

Parashat Bo

Time is of the Essence

The major events of the Exodus and their accompanying mitzvot are contextualized within the framework of time. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was fascinated by this, and showed, at length and in various fora, that time's prominence here is intentional and even essential. At the birth of our nation, it was crucial for us to relearn and appreciate the true value of time.

Time to Go

In *Parashat Bo*, in particular, time is prominent.

(1) *The stroke of midnight*: On the night of the Israelites' departure, the final plague occurred precisely at the stroke of midnight: "And it occurred at midnight" (בְּחֹצֵי הַלַּיְלָה) (Exodus 12:29). Moshe said it would occur "around midnight" (כְּחֻצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה) (Exodus 11:4) because humans cannot calculate that time precisely.¹ The plague struck not a millisecond before midnight and not a millisecond after—it was midnight, on the dot.² The Israelite slaves were suddenly made aware of the power of time through the ultimate before-and-after contrast. At a specific moment, everything would irrevocably change.³

(2) *The first commandment*: "This month shall be for you the head of the months" (Exodus 12:2). The very first commandment given to the Jewish people was about marking time. Why?

To the slave, time is a curse; he waits for the day to pass. The slave's time is the property of the master. No matter how hard he may try to be productive in time, he will not reap the harvest of his work; therefore, he is insensitive to time.⁴

The Jewish people were about to be liberated, and learning time-awareness is a critical first step in transitioning to a liberated existence. The Rav suggests that this might account for the halachic exemption of slaves from *mitzvot aseh she-ha-zeman geraman*, the time-bound mitzvot. Without awareness of the ebb and flow of time, the slave cannot be held responsible for performing those mitzvot limited by time.⁵

(3) *Leavening time*: On the verse "You shall guard the matzot" (Exodus 12:17), Rashi cites the *Mechilta* which understands this to mean "guard them so they do not become *chametz*." He then cites another opinion:

¹ Rashi on Exodus 11:4.

² *Mechilta, Bo (masechta de-fischa)*, §13.

³ Soloveitchik, *The Lord is Righteous*, 128–129.

⁴ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:85.

⁵ Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, 200.

Rabbi Yoshiyah says: Do not read it as “matzot” (מַצוֹת) but as “mitzvot” (מִצְוֹת). In the same way we do not allow matzah to be leavened, so we do not allow a mitzvah to be leavened. If the opportunity presents itself, perform it immediately.⁶

Alacrity, which requires sensitivity to time, is an essential component in the service of God, and matzah is a paradigm for every mitzvah.

As the Jewish people were on the cusp of liberation, they needed to develop a consciousness of “time-awareness,” to use the Rav’s term. Even today, as we prepare for Pesach and bake matzot, we are ever conscious of the eighteen minutes steadily ticking away until the dough becomes *chametz*.

The unified theme of time, therefore, comes into focus. The final plague occurred at *exactly* midnight, we were bidden to establish a calendrical system, and the matzah had to be eaten within a specific period of time. All of these accentuated for the Israelite slave the lesson that time is essential to true freedom.

Making (the) Seder out of Time

The rituals of the Seder night, which commemorate our enslavement and liberation from Egypt, are likewise closely interwoven with the theme of time.

(1) *The holiday blessing*: We usher in Pesach during the *Amidah* of *Ma’ariv* by saying that God “sanctifies Israel and the festive seasons” (מְקַדֵּשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַזְמַנִּים). These words are repeated throughout the holiday, through which we affirm that it is the Jewish people who sanctify it. This is because God delegated to the Jewish people—in the very first commandment noted above—the authority to determine the date of the festivals. They are the conduit through which sacred time is sanctified and marked.⁷

(2) *The first cup of wine*: Why does the first cup of wine, over which we recite Kiddush, count as one of the *dalet kosot*, the four special cups drunk at the Seder? Is it not the case that we recite Kiddush at the beginning of every Shabbat and holiday? With his characteristic penetrating insight, the Rav proposes that the first cup of wine signifies the sanctification of time, by discriminating between the weekday and the onset of Pesach. In that sense, it is part of what Pesach is all about: time-consciousness.⁸

(3) *The opening of Maggid*: We are accustomed to begin the section of *Maggid* by reciting the Aramaic passage *Ha Lachma Anya*, “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” However, the Haggadah of the Rambam precedes that with the words “we hurriedly left Egypt” (בְּבִהָלוֹ יֵצְאוּנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם). The Rav argues that the Rambam thought the theme of time-awareness to be so important that to successfully tell the story of the Jewish people’s redemption from slavery it had to be begin the narrative.⁹

⁶ Rashi on Exodus 12:17.

