

## Midnight

Temple Isaiah, Kol Nidre 5768

*Rabbi Zoë Klein*

I want us to take a few minutes  
To contemplate the moment  
The clock strikes midnight...

The hour of glass-slippers,  
Goblins, and creaking floorboards.

Three times does the phrase  
“It came to pass at midnight”  
Appear in our Sacred Scriptures:

“It came to pass at midnight,  
That God smote every first-born in Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

“It came to pass at midnight,  
That Samson arose,  
And seized the doors of the gates of the city.”<sup>2</sup>

“It came to pass at midnight,  
That [Boaz] was startled and awoke,  
And behold, a woman was lying at his feet.”<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy  
That each one of those particular midnights  
Led to a certain redemption...  
The Jews were freed from bondage,  
Samson was freed from captivity,  
And Boaz, when he found Ruth at his feet,  
The beautiful Moabite  
Who had been gathering grain  
In his fields,  
Resisted temptation  
And decided that moment he would marry her.  
She became the great, great grandmother  
Of King David...  
Through decisions made  
that particular midnight  
Came the messianic dynasty,  
The ultimate redemption of all mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 12:29

<sup>2</sup> Judges 16:3

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 3:8

Every night,  
It is said,  
At midnight,  
The Holy One, Blessed be God,  
Enters the Garden of Eden  
To commune with the souls of the righteous.<sup>4</sup>

And every night,  
While we sleep,  
They say,  
Our souls leave us  
To return to the Garden  
At the exact moment  
When God enters,  
And our souls report our deeds,  
At midnight we are judged.

This moment,  
This knife-point,  
Poised between the day's deepest darkening  
And the commencement of its lightening,  
Is actually the razor-breadth's flash  
Between judgment and mercy,  
Between hope and despair.

Some believe that the time for *teshuva*,  
The time to arouse compassion  
In the Creator  
Is at midnight,  
That our prayers are listened to  
Most intently at that time.  
Midnight  
Is like a shard of Yom Kippur.  
Splintering the night...  
The gates of repentance swing open  
As if by a sudden gust,  
And then clatter shut again.  
We startle in our sleep,  
And then settle back down,  
Our house haunted by our unresolved deeds.

There developed a custom called *Tikkun Chatzot*  
Of praying during the midnight hour,  
Mostly a Sephardic custom.

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<sup>4</sup> Me'am Lo'ez

The people who pray this prayer  
Believe they are saving the world,  
The way a parent shushes a baby,  
They believe their prayers soothe  
The wailing of a tempestuous God,  
A God capable of floods and  
Brimstone storms,  
They rock-a-bye the heavens  
Until the peak of darkness is surmounted,  
Who by fire and who by water  
Gives way to mercy and grace.  
The midnight prayer is traditionally divided into two parts,  
One called Tikkun Rachel, and one called Tikkun Leah.

Why is the midnight prayer named after our matriarchs?  
Because legend tells us that when Jacob  
Was tricked into marrying Leah,  
Rachel didn't want her sister to be shamed,  
And so Rachel hid under the marriage bed  
And whispered to Leah throughout the night  
The secret words she and Jacob used to share  
So he would think he was with Rachel...  
(this is one of those stories you don't learn in Sunday school...)  
Rachel subdued her own disappointment,  
And pretended,  
To protect her sister from shame.  
Jacob didn't recognize he was with the wrong sister.  
(Or if he did, he chose not to say anything...)  
And yes Jacob was deceived,  
In morning's light, he realized what happened.  
Leah is humiliated,  
And spends her life trying to win the love  
And affection  
She felt her wedding night.

Midnight is the most intimate of instants...

And that darkest,  
Deepest,  
Pitch thick  
second,

That most  
Hollow,  
Superstitious  
Lost-in-the-woods,

Something's-in-the-attic  
moment

is the *precise* moment  
when God chooses to redeem us.  
Out of our hiding place.

The miracle of midnight,  
Is that out of the moment most like  
The belly of the whale,  
the depth of despair,  
comes a whisper of salvation...  
*tomorrow is a heartbeat closer,*  
the shore of another day  
not much more than a prayer away...

