Jews and the Invention of Time

by Moshe Dann (January 2015)

Jews are quite literally obsessed with time. Every month the new moon is sanctified and calculated by minutes and seconds, as well as by sight. Every week observant Jews rush — sometimes panic — to finish all the preparations for the Sabbath before it begins. On Pesach, unleavened bread (matzot) can only be used if baked within 18 minutes from the time the dough is made. Why are time-limited boundaries so important? Does an extra minute make so much difference?

In Judaism, the answer is, yes! Time itself has holiness (*kedusha*). It is "eternity formed into tassels," as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it. "The moments of our lives are like luxuriant tassels. They are attached to the garment and are made of the same cloth…every instant is like a thread raveling out of eternity to form a delicate tassel." (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 205.) Time is the way we sanctify space, and ourselves. But how does that work? How is it accomplished?

Imposing time-related boundaries as part of a system of divine regulations and commandments (*mitzvot*) is the way in which Jews create a sense of holiness in the world of space. The infusion of time restrictions into events and actions attaches the presence of G-d to everything in the finite world of space. The concept of G-d as infinite and unlimited, yet part of everything that exists, that was and will be, is expressed in time restrictions. It changes the way in which we perceive the world; it is an uniquely Jewish contribution to civilization.

Jews were not the first to be concerned with time, or to devise ways of measuring days, weeks, months and years. Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations developed that technology long before Moses and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. These earlier cultures even had holy days, times set aside for the worship of localized gods and phenomena of nature. And they undoubtedly had an impact on the development of the Jewish people.

Wherever Jews lived, traces of host cultures became imbedded in many aspects of Jewish life and thought. These influences, for example, are reflected in the Babylonian names for Jewish months, just as today the days of the week carry names of planets, following Roman practices. Some Jewish rituals, like sacrifical offerings (*korbanot*), are related to Egyptian forms of worship. But Jews added something new.

Time, incalculable, immeasurable and One, when divided into specific units ("tassels") and linked with events and actions as manifestations of G-d's presence conveys a sense of existence that transcends physicality and creates holiness, spiritual potential – *kedusha*.

Jews were the first to attribute significance to time itself, to insist that its measurement was not arbitrary, or utilitarian, but that time gave meaning to all events. As part of a divine scheme, the world would encounter ultimate redemption – the time of Massiah. Jewish time, therefore, must always be seen in the perspective of the 'end of days,' when time as we know it would no longer exist. That belief underlies the idea that G-d is beyond time, "*Eh-eyeh Asher Eh-eyeh*," – I am what I am – but in the future tense – beyond understanding and recognition, whatever was and will be. As magnificent as that concept is, however, it needs another element..

Jews also emphasized historical memory, embedding significant events in religious practice. Historical events take on meaning as they reveal G-d's plan. And, once grounded in that vision, one could then make sense out of what may seem random and absurd.

Jews not only marked time by referring to historical events, but instituted historical memory within daily religious practice in a time-frame that is fulfilled in redemption, a suspension of time as we know it, an awareness of infinity. Linking the present with the past was not new; pushing it forward into the future was a radical move because it posits that everything and everyone was part of a divine plan. That perspective gives every aspect of life a purpose and meaning as elements of the great creation epoch that began the world.

Insisting on a sense of boundaries in time was the way Torah created a structure to see the world, an awareness of existence that transcended finite space. In this way Jews not only asserted their place in society, but suggested the possibility that *all* human life, because it was connected to the Infinite – G-d, was in a constant process of renewal.

Previous systems rendered Man subordinate to Nature; Judaism posited the reverse. "*Ha-Melech*," "*Ha-Elokim*," "*Ha-Shem*" (word names that refer to aspects of G-d's manifestations) controlled Nature, and the proof of that originated with a new and unique concept of time beyond Nature.

Time was not only the mechanism by which Man accommodated Nature, but a way of moving from spatial quantity to spiritual quality. In Torah, time itself is holy, or an aspect of holiness, and when used in a particular way, it creates holiness. The notion of holiness <u>in</u> time evolved into the idea of holiness <u>of</u> Time itself, as a symbolic reference for G-d. The idea of Infinity – of time beyond time – when reintroduced into activity, assigned purpose and

meaning to life itself. Doing *mitzvot* brings an aspect of Man-following-G-d into the event, or act. In that way we create meaning and significance (*kedusha*), or nothingness (*hevel*) in everything that we encounter.

