

It's About Time
Kol Nidrei 5763
September 15, 2002

A colleague of mine is fond of saying that he doesn't mind so much if, during a sermon, he looks out in the congregation and sees someone going like this [surreptitiously glance at watch]. What bothers him a bit more, he says, is when he sees someone going like this [tap watch to see if it's working].

Well, I didn't exactly have a chance to catch David Letterman on the Friday night after services on Erev Rosh Hashanah. So I don't know if he came through with his usual line. But often, around this time of year, exclaims with his unique blend of bafflement and sardonic wit: "Wow, it's the Jewish New Year already! And I'm still writing 5762 on my checks!"

My friends, I want to speak with you tonight about the power of time, about a circle and a line, about how moving from one way of looking at the world to another can change our lives forever. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that as Jews, we have no cathedrals in the physical world, no sacred space, no hallowed ground. Instead what we build, he says, are cathedrals in time. Or, in the possibly better-known words from that cultural phenomenon of the 1970's, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: "Let's Do the Time Warp Again."

Now, normally when we talk about time, we talk about quantity. Is there enough of it? Where does it go? How can we get done what we need to do? Or we talk about quality: do we use our time wisely and well?

But I want to explore a different aspect of chronology, a more mystical kind of question, more about its mood and shape and texture than a raw amount.

What a wondrous and bizarre thing it is: fixed and firm, scientifically solid, yet subjectively plastic. Have you ever been away for a week and had a sense of temporal displacement – as if the week went by in the blink of an eye, *and* felt as if it lasted forever? A few hours can feel like minutes, or days, depending on our state of mind.

The ticking of a clock, the ending of a week, the passing of a month, the measurements of our lives. We invented them, yet they rule us. We want to mark and end a difficult period, to bring closure to a painful chapter, to begin anew, to start afresh, feel as if we can face the world with a clean slate at the dawn of a new day, a new month, a new year. It is an annual exercise: we look back at the blemishes of the past, and long to put them behind us.

But this year, more than others: how much we yearn to turn the page! We are caught up in a cycle of viciousness and terror, the routine expectations of a placid life shattered. If we were, a few years ago, afraid of our computers, this past year we learned to fear the mail. And the sky. This year we saw planes become weapons, the plain meaning of words distorted, Americans with big bombs failing to find an elusive enemy, Jews again afraid to walk the streets of Europe. The world is going mad! Life and death hang by an invisible spore, a mosquito's bite, a seder skipped, a cup of coffee in a university café. Lives burn, people die, none of it seems to make any sense. Turn the page, close the book, bring the year to an end!

We stand on the precipice of tomorrow, baited breath and beating heart. We stand in a place where expectation and anxiety mix: tomorrow *must* be better than today. It must. It has to be. And yet I once read a High Holy Day sermon of an American rabbi, who wrote that the ultimate horror had come to pass, the worst had happened, that the news could *not get* any grimmer than this. The year was 1934.

So often it seems we are prisoners of time, caught up in the slow and steady falling of the sand, the ticking of the clock, the inexorable linear forward sweep from yesterday to tomorrow. But there are moments in our lives when time seems to stand still. When our soul pulls free from the flow. When we can step above the stream, use the tug of time in a wholly different way. In a holy different way.

We begin right here, right now. For we stand this night in a warp of time; a community on the edge of forever, where is and was and what will be meet and open to one another. *Kol Nidrei*: a whisper of wings, as promises are remembered.

It is said of *Kol Nidrei* that the melody carries more magic, perhaps even more meaning than the words. Indeed, Jews around the world this night lose themselves in the cantor's chant, caught up in something at once timeless and profound.

But the words do say something. And in the words, too, here and now crumble before the invocation of yesterday and tomorrow.

What is *Kol Nidrei*? An incantation, a formula. In it we pray: "may our vows be void, if we cannot carry them out." In it we say that our commitment is *so* important,

so *binding* that it takes this solemn ceremony to release us from the unkept promise, the unfulfilled word.

The *Kol Nidrei* we sung tonight looks towards the future. “All our vows and oaths, all the promises we make and the obligations we incur, *between this Yom Kippur and the next...*” We attempt to reach across time and make what we have not yet done as if it never was.

Only, what we sung tonight is *not the original version* of *Kol Nidrei*. It is not what was sung for centuries. The *original Kol Nidrei* said something different. It annulled vows we imposed upon ourselves “*from the previous Yom Kippur, to this one.*”

The original words sought what one colleague calls “retroactive nullification,” that is, “from the very moment they took force, *Kol Nidrei* renders the vows as if they no longer exist, and had never existed.” (Gershon) What was is not, and never was.

[Another version sung today, in some Sephardic synagogues, leaves nothing to chance. It looks to the present *and* future; it nullifies the unfulfilled vows of last year *and* next. Now, this really gets us off the hook. Let’s talk about sin. Look, if you’re going to break your promise to God to be here all day tomorrow, if you’re going leave services *early* and skip N’eilah and not stay for the powerful climactic close of this holy day in order to get a good seat at the Redskins game... I guess you’re covered – for this year and next. But only if you sung the Sephardic version of *Kol Nidrei* tonight.]

The power of this night comes from a moment beyond itself. Something - the music, the memory, a collective unconscious, a fear of our failings - if the service works

then *something* lifts us to a place beyond the ordinary. This night, we do the time warp again.

Have you ever had that feeling of *deja vu*, a sense of things happening again and again? Have you ever had that feeling of *déjà vu*...

A time out of time. Some of us, at least, have been here before. A Bar or Bat Mitzvah: this, too, a kiss of time, when the present recedes before the awesome power of yesterday and tomorrow.