The moment is poised between day and night,  
The kiss between  
The kingdom of the moon and the kingdom of the sun.

This Yom Kippur  
The kingdoms of the moon and sun are aligned  
In an interesting way  
When Yom Kippur and Shabbat  
Fall at the same time,  
As tonight,  
It is like an eclipse,  
The great warm reviving Sabbath,  
Crowned in golden fire,  
And the stark and mysterious eye of the night sky,  
Yom Kippur, shrouded in white.

There is a Yiddish saying  
That you cannot dance at two weddings  
At the same time.  
But tonight, we dance at two weddings,  
At one, the Sabbath wedding,  
We have the Sabbath bride,  
According to some commentaries,  
the Sabbath is God's daughter,  
God the Almighty Father of the bride,  
We recite love poetry to her,  
*Yedid Nefesh*, Dear one of my soul,  
And *Lecha Dodi*, come my beloved,  
We make *l'chaim* at this wedding...

At the other, the Yom Kippur wedding,  
It's more like a shot-gun ceremony,  
Our Father, Our King with his rifle,  
Watchful that we fulfill our promise,  
"I reckon I'm-a gonna write you in this here book o' life  
On account-a you done take them vows..."

Two weddings,  
And here we are,  
Dancing at both of them,  
Like Jacob,  
In bed with these two sisters...  
(Not an appropriate metaphor for Yom Kippur...we'll just go with it.)  
In bed with these two sisters  
Who are as different as night and day.

The holy days seem at first to contradict one another,  
One seems even to cancel out the other.  
Look at the laws of Yom Kippur...  
On Yom Kippur there are five things  
From which you are supposed to abstain:  
You are supposed to abstain from:

- 1) food and drink,
- 2) Anointing oneself with oils,
- 3) Wearing leather,
- 4) Bathing, and
- 5) Having sex.

In contrast, on Shabbat  
One is *supposed* to  
Eat and drink,  
Rub oneself with oil  
Put on some leather  
Get in the bath and have...(Some kugel...)  
Seriously, though...Shabbat is about partaking,  
While Yom Kippur is about abstinence...  
But both are about matters of life and death.

In Heschel's book *The Sabbath*

He writes:

"One must abstain from toil and strain on the seventh day,  
Even from strain in the service of God"<sup>5</sup>

But on Yom Kippur  
We are supposed to feel the strain  
Of our service to God.

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<sup>5</sup> The Sabbath, p.30

Yom Kippur is about truth,  
While Shabbat has an element of make believe.  
If you are in mourning,  
You are supposed to stop mourning for Shabbat.  
“The Torah says ‘Six days shall you labor  
and do all your work.’  
But the Rabbis challenged:  
is it possible for human beings to do all their work in six days?  
No rather the Torah means act as if all your work were finished.”<sup>6</sup>  
And it’s not that by making shabbat we’re faking shabbat,  
It is that we are stepping outside the barbs and fences  
That separate things,  
We lift the veil which separates us from the radiance,  
All around.  
We allow ourselves to see it,  
Those luminous lines of connection  
That we so often fail to notice.

There is still grieving to be done.  
Work to address,  
Humiliations to face.  
But like Rachel beneath the bed  
Shabbat whispers to us secrets,  
Reminds us of mystery,  
Coaxes **real** pleasure out of our life...  
Immerses us in eternity...  
If you are not attracted to your partner,  
Or your spouse,  
*On Shabbat you are.*  
If you’re not attracted to your life,  
Or your house,  
*On Shabbat you are.*  
There is a radiance to the day  
That beams through all who embrace it.

We are so seduced by our work.  
We need to be seduced instead by the Sabbath.  
Problem is: we are no longer attracted to the concept  
Of a “day of rest...”  
The dictionary defines leisure as “freedom provided by cessation of activities.”  
The root of vacation is to vacate, to cause to be empty.  
And the definition of relaxation is “an absence or reduction of muscle retention.”

We are seduced instead by busy-ness,

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Muller

One rabbi wrote:

“The seduction of work has drained us of our poetry, romance, softness and our intimacy.”<sup>7</sup>

If we were to market the Sabbath today  
We probably would not call it Day of Rest...  
“Day of intrigue”, maybe,  
“Day of renewed vigor.”

