

**Rosh Hashanah 5777**

**Rabbi Caryn Broitman**  
**“Time After Time”**

Recently I attended a small celebratory gathering. Since the invited guests didn't all know each other, we went around the circle and introduced ourselves. When it became the turn of a particular guest, she said her name, looked meaningfully at her husband sitting across the circle, and shared that they had been married for 61 years. The group appropriately “oohed” and “aahed” and the next person took her turn. But I continued to look at her husband and noticed tears had welled up his eyes. I also felt the poignancy of the moment, the poignancy that comes with the awareness of the passage of time. I don't know what brought tears to his eyes. Maybe he was remembering their wedding day in their youth, or their joys and struggles together over decades. Maybe he was looking toward the future, and the loss and impermanence that the future would inevitably bring. All these feelings rose and fell in a flash, in a

moment, as we were going around the circle, sharing our names and places in the world.

We often experience these moments at life's celebrations—births, Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, graduations—as well as at times of loss. Songs dear to our hearts capture that awareness of the passage of time and expectation of future—“Circle Game,” “Forever Young,” “Turn Around”. My mother-in-law sang the song “Turn Around” by Malvina Reynolds at her daughter's (my sister-in-law's). “Where are you going, my little one, little one, where are you going, my baby my own. Turn around when you're two. Turn around when you're four. Turn around and you're a young girl going out of my door.”

My “little one” just went out the door to start a new life at college. Maybe you have a little one who started college or high or, as the Malvina Reynolds' song says, started a family with “babes of her own.” Or maybe you've had moments this past year while looking at a parent, a friend, a spouse, or a photo when you have

been struck by the mystery of the passage of time. Rosh Hashanah is about time—the arrow of time, the cycle of time, the renewal of time. And here we sit, thank God, another year, another year older with memories of our past and hopes and perhaps fears for our future. What can Rosh Hashanah teach us as we experience this moment and reflect on time?

For those of us who grew up celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the memories of past Rosh Hashanahs evoke the passage of time. I have a distinct memory of sitting next to my dad at Rosh Hashanah services, tapping him on the arm every five minutes or so, motioning for him to show me his watch so I could see how long we had to go. I particularly remember time slowing down during the Rabbi's sermon, which I clocked at 35 minutes and which felt interminably long. That's karma for you! So hopefully, taking my cue from Stephen Hawking, this can be a *brief* history of Jewish time.

If one of the great insights of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics is that time is the fourth dimension, one of the most ancient insights of spiritual

traditions is that time has a sacred dimension. In ordinary or secular time, one moment is just like the next. But in sacred time, as Mircea Eliade taught, time does “not ‘pass’ . . . it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted.”<sup>1</sup> Rosh Hashanah begins the sacred year. It focuses our awareness on holy time, which the character John Ames described in *Gilead* “the eternal breaking in on the temporal.”<sup>2</sup> Sacredness is not a physical property of time, but a spiritual property that humans can give it. The first mitzvah in the Torah commanded to the Israelites as a people is about making time holy. Immediately before the redemption from Egypt, God commands the Israelites to establish a calendar that makes the first day of each month, the new moon, a holy day, and that numbers the months from the Exodus from Egypt. “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Ex. 12:2). “For you,” meaning, it is *you*, human beings, who have the power to make time holy. *You* set the calendar. You can live according to the dings and donges of the iphone or

according to the flow of sacred and ordinary time. Traditionally Rosh Hodesh has to be *declared* by witnesses who see the new moon. It doesn't just happen. We have to commit. Those moments, whether they are the marking passages in our lives, or the marking of the week with Shabbat or the year with holidays like today, are made by our attention to them.

As I noted, we are commanded in Exodus to number the months after the Exodus from Egypt. That would make the spring month of Nisan, when Pesach falls, the New Year. There is no mention, however, of a New Year in the Torah. Rosh Hashanah is referred to as a day of *zichron teruah*, a day of remembrance and a day of making a loud blast from a trumpet or shofar. Later, in the Babylonian exile, this day took on the themes of a Babylonian holiday that was a Day of Judgment. It wasn't until the time of the Mishnah, about 800 years after the Torah, that this day became a New Year, Rosh Hashanah. The New Year it became was not like the Torah's counting time from the Exodus. It was not a new year centered on

human events. It was a new year of creation: the creation of humanity and the creation of the cosmos, and celebrates both the eternal cycle of life and the arrow of deep cosmic time.

