

# Putting Boundaries on Time

Rabbi Dan Smokler | Parshat Bo

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We live in a cultural moment where time can feel wholly undifferentiated. The power of new technology makes it possible to talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Work is conducted at day or at night, as easily in transit as in bed. Even in-between moments – waiting in line, commuting to work, running errands – can become time for listening to music, taking in a lecture, or making a conference call. The notion made popular by rail workers a century ago that a good day was composed of “eight hours for work, eight hours for rest and eight hours for what we will” seems quaint and unimaginable today. Even the slogan about “a work life balance” that plagues professionals seems off the mark. Our time is a churn of work and “life,” of entertainment and learning, of shopping and giving, happening all the time, everywhere.

Usually when we use technology to break down the boundaries of time we do not do it thoughtfully. We answer calls when it might be best to not, we plug in when quiet might

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be more called for, or  
turn our downtime into  
work time. The  
technology is so dazzling  
that it tramples our best  
intentions.

We might not be the first  
generation to live in  
poorly  
structured time. The  
Israelite slaves described  
in the Torah portion labored under the worst of conditions with no control over their  
schedule. Time for them was probably also undifferentiated. To be enslaved is be  
always on call, able to be worked and exploited, forever. Time can never really be  
organized if it is never yours to organize.

Perhaps that is why the first commandment given to the freed slaves reads simply,  
“This month shall be for you the first of all months,” which came to mean, “make a  
calendar, sanctify each month.” Apparently the first discipline God demands of the newly  
liberated slaves is not something as lofty as loving the widow and the orphan, but  
something much more basic: organize your time.

We are not slaves today by any measure, and we can determine the calendar far more  
accurately than our ancestors, but the Jewish practice of ordering time might be a spiritual  
discipline that could serve us well. In his work *Shem MiShmuel*, Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain  
(1855-1926), the second Rebbe of Sochatchov, offers some thoughts that might give us  
insight into how to reclaim a bit of this practice for ourselves.

He draws a distinction between the spiritual orientation of shabbat and that of the new  
moon, *rosh chodesh*. He explains that the restfulness, the *menucha*, of shabbat is  
experienced in direct proportion to the spiritual “work” an individual puts in the week  
before. A week of *mitzvot*, of study, of giving of oneself to others creates a deep sense of  
rest and fulfillment on shabbat. A week of self-seeking and indulgence leads to a shabbat  
of anxiety. Shabbat is often described as a day of unplugging. The Sochatchover would  
say this is half true. Shabbat is indeed for unplugging, but the “*or kedushat shabbat*”--the  
ethereal holiness of shabbat--comes from what we put in before. Shabbat is a call to live

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more fully so we can enjoy more deeply.

By contrast, the diminishing moon that heralds a new month challenges one to realize that time is slipping away. A person becomes filled with regret knowing that a month is gone and will not quickly return. Thus new months become linked conceptually with regret, repentance and self-improvement. A new moon is not a call to live more fully as a weekday-shabbat cycle is, but a periodic moment to realize that the time to change things, to act differently, to make life better is rapidly slipping away. Says the Sochatchover, “If one does not seize the moment *now* [at the a new moon] the opportunity is lost.”

To the Sochatchover’s two orientations to time we might add a third: the notion of living *zmanim*. All around my neighborhood of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, signs are posted conspicuously in countless stores announcing the proper time to light shabbat candles and to say the morning *shema* prayer. One effect of these guidelines is that they break the day into manageable moments of sanctity. The task for one block of time is to light candles, the task of another is to say the *shema*. This is an approach to time that is extraordinarily concrete, asking the practitioner to perform a specific disciplined task at regular intervals. These could be the classical commandments associated with *zmanim*, but it need not be restricted to these practices alone. What if there were regular disciplines of learning, of good deeds, of mindfulness that were practiced daily in their proper *zman*? This might lead to a different relationship with time.

Each of these consciously constructed relationships with time—whether on the scale of a week, a month, or a day—responds deeply and mindfully to God’s first charge to the Jewish people: “This month shall be for you the first of all months.”

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