

Erev Terumah 5778

Time

Elkan Kohn

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To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to keep silent, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

We all know, and are familiar with these verses from Ecclesiastes we hear them frequently in our services, and for each of us, these words have a special meaning.

And to add to this, our service this evening commenced with the words, “The Sabbath has descended to enfold us in its mantle of peace. It brings to us the precious gift of time: time to embrace family and friends, to reflect more deeply on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and to worship in the beauty of holiness.”

Time is something we deal with every day, and something that everyone thinks they understand. Clearly time is not an object or substance that we can touch or see. But neither is it merely a dimension, quantity or a concept. Indeed, time has many aspects and appears to represent different things to different people in different circumstances. A few examples of some of the different contexts in which the word “time” is used may serve to indicate just how flexible, multi-functional and often vague the word is:

- “Time stood still”
- “Excuse me, do you have the time?”
- “Adolescence is a difficult time”
- “I don’t have the time right now”

- “Clap in time to the music”
- “Things were different in my time”
- “He should be doing time for such a crime”

Looking back over the forty years that I have been in this country, I have seen many changes. Our practices within Liberal Judaism, for example, have moved closer to traditional Judaism in that the wearing of head covering by men, optional at the beginning, has become the norm today, and very few of our male members do not wear a kippa now. The wearing of Tallaisim by women is visible today, but was unheard of forty years ago. On the other hand we have the extremes of the Charedi Jews who live in a commune where very little has changed and time has stood still. They are now planning to move en masse to Canvey Island, out of their comfort zone? - no Kosher butchers, challah bakers etc - certainly a big adjustment..... not only for this new community, but also for the natives of Canvey Island.

Time has also given us rapid advances in science and medicine. New technologies and drugs have led to a marked increase in life expectancy and quality of life. Cancers, which were fatal, perhaps twenty or thirty years ago, are now treatable. Technology has advanced at an alarming rate to give us mobile phones, computers, electric cars and satellites which allow us to position ourselves to within a few feet anywhere in the world. Social media - exciting, but also with its frightening consequences.

Time has also markedly changed our attitudes to sexuality and there is a far greater acceptance today of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. A classic example of change was seen in the life of Alan Turing. Here was a man who was primarily responsible for the code breaking at Bletchley Park, which shortened World War 2 and saved countless lives. In 1952, Alan Turing was arrested for homosexuality and found guilty of gross indecency which was then illegal in Britain - this conviction was overturned as late as 2013. He avoided a prison sentence by accepting chemical castration; however in 1954, just two years after his conviction, he was found dead from cyanide poisoning. An inquest ruled that it was suicide. Tragic, but unlikely to happen in our day. How very sad!

Time can also play tricks on us. At times it appears to pass slowly, like waiting for something exciting to happen, or imagine the homeless person on the streets waiting for better things.

At other times, it seems to pass so very quickly, as the cliché says, “time flies when you are enjoying yourself!”

..... and as the American Author Henry Van Dyke wrote:

Time is Too Slow for those who Wait,
Too Swift for those who Fear,
Too Long for those who Grieve,
Too Short for those who Rejoice;
But for those who Love
Time is not.

A few weeks ago I attended the Harrow Holocaust memorial event at the Harrow Arts Centre in Hatch End. We heard accounts of survivors of Nazi Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and the Bosnian atrocities in the 1990s. A time span of sixty years, and yet what has mankind learnt from this? Each time we hear, “never again”, but it seems to fall on deaf ears, as we add to this list the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur.....

We all pray for a time when these situations will be confined to history, never to be repeated.

We are all allotted our time each day - it is how we use this time that is important.

When I am asked what I do with my time now that I am retired, my answer is “not a lot, but it does take an awfully long time.”

The American Psychologist Philip Zimbardo summed it up very well when he said:

“Our time is brief, and it will pass no matter what we do. So let us have purpose in spending it. Let us spend it so that our time matters to each of us, and matters to all those whose lives we touch.”