This idea of scales of time is another aspect of Rosh Hashanah. While we here may be on EDT, Eastern Daylight Time, the cosmos is on G-DT, or God's Time, which is on an unimaginably grander scale. We credit scientists with radically shifting our sense of time. From the frame of natural history, John Mcphee's beautiful phrase, "deep time" describes the geological time frame of 4 billion years for the earth. "Consider," he wrote in *Basin and Range* "the earth's history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the king's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history." Cosmologists top that, telling us that our visible universe is about 14 billion years old. For the Bible, however, this is old news. "But wait a minute", you may object. "Doesn't Judaism say the world is about 5,700 years old? That's cry from the deep time of billions of years!" Well, it is true

that today is the first day of the year 5777, understood as the years since the creation. But this system of dating doesn't come from the Torah or any Jewish holy book. The Bible itself doesn't have a system to number the years, but rather marked years by events such as a king's reign, or the exodus from Egypt. The numbering of years we have now comes from the calculations of Rabbi Yossi Ben Halfta of the second century CE, who was one of many rabbis trying to figure out the age of the world using biblical genealogical trees. And yes, he got it wrong by about 4 billion years. But Rabbi Yossi's system wasn't used exclusively by the world Jewish community until about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And Jews, even going back to Talmudic times, have understood this number to be symbolic rather than literal.

The Bible itself has a much deeper sense of time. While biblical Hebrew didn't have a number for a billion or even a million, (its highest single number was 1,000), it did have words and used poetry to convey the point of "deep time," contrasting the scale of God's universe with our humble human lives. "For a thousand years in thy

sight are but as yesterday when it is past, as a watch in the night”

(Ps. 90). “O Lord, what is man that You should care about him, mortal man, that You should think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are a passing shadow . . .” (Ps. 144) Or Isaiah (40:6-8):

“All flesh is grass,  
All its goodness like flowers of the field:  
Grass withers, flowers fade  
When the breath of the Lord blows on them.  
Indeed, man is but grass:  
Grass withers, flowers fade—  
But the word of our God is always [forever] fulfilled!”

Our own Machzor *Kol Haneshama* includes many of these poetical images from the bible. We read this morning, after the *unetaneh tokef* (p. 353) that humans are “withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze scattered dust, a vanishing dream. And You—You are the . . . living God, Your years never end, Your time has no measure . . .” If you equate the universe with God, you could say that that the universe does have a measure—14 billion years since the big bang. But now physicists are postulating that the big bang is only the beginning of our observable

universe, and there may actually be a multiverse that stretches back way before the big bang. So the Bible's poetical phrase, "your time has no measure" sounds reasonable to me. So does the beautiful phrases in the hymn we sing at the end of the service, Adon Olam. "After everything is gone, yet One alone, awesome, will reign. God was, and is and will remain . . . Without beginning and without end . . ."

This sense of deep time overlaid with our ephemeral and humble present can inspire awe but also anxiety about the meaning of our lives and about our mortality. One of the most well-known passages on this theme is in Augustine's famous autobiography *Confessions*. "What is time?" Augustine asks. "Who can explain this easily and briefly? . . . Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know . . . Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they 'be' when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present? Yet if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time

but eternity. If then, in order to be time at all, the present is so made that it passes into the past, how can we say that this present also 'is'? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be. So indeed we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it tends towards non-existence."<sup>3</sup>

Augustine concludes that since time in any real sense does not exist, time is what we experience in our souls in the present. That is, we experience in the present the past through memories, the present through awareness, and the future through expectation.

For Augustine, however, the human experience of time, is difficult. He calls time a *distentio animi*, a distention or stretching out of the soul in different directions that causes pain and anxiety. "I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul . . ." <sup>4</sup> "Who can lay hold on the heart and give it fixity, so that for some little moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendour of a constant eternity?" <sup>5</sup> He prays for the

day in the future when he is released from the distention of time and “purified . . . by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.”<sup>6</sup>