A young boy stands before the open ark. A young girl chants from the scroll of her life. But a single day, alone by itself, is nearly pointless. A party. A good time. A “job well done.” And so what? Part of that day *must* be the effort that brought it about, the journey through Jewish history that led to *this* particular child, *this* gathering of a family, even with it a yearning for yesterday, a keenly felt absence of those who should have been there, no longer here.

And part of that day, as well, must be the surety of the future, a commitment to continue, a love affair with Torah, loyalty to a people; above all, an awareness that a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is but the commencement of Jewish identity, and not its culmination. Absent clan and context, it is a service to suffer through. Absent the promise of tomorrow, it is a hollow shell, a poor excuse for entertainment.

But if the day is deep, if the ceremony works it is *not* an isolated event. Standing on the bimah we travel in time, yesterday and tomorrow as reachable and

real as the present we savor with such excitement in our heart.

We rely on the past for memory. We depend on the future for meaning. And the present is a floating vessel, a nexus in time, a fleeting moment where the eternal and ephemeral flow together; when, in opening to growth, we open ourselves to God.

There are those who say that outlook and identity are inseparable from our history. That we are trapped by yesterday. That ubiquitous university phenomenon known as Postmodernism asserts: we are shaped and molded by forces we cannot easily see. It is hard to exist, even to *think*, outside the boxes of race and gender and culture and group. Multiculturalists (now referred to, I see, as multi-cultis) say we *cannot* stand alone, that **the past determines the future**, that, in essence, **we are who we were**.

Deconstructing the ties of the past has taught us much. It has revealed the power of language, pointed to the hidden assumptions in all that we do. But to say the past controls the future is a problem for a Jew. It is, indeed, a central claim of our faith that the opposite is also true.

As the real meaning of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is found not on that day alone, but in what the young person makes of it, what he or she becomes, so, too, with all of us. **If we believe at all in the power to learn, in potential and change and growth, then,**

indeed, the future controls the past. We are only partly who we were. As much, or more, **we are who we will be.** Ever in formation. And God is not done with us yet.

[The very name of God speaks to us of the power, and possibility, of time. When Moses asks how he should present this Deity to the people, God responds: “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh.*” The words are almost impossible to translate. “*Asher*” means “that which” or “who is.” But “*Ehyeh?*” It is the single form of the verb “to be,” in the “imperfect” tense. What is imperfect tense? Action not yet completed. It is, in other words, either present *or* future. And so the word means *either* “I am” *or* “I will be.”

Which gives us the name: “I am what I am.” The Popeye God. Or. “I will be what I am.” Permanence. Eternity. A rock. The Prudential God. Or “I will be what I will be.” The Providential God. Untouchable. Unreachable.

Or, my favorite. The Process God. The God of becoming. The God of empowerment. The God of growth and of time. When we read the name as: “**I am who I will be.**”]

Try this. Imagine. Imagine that your grandparents perch on your left shoulder. And their grandparents. Imagine them watching you. Imagine that you can hear their voices again, that they are with you and in you, whispering their essence in your ear, their values in your veins. And imagine. Imagine that your grandchildren perch on your right shoulder. And their grandchildren. Or the people you touch in your life. Imagine that they are waiting, for a word from you, for a world from you, to make them

what they are. Feel the lightness of their touch, the breath of a translucent ghost. Feel their weight, on both your shoulders. Feel yourself surrounded, by the circle of time.

My friends, this night we have a choice, between a circle and a line. In the midst of a crowd of strangers, in a rush from event to event, we stand on line. We spend our time, online. We live our lives in a line. A to Z, beginning to end, birth to death. A link in a chain. With no turning back.

But we can change our life. We can stand in a circle instead.

When we are aware at once of memory and meaning, of history and possibility, of what was and what might be, we come to know that we are not alone, that we are much more than ourselves. When we walk the world of the now with an awareness that goes back to the Creation of the cosmos, that includes a connection with the experience of our ancestors, a reliving of the Exodus, a standing again at Sinai, an absorption of the journeys of our people into the fabric of who we are, when, indeed, we extend our consciousness to the path of redemption, to the way the world and we can be healed and holy and whole, when yesterday and tomorrow are as alive for us as today then we can, in the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “transcend this limited realm, and enter the domain of eternity.” It is “a vision new to us, yet seen before, like a memory of the future, a promise already kept.” (*Gates of Repentance*)

A story. In a small town, the telephone operator used to receive a somewhat annoying but very regular phone call. In mid-afternoon, a male voice would ask for the time. The telephone company had the only fine clock in town, and so it was the place to which one would turn to get the exact time. After many weeks of this, the operator asked the man: "why do you call with such regularity? I don't mind giving you the time, but why do you do that?"

And the man said: "Well, you see I work at the factory at the edge of town, and one of my responsibilities is to blow the five o'clock whistle, and I want to do it exactly right. I want to do a good job."

There was silence at the other end. Then the woman replied to the man: "Well I don't want you to misunderstand what I'm saying, and I really don't mind giving you the time at all."

*"But I do think that there's something that you ought to know. **We set our clock... by your whistle.**"*

So let me put it in different words again: We are what we are. But we can also be what we want to be. And time flows in more ways than one.

"Let's do the time warp again!" It is felt in the power of a prayer to build a stairway to heaven, a bridge beyond the bounds of time. It is felt in the existential

potential of the future, a reminder that we are at best who we will be. It is a growing sense that nothing is as set in stone as it seems. That what appears inevitable is merely inertia. That we are, in the end, partners with God, inventors of calendars; now and forever, the authors of ourselves.

Open the eye of the soul, and see:

It's about time.

L'shanah Tovah.