

# The Time Being

Yom Kippur 2002/ 5763, UC Santa Barbara Hillel, Rabbi Steve Cohen

**Averot sheh beyn adam laMakom, Yom Kippur m'chaper. Averot sheh beyn adam l'chavero, eyn Yom Kippur m'chaper ad sheh v'ratseh at chavero.** “For sins between a human being and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins between one human being and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until the person has reconciled with the other person.” From the Mishnah, this is one of the most famous and most important of all rabbinic teachings about this day of Atonement which we are now entering.

Tonight I would like to discuss transgressions between human beings and God, and how Yom Kippur atones for them. What is a transgression against God? **Not** an ethical transgression. Because **ethics** refers to the realm of **beyn adam l'chavero** the realm of “between one human being and another.” Gossiping, cheating in business, oppressing a stranger, ignoring the poor, murder, adultery, embarrassing someone publicly, bearing a grudge... almost all the big and little ethical transgressions that come to mind, are **beyn adam l'chavero**, between one human being and another. They are the sins for which Yom Kippur does not atone, until we have made peace with the other person.

What, then, are transgressions between a human being and God? An orthodox Jew can answer the question easily: transgressions against God are all of the failures to live up to Jewish religious ritual law. Eating pork, for example, for an orthodox Jew, is a sin against God. It hurts no other person, but the Torah clearly forbids it. . . and so it is a sin, against God. Now I don't eat pork. . . but am I really ready to call eating pork a **sin**? What about shrimp? What about a Big Mac? I don't eat any of these, but **sin** is a big word... **too** big, in my opinion, for a Big Mac. This is the challenging question for liberal Jews: if we regard Jewish rituals as simply customs... perhaps very beautiful, but still just customs... is there anything that we would describe as a **sin** against God? And if so, does Yom Kippur in some way correct or undo those sins? And if so, how?

It all depends on what you mean by God.

For tonight, I would like to use a name of God that comes from a book that came outlast year, by Annie Dillard. She called the book **For the Time Being**. Only about two thirds of the way into the book did I understand that she meant the title as a pun, and that it can and should be read, “**For The Time Being**” . . . in other words, for God. Annie Dillard has come up with a beautiful name for God: The Time Being. And for tonight, **that** is what I mean by God: God is that which calls us, even commands us, to **sanctify** time, to make time holy, to **respond** to the cycles in our world and in our bodies in a way that creates sacred meaning. Not to do so, I am prepared to argue, **is** a sin. . . a transgression **not** against our fellow human, but against the Time Being, against God.

This Day of Atonement atones for this sin. That is my topic tonight.

Time is the great mystery. Concerns about time dominate our lives. Being on time; managing our time; giving each other our time; wasting time; having quality time;

keeping track of the time; having down time; time to oneself. These are not trivial issues—they are the essential problems we face in our work, in our relationships, and in the most intimate corners of our lives. We think and talk about time constantly; **but we don't understand it.** Is a year a long time? What about a minute? Let me take a quick straw poll: How many people here think that a minute is a long time? (wait one half minute) That was half a minute. **Now** who thinks a minute is a long time? Also: What is “now?” Does the past exist? What is memory? Does the future exist? What is prophecy? Time is the great mystery, and Judaism wants us to live in relationship with this mystery. In other words, in relationship with God, the Time Being. And it provides us with four sacred traditions for living with the Time Being. Those traditions are the year, the month, the week and the day. These are the four roads we Jews walk with God. When we depart from any one of the four ways, we find ourselves astray. . . and lost. This is transgression against God. I would like to explore briefly each of these four Jewish traditions for living with God the Time Being.

The first tradition is the year, which is always a wheel. In one year the earth completes its circular journey around the sun. We are riding on a vast carousel in space, whose circumference defines the year. But the wheel spins in time as well. The year returns us to our past. It brings us back to old places, places of memory. As each birthday approaches, each yahrtzeit, each festival..., the air fills with the old smells, the fragrance of the distinctive blossoms of the season, children sing the old songs, certain fruits come ripe and appear at the farmer's market, the particular slant of the rays of the sun, all these cues come to us, drifting through the windows of our nostrils, our ears, our eyes. . .and make their way into our mind, where they awaken memory. The year gives us back our past.

Judaism teaches us that we have a responsibility to create the year. Obviously the seasons will change whether we celebrate them or not. And memories will rise up within us, whether we invite them or not. But in order for our lives to be fully charged with the living past, we Jews are commanded, by The Time Being, to create the year. . .with the festivals.