How many advertisers do we have in our congregation?  
Maybe we should have a contest,  
How to promote Shabbat  
To our own community...  
To Isaiah,  
We can put the entries **on the website**...  
How do we brand it  
So that we recognize that we own it,  
That we *want* it...

The orthodox don't own Shabbat  
They don't *own* shabbos  
We own it too.  
We just have a different vocabulary.  
They call the morning service *shacharit*,  
We call it 'soccer.'  
It's the same thing.  
*Shacharit*, soccer, same thing.

They call Shabbat around three o'clock  
When the guests leave,  
The perfect time for a shabbos nap,  
We call it 'afternoon delight,'  
Same thing,  
*Seudat shilshit*,  
Sky rockets in flight,  
Really no difference.

“Shabbat: The Cry for Sanity.”  
“Shabbat: Electric Shalom.”  
“Shabbat, Day of Coronation...”  
“when we are all royalty [and] don crowns of added spirit.”<sup>8</sup>  
“The Sabbath - Escape from the Asylum.”  
Or “The Sabbath – Welcome to the Asylum,” however you like it.  
“Shabbat, Day of Dim Sum.”

Speaking of our website,

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Schulweis

<sup>8</sup> Aram Sterne

It's under construction.

Is there an IT specialist in the house?  
Actually I'm serious...  
Someone who knows about open source programming  
And can help create a wiki-isaiah interactive site?  
Awesome, what's your email address...  
Mine's [rabbiz@templeisaiah.com](mailto:rabbiz@templeisaiah.com).

What's great about that, the fact that you volunteered,  
Is that this moment,  
The website, which doesn't even exist yet,  
Became interactive.

Heschel explains that the Sabbath is essentially a sanctuary in time.  
It is not that we stop building,  
It is that we stop building things in space  
and start building a palace in time.

He writes:

It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations...Creation, we are taught, is not an act that happened once upon a time, once and for ever. The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process...Every instant is an act of creation...Time is a perpetual innovation, a synonym for continuous creation.<sup>9</sup>

Every instant is an act of creation.  
Think about the power in the moment  
The clock strikes midnight,  
How alive that instant is,  
How it stands poised between doom and deliverance...

Legend says  
It was midnight  
Every night that  
An east wind  
Blew through King David's master chamber  
Strumming the harp suspended over his bed.  
The music woke him  
and at that hour  
he composed his psalms.  
As it is written,  
"Midnight,

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<sup>9</sup> Heschel, p. 100

I will rise and give thanks unto Thee... ”<sup>10</sup>

Another legend says God sits, despondent at midnight,  
The hosts of heaven lament,  
And the worlds, both upper and lower,  
Begin to quake with sorrow,  
Until God hears the prayer  
Of those who have risen in the night,  
...The night and all it holds  
Become stilled,  
All of its yellow eyes,  
The silent celestials ,  
The sighing silhouettes  
Of clouds and trees,  
All listen, intently.

How much redemption, story, mystery, fear  
Wrapped in that moment, **midnight**...  
I would imagine everyone here  
Would have a story about the moment of midnight...  
*But that is every moment.*

**Every moment** we stand between doom and deliverance,  
“The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process,”  
Heschel wrote.  
“Time is a perpetual innovation.”  
The future doesn't exist yet,  
But we can change it...  
How?  
We just did...  
We took something that didn't even exist yet,  
A website,  
And made it interactive.  
The future doesn't even exist yet  
And yet we are engaged in it.

*It is every moment.*  
There is a story of two rabbis  
Who decide to test Shabbat,  
And instead of lighting candles and singing songs  
On Friday night,  
They do it Monday night,  
And celebrate all through Tuesday as if it was Shabbat.  
And they are terrified to realize  
That they have the same sense of radiance  
On Tuesday that they do on Saturday.

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<sup>10</sup> Psalm 119:62

They go to their master, distraught,  
And he tells them that Shabbat is not  
About the chronology of time,  
It is about stepping outside of time,  
Into eternity,  
And that can happen at any time.

All week we are engaged in things,  
The tyranny of things...