⁷ Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 308.

⁸ Genack, *Exalted Evening*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

The Seder is intended to remind us of our unique ability, conferred upon us by God, to sanctify time. This theme is foundational to the story of our people and must be amplified when celebrating the Exodus.

Counting Days and Weeks

This special Pesach emphasis on time continues well beyond the Seder night. The very next night we begin *sefirat ha-omer*, the counting of the Omer, marking each passing day and then every week as time slowly marches to Shavuot nearly two months later. The Rav exquisitely expresses the deeper meaning embedded in this count:

When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression and Moses rose to undertake the almost impossible task of metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a nation of priests, he was told by God that the path leading from the holiday of Passover to Shavuot, from initial liberation to consummate freedom...leads through the medium of time. The commandment of *sefirah* was entrusted to the Jew; the wondrous test of counting forty-nine successive days was put to him. These forty-nine days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of numeration is invalidated.

A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious fabric...is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.¹⁰

Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, a rosh yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary affiliated with Yeshiva University, expands upon this teaching of the Rav by highlighting the fact that, remarkably, we are enjoined to actually recite a blessing over time as we count the Omer. The forty-nine repetitions of this blessing help us internalize the fact that time can be imbued with sanctity.¹¹

Lessons for Living

As our ancestors learned at the Exodus, time is not a blank canvas on which we live out our lives but a wash of distinct colors—alternately bold and muted, bright and dark—every moment pregnant with sacred potential. It follows that the importance of the clock for modern Jewish life cannot be overstated. For this reason, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, one of the greatest luminaries of the previous generation, often chose to gift bar mitzvah boys a new watch. On this auspicious day marking a young man's entry into adulthood, he wished to impart that there is nothing more precious in life than time.

God took the Jewish people out of Egypt to become His people and observe His Torah. As new masters of their own schedule, the manumitted slaves had to remember that there was a Master expecting them not to allow mitzvot “to be leavened.” A Mishnah captures this experience of time: “Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master is insistent.”¹²

¹⁰ Shapiro, *Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer, and Shavu'ot*, 147.

¹¹ Heard in a lecture.

¹² *Pirkei Avot*, 2:20.

This finds clear expression in Halachah as well. As the Rav puts it:

A person reads *keri'at Shema* at 9:05 and fulfills the mitzvah, but at 9:06 his performance is worthless. What did he miss? It was the same recitation, the same commitment, the same dedication. And yet, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah of *keri'at Shema*. Time is of critical importance—not years or months, but seconds and split seconds. Time-awareness and appreciation is the singular gift granted to free man, because time belongs to him; it is his time, and he can utilize it to the utmost or waste it.¹³

Once sensitized to the preciousness of time, the Jew must maximize it. Wasting time, *bitul zeman*, is worthy of contempt.

Exploring the Rav's Insight

In the Torah, the very first thing to be sanctified is not a place, object, or being, but time itself: “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (Genesis 2:3). As we have seen, the first commandment given by God to the Jewish people was to mark sacred time by sanctifying the new month. As we do so by reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh, some have a custom to say the following verse afterwards: “And Avraham was old, advanced in years, and God blessed Avraham with everything” (Genesis 24:1). Why?

Perhaps the key lies in the phrase usually translated as “advanced in years” (אָדָּבַר בְּיָמָיו), but which can be understood to mean that he came to (אָדָּבַר) each day (בְּיָמָיו) with everything he had to give. He did not leaven any mitzvot. He ran to greet his guests (Genesis 18:2) and rushed to the tent to prepare their meal (Genesis 18:6). He rose early in the morning to fulfill the command to sacrifice Yitzchak (Genesis 22:3), a practice that the Talmud developed into a general principle that one should perform mitzvot with alacrity: *zerizim makdimim le-mitzvot*.¹⁴

Since Avraham taught us time-consciousness by personal example, perhaps this is why on Rosh Chodesh, a day that commemorates that very concept, we remind ourselves to walk (or rather run) in our forefather's footsteps.

The first act of sanctification, the first commandment to the nation, and the first Jew all share a common theme: a full appreciation and awareness of time.

¹³ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:86.

¹⁴ *Yoma* 28b.