The festivals are essentially a year-long series of sensory experiences, all of which have the power to awaken memory. The taste of apples and honey on our tongue. The cry of the shofar in our ears. The hunger of the 24 hour fast. The shade of the sukkah. The rustling of the branches of the lulav and the marvelous fragrance of the etrog. The aroma of latkes sizzling in our noses. The dancing, melting, colored candles of the menorah. The rasping sound of the gragger. The tangy sweetness of poppy seed filling in hamentashen. The tunes of dayenu and chad gadya, and the flavor of the charoset and horseradish. . . All of this, clearly, it is up to **us** to create and recreate. Without **our** effort, we will not smell the smells nor taste the tastes of memory. When we **do** make the effort, we build a bridge between past and present, which we can cross every year--at each one of the festival seasons. This is the path of the year, which each one of us is asked to walk with the Time Being. When we leave this path... .we turn away from God.

The second great Jewish time tradition is the month.

In the traditional Jewish world, the month was the primal unit of time most intimately associated with the Jewish people. The moon itself, the heavenly body which reveals the cycle of the month, was seen as a reflection of the Jewish people, which like the moon went through periods of decay followed by rebirth and expansion. The Hebrew word for month is **chodesh** which comes from **chadash** meaning “new. Whereas the wheel of the **year** carries us back to the past, and awakens **memory** the cycle of the month, beginning with the sudden, breath-taking appearance of each delicate new sliver moon, carries us **forward** into the **future** and awakens **hope**.

In the traditional Jewish world, the new moon is blessed each month with a ritual called “Kiddush Levanah”. . . literally “The Sanctification of the White One.” Kiddush Levanah is always performed outside, at night, and its primary ritual action consists of **jumping** three times, toward the moon, and calling out: “Just as I am leaping toward you and am unable to reach you, so may my enemies not be able to touch me!” and then a prayer “May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of my fathers, that you heal the moon, and restore her light to be equal to the light of the sun....”

Traditional prayer books retain this ritual, and, in the most traditional communities, Jews still leap toward the moon in the middle of one night, every month. Most Americans, as far as I know, have no such moon ritual. And we Americanized Jews tend to easily lose track of where we are in the month and even of which Jewish month we are in..., and we don’t jump at the moon in the night. Coincidentally, many people of all ages report that they are finding it difficult to feel hopeful about the future. Could it be that returning to the traditional Jewish path of the month, the **path** of the future and of hope, might lift our spirits? There’s one way to find out!

Another distinctive Jewish practice that sets the month at the heart of Jewish life is what is referred to as “family purity.” It is an awesome and mysterious fact ... that the cycle of the month occurs in nature in two places—in the phases of the moon **and** in the menstrual cycle of women. Traditional Judaism makes much of that connection. Traditional Jewish couples structure their sexual lives around the woman’s monthly cycle. During one half of the month, while she is bleeding, and during the week after, they separate from each other physically, not even touching hands, and then in the second half of the month, after she immerses in the mikveh, they come together in sexual intimacy.

Thanks to the efforts of our local Chabad, Santa Barbara’s Jewish community now has a mikveh. And some local non-orthodox Jewish couples have for the first time been experiencing the traditional Jewish monthly separation and reunion. It is physical, gutsy Judaism; it sanctifies a couple’s love life; it creates excitement; and it restores to the center of our lives the cycle of the **month**: the sacred pathway of birth and rebirth, and hope for the future.

The third Jewish tradition for living with the Time Being is the week. No change or movements of the sun or the moon signal the start of the week, or its ending. Nothing in nature makes a week seven days long. . . in fact, many societies have had no concept of week at all. The week is a strictly **human** construction... and at its heart is the institution of the Shabbat, the Sabbath.

In Judaism, the week is all about Shabbat. Sunday, in Hebrew, is just called “Yom Rishon l’Shabbat,” meaning “the first day on the way to Shabbat.” Monday is “Yom Sheni l’Shabbat,” the second day on the way to Shabbat. . . and so on. The entire week is simply a journey toward Shabbat. Shabbat is a weekly fulfillment of the purpose of our lives.

The greatest modern teacher of the meaning of Shabbat was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who describes Shabbat as “A Palace in Time.” Here are some of his words: “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness in time.”

The Sabbath is perhaps the most radical institution that Judaism has brought to the world. That and the idea of God... the Time Being. In fact, they go together. Shabbat is **liberation** for one out of every seven days, from the world of work and worry, of newspapers and television, of computers and email, of shopping and cooking and cleaning. . . liberation for twenty-five hours to be a human being. To relax, talk, and laugh with members of the family and with friends. To nap. To go for a stroll. To read. To pray. To sing. To step out of the world, and into eternity.

Many people when they first imagine twenty-five hours of not doing but being reject the idea out of hand. Many say: “I can’t. I have too much to get done.” Others say: “I’d go crazy! I can’t hold still that long!” The best answer that I know is: try it. It is addictive. It is miraculous. It is a gift from God.

