

Two Clocks
Rosh Hashanah Second Day
Rabbi Zoë Klein

It is Friday,
September 10,
It is also the 2nd day of the month of Tishrei
It is 2010,
It is also 5771.

In Prague there still stands the large clock tower that used to chime the hour to the inhabitants of that city.

However, the Jewish shtetl was located behind the clock tower, and so they looked only upon the back of the large clock, watching the hands ticking backwards through the glass.

So the residents of the shtetl painted Hebrew numbers on the back of the clock, Hebrew which is written from right to left, so that they could tell time *backwards*.....

Here we gather today to celebrate the Jewish new year which falls nowhere near January first.

Funny thing, Tishre is not even the first month of the Jewish calendar, it is the seventh. We celebrate our New Year on the first day of the seventh month of our calendar.

Sometimes it is as if we really are seeing time *backwards*, as if we are living on the wrong side of the clock tower, that three is nine and eleven is one.

An old Yiddish phrase says it is impossible to dance at two weddings at the same time. Well, Jewish history has shown that Jews are quite apt at accomplishing the impossible.

Dancing at two weddings is what we do every day, our legs shuffling in a large circle to Hava Nagila while our upper bodies arch backwards to shimmy under the limbo bar to an island beat.

But it is not just about our cultural calendars colliding.

Max Lerner once wrote:

We all run on two clocks. One is the outside clock, which ticks away our decades and brings us ceaselessly to the dry season. The other is the inside clock, where you are your own timekeeper and determine your own chronology, your own internal weather and your own rate of living.

It's an interesting idea,
This notion that we each have two clocks,
An outside clock,
And an inside clock.

Some scientists talk about biological age,
Rather than chronological age.

You might be chronologically seventy years old,
But if you never smoked,
Take vitamins,
Don't drink more than a glass of red wine no and again,
Floss your teeth,
Exercise,
Have yogurt and broccoli
And give to Temple Isaiah's annual campaign,
Biologically, you are more like a 20 year old stallion,
A nineteen your old Philly...

But that's not what we're talking about here with the two clocks.
We're talking about your rhythm,
Which is yours and yours alone.

Each of us, gathered together
THIS CLOSE to one another,
We are each in our own time zone.

You know what the watch says.
It's what, around 11 o'clock?
But you have your own chronology.
For some of you,

It feels like the middle of the night,
For others,
It is break of day,
For some it has already been a day and a half.
There's a story in the Talmud (Yoma 87a)
About a Rabbi Abba who thought he was being nice.
You see the day before Yom Kippur he hung out in front of his butcher's
store
Why?
Because his butcher had wronged Rabbi Abba that year.
And Abba thought –
I'll just stand around so that the butcher can see me,
Remember that he had slighted me,
And then of course he'll take me in his arms
And apologize.
Then he'll be free of his sin toward me, as he enters YK.
But something else happened.
When the butcher saw Rabbi Abba
He said "Get out of here!
I don't want anything to do with you!"
And just then,
The butcher slammed down his knife,
A bone flew in the air,
Struck the butcher's throat,
and the story ends with a dead butcher.

Rabbi Abba had thought he was doing the butcher a favor,
Hanging around there outside his shop,
Giving the butcher every opportunity to do the right thing
In order to go into the Day of Atonement,
His soul not nearly as stained as his apron.
But it was Rabbi Abba's arrogance
To think that he knew what was the projection
Of the Butcher's soul's journey.
The butcher has his own chronology.
He wasn't ready to ask for forgiveness.
He hadn't yet come to realize what he'd done wrong.
Perhaps he needed another day,
Perhaps had Rabbi Abba let the butcher attend Yom Kippur services,
The melodies would have reached inside of him,

The rabbi's message would have turned that key,
Opened the door,
Elicited a tear.
Perhaps he would have at last
Seen the light of spirit in Rabbi Abba's face,
The divine spark,
Perhaps he would have revisited the time
He had wronged Rabbi Abba
From a place of spiritual courage,
And standing, reflecting on it,
Like looking into a mirror through the mist,
He would finally have realized his own guilt,
And come to make atonement.
Or, his chronology may have meant he needed a year,
A few years,
and terrible as it may be,
for some,
their internal clock is slow to alarm,
is in perpetual snooze,
and even the blast of the shofar
doesn't rouse them to want to purify.