Heschel writes:

Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness, they are a threat to our very lives; we are more harassed than supported by the Frankensteins of spatial things...the higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments...what is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.<sup>11</sup>

The grandeur of what is eternal in time,  
That is Shabbat.  
Paradise doesn't even exist yet,  
But on Shabbat, we interact with it.

It is taught,  
"Suppose we could learn to see life not as something that gets used up but as the accumulation of treasure. Then with every passing year, we could see ourselves as having more life than we had the year before, because of all the new insights and experiences that the year brought us."<sup>12</sup>

There is a debate in the Talmud in which one of the sages argues that the elders should be honored only if they are wise, but another claimed that all older people should be honored, regardless of wisdom.

The medieval rabbi Rashi explained that holiness pervades all aspects of life.  
The person who lives longer has more experiences  
and therefore the greatest number of possibilities for encounters with God.  
Each moment of life is of infinite value.  
How great, then, is the triumph of being blessed with so much living!  
Yom Kippur we come and plead for another year of life...  
**Why** do we want another year of life...to get more done?  
To have more opportunity to encounter godliness, in creation, in each other, in ourselves,  
That's why we need time.

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<sup>11</sup> Heschel, p. 5-6

<sup>12</sup> Harold Kushner, Heart of Wisdom

In Exodus,  
Moses warned Pharaoh with the words,  
“Around midnight I will go out amongst Egypt  
and every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die...”<sup>13</sup>

Why, the rabbis ask, did he say “Around midnight?”  
Why not “At midnight?” Does God not know what time it is?

They answered because Moses was concerned that the Egyptians  
Did not know how to accurately tell time,  
And if God smote at 12 sharp, but their dials were off a degree,  
They would think Moses was inaccurate, and his God false.

The Talmud, our 73 volumes of Jewish law,  
5000 pages,  
That span hundreds of years of discussions,  
Begins with the question  
“From what time may one recite the *shema* in the evening?”

(You can actually follow along on page 11 in your supplements)  
From what time may one recite the *shema* in the evening?

That’s the “opening line” of the Talmud.  
It really is a question of how we determine time.  
In order to know when to recite *shema* in the evening,  
We need to know when evening is,  
What are the borders of day and night.  
Now, we could just say it is when the sun goes down,  
That would seem the easiest.

There is a Talmudic debate between Shammai and Hillel  
over the order of blessings for Shabbat.  
Shammai said, “The first thing that has to be recited  
is the blessing of the sanctity of the day  
and after that the blessing of the wine is recited.”

But Hillel said, “You begin with the blessing over the wine  
and *then* you can conclude  
with a blessing over the day.”

Shammai believed the day has already become holy  
before the wine was brought.  
It was made holy at the setting of the sun.

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<sup>13</sup> Exodus 11:4-5

“But Hillel argued that it was the wine which human beings bring and was made with the labor of their hands that produces the occasion for the benediction. It is then not only the setting of the sun or the appearance of the stars in heaven that determines the Sabbath, but it is the hands, hearts and intentions in our bringing the wine that sanctifies the Sabbath.”<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Harold Schulweis said:

“Sabbath is not simply a matter of astronomy in the heavens, the Sabbath is a philosophy, a way of thinking, behaving and belonging. The Sabbath is a state of mind. How we celebrate the Sabbath tells us how we deal with time.”

We could just say evening begins when the sun goes down  
And call it a day...  
Instead...

We continue in our text...  
From the time that the priests  
enter their houses  
in order to eat the ritual offering  
until the end of the first watch.

So that is how time is determined.  
By the eating habits of the clergy.  
It is an interesting way to determine time...  
The humanity of the priest...

Skipping down,  
I mean we don't want to be here until midnight...  
“When do the priests eat the ritual offering?  
From the time of the appearance of the stars...”

So how do we measure the border of a day,  
By the priest? By the stars? Both?

There is a verse in Genesis 15:5  
In which it is written:  
He took him outside and said,  
“Look toward heaven and count the stars,  
if you are able to count them...so shall your offspring be.”

Rashi understood “He took him outside”  
to mean that God elevated Abram,  
lifting him outside of the world  
and whooshing him high above the stars.  
So he was literally outside the stars,

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<sup>14</sup> Harold Schulweis

above and beyond the universe,  
out of this world.