Many smart people have begun to argue that our society desperately needs to re-discover Shabbat. Especially as things get faster and faster and faster. It is becoming more and more understood that our computers are NOT making our lives easier; on the contrary; they are making our lives faster. We are living now not simply week to week or even day to day, but minute to minute and second to second. And we are becoming exhausted.

On Shabbat we can take off our watch. For me, that is the moment of liberation undoing the shackles of slavery. There is no greater pleasure than to watch the sun slowly march across the sky, and finally sink into the west. These are the only time pieces we need on Shabbat-- the setting sun, the darkening sky, and the first twinkling stars that signal the moment of havdalah.

In removing our watch, and breaking free of the tyranny of seconds, minutes and hours... we reconnect for a full day to the Time Being. If we have refused this gift, we have broken faith with God. . . and for this we need atonement.

The fourth and last time tradition that Judaism offers us is The Day, which in Hebrew is Hayom. . . which also means Today. If the year gives us **our past** and the month gives us **hope for the future** and the weekly Shabbat gives us **eternity** the day gives us **Now** In English we have the expression “today is the day.” Hebrew doesn’t even bother making the proposition; it simply calls today **Hayom** “the day.” By implication, no other day really matters. . . or even exists. This **is the** day . . . the only day that really counts.

A similar notion is expressed in our morning prayers, when each day we thank God. . . bam'chadesh b'chol yom tamid maaseh b'reishit. . . that is, God who **each day** recreates the world. Those old days. . . are gone. They are old worlds that have passed into non-existence. . . the sun is rising, for the first time, and the world is new.. . this is Hayom, The Day.

Here we find Judaism's insistence on the importance of The Now... the Present. We are not really so much a religion of the **moment** as we are a religion of **the day**. It is indeed good to be fully present in the moment of prayer, or of conversation. But even more important is the work we have to do, in the here and now, which takes some planning ahead. To cook a meal and bring it to someone who is sick and shut in, takes several hours. To sit down and write a letter to an old friend or a family member, takes more than a moment. To go through the procedures to adopt a grandparent or a little brother or sister, takes hours.... Nonetheless, these are all things which we will never do until we say to ourselves: **Today** I do this.

The Day is the fourth pathway that Judaism would have us walk with the Time Being. The Day is the world of our actions, the Now in which we have to decide and act without fail... because no one knows what tomorrow will bring. And to fail to live **in** the day, **each** day... to put off our responsibilities into the future, or to spend our days endlessly reviewing the past, triumphs or failures, pleasures or suffering. . . is in fact to **waste** the Day, and to sin against the Time Being.

These then are four pathways that Judaism asks us to walk with God: the year, the month, the week and the day.. . four traditions about living in relationship with the mystery of time. None of us has walked them all successfully in the past year.

This day which we are now entering,..., according to the Mishnah . . . does have the power to atone for these failures. In each case, how?

For the path of the day, the Now: No day of the year is so emphatically a day for action as Yom Kippur. We remind ourselves over and over that twenty-four hours from now the gates will close. After that it will be **too late**. If we do this day, and do it fully and passionately and without hesitation or waffling, it will be a huge first step toward waking up to each **new** day that follows.

The path of the week, the Sabbath: Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. If we spend **this** entire Sabbath day wearing no watch, unchained from our computer, liberated from our credit card and putting the stock market and our business and our bills completely out of our mind... then we will have tasted the fruit of Shabbat. And we will know that we did not die, but that our eyes were opened. And in this way Yom Kippur can give birth to the practice of Shabbat every week.

The path of the month: if you look in the back of a traditional Yom Kippur prayer book, the last ritual you will find. . . after the Neilah Service, after the final shofar blast and Next Year in Jerusalem. . . you will find Kiddush Levanah, the Sanctification of the White One, the Moon. If tomorrow night is not cloudy, and the moon is visible, it will be the perfect occasion for leaping toward the moon. . . and beginning a new practice of walking the path of the month. And when a Jew blesses the moon, said the ancient sages, they are actually greeting the face of God. . . the Time Being.

6

And finally, as an atonement for our departures from the path of **the year** and the creation of the festivals. It's been many years now that we have come together here at Hillel on this night. Our traditions are well-established. Every year Aharon chants Kol Nidre. Every year Judy's voice soars over us. Every year this wonderful book cracks our hearts open. True, many are here for the first time, but many of us have been coming together for Yom Kippur for ten, fifteen, twenty years. . .or more. We can feel the wheel of the year turning, returning us. The past is alive here tonight. The Time Being, I believe, is glad to have us back.

Gmar chatimah tova. . .may you be sealed in the Book of Life for a good year.