
It's Time to Take Back Your Time!*

Rabbi Barry Lutz*

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This week we once again begin to retell and relearn some of the fundamental lessons about what it truly means to be human. We start, of course, at the very beginning, which as Maria reminds us in the Sound of Music, is "A very good place to start." We begin with the story of creation. It is a story we really pay scant attention to, because we all know that this is not the way the world came to be. But, as I often point out to the biblical sceptics among us, that is not the purpose of the story of creation -or indeed of any of the stories we find in the Torah. The Torah does not attempt to give an answer to the question "How," but rather "Why."*

There are two important answers to this question in the first chapters of Genesis. Why was the world created? Well, first, for us ... We are told that God created us b'tzelem elohim, in God's image and that the earth is here for us to fill and master ... That is, to do in our own way what God has begun ... to create. However, and it is a very, very large however, creation is not to go on unabated. After all, what is the last thing that God creates? Shabbat - rest. Perhaps the most significant phrase in the entire story of creation, is the last: "God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation."

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy ... Over the story of creation God has created many, many things, the heavens, the earth and everything in it ... but what is the first thing in creation that God makes holy? TIME The sanctification of time is one of the genius concepts of our tradition - because what does the rest of it matter, what good is the produce of our own work, the objects of our own creations if there is no time to enjoy them, to celebrate them, to be thankful for them?

So much of Jewish ritual and celebration is structured to recognize, bless, celebrate and sanctify time. In this very fundamental way Jewish values are completely at odds with the values of our American culture which teach us that any moment that isn't used to produce and control, any moment that isn't filled up completely is a moment that has been wasted. In our effort to better use time, we have attempted to move faster, to be more efficient, to make better use of our time ... and somehow all those efforts have only produced less time, less time for ourselves, for our children, for our leisure, for our lives.

Today, has been designated as "Take Back Your Time" day; a day for us to consider time and what has happened to it, to consider our own time starvation and its effects on us, our families, our community and our nation. Tonight I can only begin to touch on an issue that has spread its roots throughout our culture as clandestinely as the St. Augustine grass that has taken over my lawn. But it is a problem that is at the very

core of our social foundations and cultural assumptions - and finding a solution will involve challenging those foundations and assumptions as uncomfortable as that may be.

Jerome Segal, one of the co-founders of the Simplicity Forum, the creators of this Take Back Your Time Day, points to three problems that are at the core of our lack of time. These are: Time Thievery, Overwork and Time Estrangement.

Time Thievery is time that is taken from us in so many surreptitious ways that we aren't even aware. Let me name just a few:

The commute. Let's be generous and say that the average commute to and from work in Los Angeles is about thirty minutes. I know for some of you it is less, and for many of you it is much, much more, especially in the past few weeks. That is one hour a day or 5 hours a week, or 250 hours a year, or, 6 - 40 hour work weeks that we spend, on average just getting to and from work. Six weeks that have been stolen from us as we sit on the 405.

Technology. I love technology. After all, I am a guy and I love my toys. But what has technology done to our time? It was supposed to give us more of it, remember? Instead, technology has led to the breakdown in the barriers between work and home. E-mail and cell phones mean that we are never out of touch. We can go home and answer the e-mail we couldn't get to at the office. We take our cell phones wherever we go. Because, God forbid we should be out of touch, even in the middle of worship services, which are supposed to give us a time for retreat from our crazy lives.

So, are we using technology or is it using us?

Following my talk on Rosh Hashanah, so many of you shared stories with me. I have to share one with you that was told to me by Les Birken. In one of his trade publications is a story of a man spending the day at the beach with his family. He receives a phone call from a client and immediately leaves his family on the beach in order to answer his client's need.

Anticipating the moral of the story, I was expecting this man to be berated for letting the demands of his client infringe on his personal time with his family. Wrong. This was an article of praise about a man who was willing to sacrifice his family because, of course, the client always comes first. And these days the client can reach us at any time, and in any place.

Then there are the more subtle ways time is being stolen from us. Remember when operators used to answer the phone, and direct your call to the appropriate person? How much time do we now waste, pressing 1 if you speak English then listening to 9 options, none of which really addresses your need, so that you can be directed to

a message, so that they can reach you on your cell phone when you are putting your kids to bed?

AND ... How much time is wasted in this country trying to deal with a health system that is completely out of whack? How many times have you had to meet new doctors as your plan is dropped, for good reason I might add, by one doctor after another. How many of you have spent significant time on hold trying to deal with an insurance issues that is misunderstood, misapplied, misdirected or just plain missed - and handled by an individual who has no authority but to recite policy. And it takes hours and days and weeks to get to anyone who can even begin to give you any kind of response. (Watch for a sermon on this topic coming to a synagogue near you soon!)

Of course the bottom line of all of this is ... the bottom line. The true culprit in this theft of time is the almighty dollar. Saving money wherever possible, and more importantly making money in every way possible, with little concern really for the effects of such shortsighted philosophy on each of us, our community and our world. It seems that the purpose of our society is to support the economy.

Our culture tells us in every way, at every turn that we need more, and we need it bigger and better and faster. And this culture of consumerism means that we have to work longer, harder and faster to pay for all the stuff that we've been told we have to have. Which leads to overwork.

Do you know that on average, over the past 25 years, work hours have increased by 12%? Today we work 199 hours more than we did in the mid-70s. That is an additional 5 weeks a year. And, that is just an average. For the middle class, those just trying to keep their heads above water, work hours have increased by 20%, 330 hours annually, more than 8 additional weeks of work a year.

And as time keeps on slippin' slippin' slippin' - we are driven to do everything faster. There are books on how to manage faster, work out faster, diet faster, how to shop faster, even on how to have sex faster (sorry kids)!