Rav Yehudah said: "How do we know no star  
controls the destiny of Israel?"

From the verse, He took him outside..."

The Jewish people exist outside of astrology,  
our destiny not bound to the path of planet and constellations,  
rather, our destiny can miraculously, change.

Our future not determined by stars alone.

Our text continues:

From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening?

From the time the poor man comes home

to eat his bread with salt until he rises from his meal.

*So the entire Talmud begins with three different ways*

To determine time.

The priests,

The stars,

The poor.

The contradiction is resolved, as it says...

The priest and the poor have one and the same time.

From what time may one begin to recite *shema* in the evening?

From the time that the people come home to eat their meal on a Sabbath eve.

The priests, the poor, the stars, the people on Shabbat,

All have the same time.

On Shabbat, we are all aligned.

Planets, people, priests, poor...

But going back for a moment

To the initial question...

*From what time may one recite the shema in the evening?*

The initial question

itself answers what is the purpose of time.

It is in order to pray.

And not just any prayer, the *shema*,

The prayer that declares unity...

When is evening so we can say that prayer...

When does it become evening so we can remember that we are one...

When is evening **so that all our colors can become blurred**

And we can remember unity...

Remember when you were laughing before

A little incredulous,

Did the rabbi just say something about being in bed with two sisters,

That's the whole secret of Shabbat.  
Not the part about the sisters.  
The part about laughing.  
Being alive,  
A draft of happiness...  
Laughing at our humanity.  
Celebrating our breath,

Shabbat and Yom Kippur  
Do share much in common.  
They are both about *teshuva*,  
About turning.

One author wrote:

“On the Sabbath, humanity gets a sense of what the reward for *teshuva* is, namely, Paradise. But to appreciate the Sabbath requires *teshuva*, it requires that humans “turn” away from their enslavement to things and money and open themselves up to another dimension, the dimension of spirit. In fact, to “welcome the Sabbath bride,” to open oneself to the Sabbath, is itself *teshuva*, since it is a turning away from the weekaday world...The Sabbath is *teshuva*, and it is also the reward for it. Both at once. The instant one performs the “turn,” one gets the reward.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the letters of *teshuva* are the same as the letters of *hashabbat*, the Sabbath.

Six days God created the world,  
And on the seventh,  
God creates love,  
Six days a week we make things,  
And on the seventh  
we make *l'chaim*  
we make light,  
we make laughter,  
and on the seventh we love.  
We make life worth loving.  
We make time,  
We make time for blessing,  
We make time for being...  
*We make love* the highest ideal,  
*We make believe*  
That we are in paradise,  
We make believe *that we believe*  
We make believe that we are flawless,  
And so are our friends,  
And our family,  
And the poor become priests

When, as David Hartman wrote,  
“the flowers of the field stand over and against man  
as equal members of the universe.”

The Israeli poet Zelda wrote:  
“Slowly the Shabbat descends,  
The rose of heaven in her hand.  
How can the Shabbat  
Plant a huge and shining flower  
In a blind and narrow heart?”

This tradition,  
Which is unafraid to face the heart of darkness,  
Which in the middle of the night  
Says here is the portal  
To redemption...  
David’s harp hovering above his bed,  
Rachel hiding below the frame  
Whispering her secrets,

We have explored the border between day and night.  
We have explored night at its midpoint.  
What about the border between night and day...  
When has morning come?  
Of course it is not enough to say it comes with the sun...

When Former Israeli Prime Minister Peres  
Accepted the Nobel peace prize,  
He told this story about a rabbi  
and his students discussing  
how to tell when the night ends and the day begins.

One student said, “When we can distinguish from afar between a goat and a lamb, the night is over, the day begun.” Another student said, “When you can distinguish between an olive tree and a fig tree, the night is over, the day begun.” The rabbi kept silent, and the students turned to him and asked, “Rabbi, what is your indication?” He looked at them and answered: “When a stranger approaches, and we think he is our brother, and all conflicts disappear, that is the moment when night ends and the day begins.”

May there be a time.