I shared a piece of an essay one Sabbath
A few weeks ago
Written by a man, Jay Litvin,
A Jewish writer, who
After many decades struggling to overcome his anger,
Finally did.

He writes:

I'd like to take credit for these changes, but in truth they feel as much the result of happenstance as effort, of G-d's intervention and providence.

First, the destructiveness of my behavior in all its terror became so vivid I could not tolerate it. I not only saw this in times of anger, but also in vision and memory of angry times past, visions that I think were gifts from Above. I became tormented by all that I was capable of destroying, and had. I saw and felt the hurt and damage I was causing others with my cruel words and actions. I saw and felt it as if I were the object of my own anger. And I cringed and cried as I felt the pain and damage I was causing to those I

loved most. It was as if the anger was happening all over again, but now I could see it with distance and perspective, though the feelings were as intense as if it were happening now. Not feelings of anger, but feelings of revulsion for what I was watching, for what I had done.

Second, during some recent difficult times, I have been the object of love and concern, patience and dedication by some of those at whom I had been the angriest. In the face of their kindness and of my need, I could no longer muster the anger I once had. Now, I could only feel gratitude and love and perceived in these onetime objects of my anger such angelic souls that I felt searing shame at my past actions towards them.

That they were now so loving despite the anger that I'd spent at them over the years increased their virtue even further and where once I could, in moments of blind anger, see only their negativity, now any perceived hurt or disappointment I felt from them was balanced with my awareness of and appreciation for their goodness and kindness. And to them I ask and will continue to ask forgiveness.

I also began to more and more recognize G-d's hand in my life, and His goodness. The reality of G-d's participation in and control of the world, even in times that could be described as "bad", penetrated deeper and deeper into my psyche and soul. Thus, no matter what happened I began to see and truly believe that this, too, comes from G-d. The hurts or disappointments, the lacks and the frustrations -- all come from G-d. There is no one to blame. Or if there is, it is only G-d. Each obstacle, each frustration, each hurt, each fear, every childhood injury or lack comes ultimately from G-d, for my benefit, as part of my life's journey -- a journey tailored by G-d only for me.

Three things had to happen in this man's personal chronology,
His own internal clock

That allowed him to finally become free,

1. He opened his eyes to the pain he had caused.

He felt it,

He remembered it in vivid detail,

With courage he revisited it,

Unswep it from under the rug,

Pulled it up from the ocean of tashlich,

And experienced it anew,

In all of its dark horror,

With honesty and courage.

In other words: *He reached in.*

2. He became humbled

By experiencing difficult times himself,
He realized his own vulnerability
And witnessed the generosity of the people
Who stubbornly continued to love him
Despite his uncontrolled rage.
He realized his mortality,
His humanness,
He saw his clock ticking
And realized that he didn't have all the time in the world,
In fact,
Looking in the faces of those who cared for him
He realized, the time is now.
He saw the beauty he had been blind to before.
In other words: *He reached out.*

3. He let God in.

He recognized that ultimately there is no one to blame but God.
Now that doesn't have to be your belief,
That might not be your theology,
But for Jay Litvin,
That understanding changed his life,
Recognizing that he had a course,
And the course was drawn up by the source,
And he experienced a certain surrender
To the transcendent.
In other words: *he reached up.*

Perhaps the butcher's path would have been similar.
Perhaps the butcher's path needed to reach certain milestones,
The milestone of honest reflection,
The milestone of true humility,
The milestone of finding God...
And only then would he be ready for atonement.
Perhaps he needed to reach a point
Where the pain of his wrongdoings
Outweighed his fear of vulnerability.