Getting it done quick has become much more important than getting it done well (I don't mean just in the bedroom) You know the buzz words in parenting: it's the quality not the quantity of the time ... Oh, come on, who is kidding who? There is no quality without quantity.

In the manufacturing industry there is a name for the lack of product quality that results from of a lack of time: planned obsolescence. Workmanship is shoddier, because it is more important to get it done fast than to get it done well. A PBS documentary on the evolution of Microsoft interviewed the designers of the Windows operating system. The designers acknowledged that they were aware of serious problems with early versions of Windows but it was more important to get the product

into the market than correct the bugs in the system. And how much time has that decision cost each of us?

Now, consider the debilitating effects of this kind of work environment on the quality of our lives. We don't feel good about work we produce because we have too much, and we have to finish too quickly, and we can't give it the attention it deserves. And that unhappiness flows over into every aspect of our lives.

The implications go beyond what we might realize. Take the environment, for instance. Do you know that 24 acres of raw material are consumed each year in producing the goods used by the average American. Goods that are produced under the banner of planned obsolescence. Now there are, on average, only 5 acres available for each person currently on this planet. So, one has to ask, when other nations begin to catch up, where will the five extra planets come from?

But, perhaps the largest problem of all is that we have become estranged from time. We have no time left for those activities through which we give meaning to our lives. There is no time for activities that provide for self-expression, self-realization, for growth and reflection. For instance, we have no time to fulfill our civic duties..Our lack of time is taking a serious toll on our democracy. Look at the facts and figures, voting percentages go down every year. In the 2000 presidential election, which was decided by only a handful of votes 20% of those who did not vote, a group larger in number than the votes separating the two candidates, said that they just didn't have time to go to the polls. Today, informed political choice means watching 30 second t.v. spots. People say they feel estranged from the process, that they cannot affect the process. Of course not, they don't have time to participate in an informed and meaningful way.

We have a similar experience here. So many congregants express the wish to become involved, but they simply can't find the time. And people who don't have time to become involved are likely eventually begin to feel estranged from the community. Find someone who talks about "the Temple" and I will bet that you will find someone who just doesn't have the time to become involved in the great and important work that we do here.

How is it possible to be an active citizen when we are working 6 to 8 weeks more annually than we did 20 years ago, when we are spending 6 weeks just commuting. That's an additional 12 to 14 weeks! No wonder we all feel time starved and exhausted.

We just don't have the time to connect with each other. Instant messaging and e-mail has replaced real face to face interaction. And the lack of personal connection affects us in many harmful ways. Doctors report that instances of stress, anxiety and depression have reached epidemic proportions. All of these are indications that our

that we need to solve the problem, we just need time to restock, replenish and re-energize.

We need time to rest, time to eat proper meals, time to exercise, time to connect with our families and community, time just to be.

The difficulties are so many so overwhelming and seem so entrenched on our social and economic fabric. What can we do? So, what are the answers? Well they aren't simple ... there are no magic bullets. As I noted earlier, taking back our time is predicated on challenging some of the most fundamental aspects of our social organization and cultural assumptions. And that won't be easy or comfortable, because it means confronting our own lifestyle choices.

One place to begin is here, with Shabbat. It was the original Take Back Your Time Day. It was a radical and revolutionary notion at the time of its creation and it certainly remains so in the face of our contemporary culture and values. Shabbat gives us a structured, established place to start. Granted, it is only a beginning, but a significant one. In the kiddush, we are told that Shabbat is a reminder of two events, the creation of the world and our freedom from Egypt. We need to take these words seriously, using Shabbat as an opportunity to create for ourselves a world in which we have been redeemed from the tyranny of time.

Imagine again that man sitting on the beach with his family. The cell phone rings, but he doesn't hear it - because he doesn't have it with him. So rather than jumping up the client gets a message from the answering service: "I'm sorry, but today is Shabbat, it's my day with my family. Please leave a message and I will call you back first thing tomorrow." How do you argue with that? How do you argue with a man who has made a commitment to his family and his faith?

We need to begin to find small ways, like this, to take back our time. More than that, we need to look take a hard look at our lives, at our choices, at how we buy into a system that, by not giving us time for ourselves, our family or our community is eroding the source of strength at the very foundation of our society.

We need to support leaders who promote social and economic policies that are based on the idea that the purpose of an economy is to promote the physical, mental and spiritual welfare of society rather than the other way around.

Oh and by the way, I truly believe that in doing so the bottom line will do just fine.

I would argue that what I have shared with you tonight what I have discovered for myself in the past few weeks is not just a nice idea, not just a quaint, but unrealistic, ideal. I would argue instead, that we are talking about nothing less than our very future, we are talking about our health, about the future of our families, the vitality our

society and the well being of our world.

I hope that you will continue to share your stories with me of how you are taking back time in your own lives. I hope that we can, together, become a force for change promoting the sanctification rather than the desecration of time. That is, indeed the world we pray for each Shabbat. A world of wholeness and peace, a world where we have the time both to create and to celebrate our humanity.

Slow me down, O God...✠

May I ease the pounding of my heart, by the quieting of my mind, and✠

Steady my hurried pace with the vision of the Eternal reach of time.✠

May I, amidst the confusion of my day, seek the calmness of the everlasting hills, and✠

Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory.✠

May I know the magical restoring of sleep, and✠

Learn the art of taking minute vacations – of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines from a good book.✠

May I remind myself each day of the fable of the hare and the tortoise, that I may know that the race is not always to the swift, that there is more to life than increasing its speed.✠

May I look upward into the branches of the towering oak tree and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well.✠

Slow me down, O God. And may I be inspired to send my roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values that I may grow toward the stars of greater destiny. Amen.✠