive way of 'counting' lock down time is to count the days since everything changed.

Instead of counting FORWARD - we should experience time as the here and now - a gift to be savoured. The blessing shecheyanu - which we recite thanking G-d for "keeping us alive, sustaining us and bringing us to this time" is called by the Rabbis as Birkhat Hazman 'The Blessing over Time'. Time is a blessing when we live in the moment.

But in these days, it's 'backwards' time that I find myself thinking about. I'll confess, I am NOT enjoying these days. None of us are. I find them difficult, for so many reasons. But I have begun to find strength in asking myself the question - when we look back on these days, what will we find? I imagine myself when this is over - or at least when life is much more familiar - and I'll ask myself - did I USE these days - days at home, more time on my hands - did I use them wisely? What did I learn, how did I grow? Who did I remember, who did I forget? What skills, knowledge, attitudes did I acquire in these absolutely unique times? How did I express love, kindness, compassion even when I couldn't join with people?

Today, May 8th is "V.E." day - the anniversary of the German surrender in the Second World War. !! months earlier, had been D Day. On June 5th 1944, the night before DD day Supreme allied commander Dwight Eisenhower sat down at a desk and drafted the following letter

"Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.'

This was a letter that thank G-d never had to be released. It was a letter he wrote that was to be sent if the landings failed.

Eisenhower did not write this letter because he was a pessimist.

It turns out that he intuited something that modern psychologists have only recently come to recognize -and that perhaps we can apply.

A few years ago I came across a marvelous book called "When - The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing" by Daniel Pink. Pink introudced me to a fascinating idea , developed by professors at Wharton Business School.

“The best way to recover from a false start is to avoid one in the first place. And the best technique for doing that is something called a “premortem.” You’ve probably heard of a postmortem - A premortem, the brainchild of psychologist Gary Klein, applies the same principle but shifts the exam from after to before. Suppose you and your team are about to embark on a project. Before the project begins, convene for a premortem. “Assume it’s eighteen months from now and our project is a complete disaster,” you say to your team. “What went wrong?”

Pink writes,

As it happens, I conducted a premortem before I began this book. I projected two years from the start date and imagined that I’d written a terrible book or, worse, hadn’t managed to write a book at all. Where did I go awry? After looking at my answers, I realized I had to be vigilant about writing every day, saying no to every outside obligation so I didn’t get distracted, keeping my editor informed of my progress (or lack thereof), and enlisting his help early in untangling any conceptual knots.

Then I wrote down the positive versions of these insights—for example, “I worked on the book all morning every morning at least six days a week with no distractions and no exceptions”—on a card that I posted near my desk. The technique allowed me to make mistakes in advance in my head rather than in real life on a real project.”

I’d like to suggest that we think of these days in the same light - perhaps the only reasonable way to ‘count them’ - by counting backwards, by asking ourselves, when this is over, how would I want to have spent them?

On a huge level, these days are an opportunity. Not one any of us chose. But an opportunity nonetheless. So here is a question - what are YOU doing in these days that you will look back on, and be proud of yourself for?