A simple surgical operation on a child may not have significance beyond the physical improvement it brings. Circumcision, linked to a primal event and located in time restrictions, however, is essentially a spiritual change. It's not just the event itself that's important, but that it is required to be done on the eighth day.

Eating unleavened bread can be done every day of the year. But eating it on Pesach is a Divine commandment. Not only that, but eating *matzot* that is baked within a strict time limit raises the significance of the mixture of flour and water to a higher level; it becomes spiritual food.

Adding a time-bound ingredient illuminates the value of human energy, creativity, and intention even in the most mundane aspects of life. Lighting candles can be a routine or simply practical act. But using this to create a 'romantic atmosphere or to inaugurate the Sabbath makes the event a deeply personal matter. The woman becomes an initiator, her flames coinciding with fervent anticipation, culminating in an experience far beyond the act itself. Facing the lights she stands with the Creator of the world, overlooking all that has brought life to fruition. It is something that she herself has brought into the world, into her realm, where she reigns supreme. And it can only happen within and because of self-imposed restrictions of time. An hour later, there is nothing left to wait for. The yearning of the heart, the voice of G-d has already dimmed. Lost in time, the soul searches for its place, alone.

Time restrictions focus us on priorities. We see this so painfully in women who have not given birth and measure each moment of their life against the clock of desperation, dreading the time when their bodies can no longer produce children.

Part of that grieving is in all of us when we realize what we have lost, when we fail to appreciate what we have, or not taken advantage of opportunities that were given to us. We long for another chance, for another time.

Time is precious when we don't have enough of it. "I'll do it tomorrow," is our banner, and, even though we may get away with it, we are left poorer than we thought.

When we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet a famous person, for example, we are very careful not to be late. The time we have been given is very precious, and if lost or

squandered cannot be recovered. One must try to make the most of this encounter, and not waste a single moment. Meeting this person, moreover, makes you feel special, raises your sense of importance simply because you were given this unique privilege. In the context of time-related *mitzvot*, Judaism asks, "What if you could see every moment of your life in this way? What if the one you could meet is you?"

Jews are concerned with time; pagans are concerned about the end of time.

Reincarnation, the idea of an after-life, was an attempt to bridge the gap between Existence and non-Existence. Counting days, hours, and minutes was a mechanism for dealing with the end of time, death. But in Judaism death is also linked with the cycle of life. Thus, Kohelet marks the passages of time by embracing everything within a Life system. Health and sickness, grief and happiness, are aspects of an ever-moving spiral of events and circumstances that – without a G-d-centered vision – is *hevel* (nothingness); with belief it moves us closer to Redemption, the renewal of Time.

In primitive world-views, the idea of reincarnation was a way of absorbing death back into a Life-system. Judaism moved beyond this static cycle by introducing *mitzvoth* – a way of creating holiness in *this* world. The intense affirmation of life, because it is focused on here-and-now details, moves Time from static to dynamic, and from abandoning the concerns of this world to engaging them. In this way the Jewish renewal of and commitment to life overcame the pagan obsession with death.

This shift marks the thrust of Jewish civilization. It could not have been accomplished without an entirely new definition of Time. In this world view, the future is always open, in process; it cannot be closed. "G-d's plan" is not in space, but in Time – not in controlling events, but investing purpose in them, infusing creativity into the human condition. Time is not only the rhythm of Nature, it is the harmony of G-d's music, Eternity.

In describing the Ark of the Covenant, the Gemara (TB *Magillah* 20b; also in *Baba Batra*, and *Yoma*) notes that the Ark (2.5 cubits x 1.5 cubits) did not fit into the dimensions of the Holy of Holies (which was 20 cubits wide). When they measured from the sides of the Ark to each wall they found the distance to be 10 cubits, and concluded that there was no room for the Ark; it existed by a miracle. Moreover, the wings of the figures (cherubim) that were placed atop the ark were also 10 cubits long.

In this story the rabbis may be trying to teach us that the Ark did not exist in space, but in time. As such, the Ark represented Eternity, the timelessness of Torah. Even the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Tent of Appointed Time) was a place of restriction and concentration, pre-requisites for

encountering G-d. And it was a metaphor. Each person is a sanctuary, a center of holiness within which resides an ark of truth with an immediate and direct source of inspiration. We balance at an instant of time on the edge of eternity.

“My G-d, the soul You have placed within me is pure. You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me, You safeguard it within me, and eventually You will take it from me, and restore it to me in Time to Come.”

May we be blessed with the time to accomplish the tasks which we were given by G-d and that shape our destiny.

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