Augustine’s idea of the three-fold present is very helpful for thinking about time. But while our human experience of time inevitably includes sadness around loss and mortality, especially if we are focused on the past, Augustine seems overly focused on the future, on a time when he is released from time. Judaism, however, does not primarily look for a future release from time but rather a way of creating moments of holiness within time, a way of bringing the presence of God, eternity, within our lives. The three-fold present, can be understood not as a distention but as an experience of Jewish sacred time. When we are present to sacred time like Shabbat, a yontif like today, or a lifecycle ceremony like a naming of a newborn, we fully experience the three-fold present, the past, present and future of the moment. Our prayers of gratitude bring to our awareness the present moment. Our ancient rituals connect us to the

tradition of our ancestors stretching thousands of years into the past. And our faith and strength of spirit imbue us with an expectation that transcends anxiety and lifts us to a sense of belonging to an unfolding universe. The holiness of time resides in being able to hold all three aspects of time in a moment of gratitude. That is the essence of the *shehekhiyanu* prayer, with which we began this holiday last night. *Bless You who has given us life, sustained us at each moment, and brought us to this point in the flow of time.*

One of the most powerful rituals of Rosh Hashanah that embodies that full experience of the three-fold present is the shofar. The mitzvah regarding the Shofar is not to blow it but to listen to it. *Blessed are You who made us holy with your mitzvot and commanded us to listen to the shofar.* The commandment to listen is the commandment to be fully present. The shofar is said to wake us up. To what? To being fully aware, fully present. At the same time, we are connected to a shared past by listening to a sound heard by our ancestors for 3,000 years, including at Mount Sinai. As to the future,

the shofar is associated with the announcement of the messianic time, the ultimate future expectation of justice, redemption and eternity. Listening to the shofar, we experience a time out of time, a moment of “eternity breaking in on the temporal.”

The shofar awakens us to the sacred moment. Our tradition teaches us that the shofar also awakens us to *teshuvah*, repentance, a central theme of Rosh Hashanah that is also related to time. Today starts the first day of the ten days of repentance, leading to Yom Kippur. Teshuvah means “return” in Hebrew, and the idea of “return” is an idea of time. It is also an idea of space. In Judaism, as in the theory of special relativity, time and space become “spacetime” and are both dimensions of reality. In Hebrew, the word *olam* means both cosmos and eternity.

Teshuvah’s idea of return, whether in space or time, is paradoxical. We ask forgiveness or make change in the present, concerning past transgressions, with the expectation of a different future. So the idea of “return” here is not only about the past, as the

word suggests, but also about the future. In addition, how can you return in time anyway? According to the laws of physics, time only moves forward, and there will never be time travel, so that we cannot travel into the past and change what was. But in Judaism, Teshuvah is just that—a kind of spiritual time travel that takes us “back to the future,” so to speak. Maybe that is why, according to our tradition, teshuvah was one of the things created before creation—before time itself.

To explain this uncanny ability of teshuvah to reverse time, I will turn to the words of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, that are also included in our Machzor (p. 8, 20).

Time flows in one direction; it is impossible to undo or even to alter an action after it has occurred and become an ‘event,’ an objective fact. However, even though the past is ‘fixed,’ repentance admits of an ascendancy over it, of the possibility of changing its significance in the context of the present and the future. This is why repentance has been presented as something created before the world itself. In a world of the inexorable flow of time, in which all objects and events are interconnected in a relationship of cause and effect, repentance is the exception: it is the potential for something else. . . . Repentance . . . is an ever-renewed extrication from causality and limitation.

In other words, as an example, we may have hurt someone in the past, causing a break in a relationship. But real teshuvah, while not erasing the event, creates a different context for the event.

Instead of being an event leading to more anger, hurt and separation, it is now, through teshuvah, an event leading to an open heart that in turn leads to different behaviors including kindness, clarity, healing and love. The significance of the event changes, because we are changing the direction of the story. Our change in the present, rewrites both the past and the future, making us spiritual time travellers.

Rosh Hashanah is referred to in the Torah as a day of memory—*zikaron*. We go back in time, back in memory, to do teshuvah but also to enjoy the beauty of life, finite in itself but part of whole that is infinite. “Turn around, Turn around,” the song says, as we poignantly watch more of our lives become a part of our past. Or, to quote Pete Seeger’s song based on Ecclesiastes, “to everything, turn, turn, turn.” Those past moments can continue to give us

blessing. As the character the Reverend Ames muses in the novel *Gilead*, "Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time" (p. 91).

This day we celebrate a new year, but we not only mark the arrow of time, but the renewal of time. We celebrate that first day of creation. We celebrate this day. May we all find blessing in it.

Shana Tova

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 230-31).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 244.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 244.