Even though Rabbi Abba was the one wronged,
Even though Rabbi Abba was the victim
Of some unnamed transgression,

By pushing his own chronology on the butcher
He became accomplice to the butcher's demise.

We each have our outside clock,
And we each have our inside clock.
We each have our own rate of living.

And then comes today.
And then comes these days,
The days of awe,
The days of opportunity,
To seize a moment,
To peer into the past,
To be spiritually brave,
To knock on our hearts as a community
and admit our faults,
our communal alphabet of woe,
and surely many are triggered
into action,
stirred deep inside,
summoned out of their sleep...
Jewish time meets internal clock,
And we step into the sacred
Where the spirit is redeemed.

Be aware of each other's internal clocks.
We're not all ticking the same time here,
We're not all following the same metronome,
Respect that,
Marvel at that,
Together, we are a vibrant drum circle,
Each moving to a different vital beat.

Pay attention that that other clock,
Not just the one that tells you which birthday it is,
But the one that tells you when it's time to reach out,
When it's time to reach in,
When it's time to reach up...

My good friend Rabbi Bill Warnick

Who is the oldest living past temple president
At Temple Isaiah,
Shared with me a letter last week
Written to him by Rabbi Albert Lewis.

Rabbi Lewis wrote 20 years ago (he was emeritus at the time):

You shared with me in a recent phone conversation about a friend of yours who was calculating everything to live as long as possible. He was intent on arranging his finances to provide adequate means for him to live more than 100 years. Diet, exercise, work, sleep, stress and the absence of it, you name the subject and he had investigated its potential for adding years to his present score.

Since the phone conversation required me to say no more than, "Yes, of course, great, he should live and be well. Maybe he will exceed the traditional Jewish "to a hundred and twenty" as our biblical leader, Moses, survived. Days later, this conversation came to mind and I thought, "Should I have raised the question as to why he wanted to live so long? Did this friend have some special mission in life that he wanted to fulfill and he was not going to leave until his mission was accomplished?"

I guess I didn't ask this question of any other like it, because I accepted, as most of us to, that just to live is justification enough for wanting to live as long as possible.

The late Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: "Just to live is a holy act."

*To live to one hundred and twenty years
As did Moses,
Doesn't mean one has to also do as Moses did,
Leading a people from slavery to freedom,
Or anything comparable.
Just live, take care, enjoy living,
But be ever watchful for anything at all that may cost you some years.*

*I accept that and I will not question the right of my friend's friend
To preserve his body alive for 120 years and more,*

It occurs to me, though,

*The hazards of life being what they are in our day and age,
Civilization not withstanding,
There are still innumerable fatal diseases,
Unpredictable accidents,
Genetic frailties,
Sometimes it appears life conspires against us
No matter our watchfulness and our best calculations. Then if the odds of
celebrating one's 120th birthday are still hard to stack in our own favor, why
not have a Plan B.*

*Plan B to my mind would be one in which we will take maximum
responsibility for living as judiciously as possible in order to live as long as
possible. However, alongside of this concern for health and longevity why
not nurture an idea, a cause, a humane act or acts, a contribution to one's
community, one's people, an artistic expression in art, music, drama, i.e.,
some meaningful activity which also requires concern, development,
nurturing, and to some degree, however large or small, leaves our world,
this planet, this society, this community, this human family in better shape
than it is at present and give it a greater chance to survive to a venerable
geologic age.*

The clock tower of Judaism
Has many faces.
Some run backwards,
Recalling history,
Holding ancestors in mind, remembering.

Some run fast,
Forward-looking,
Edgy, innovative, inventive.

Some stop just long enough for Sabbaths,
For the people to take sacred pause from
The tick-tock-tick-tock
To slip into shining eternity...

There is the face of communal time
That counts our people's chronology toward
"a venerable geologic age"
One holy day at a time.

And there are also the faces of the individual,
The faces of our personal time, our private chronology –
Which stands outside biology
And counting of days –
Our soul's great and glorious growth that continues
Long beyond our body.
Long beyond 120, *l'olam vaed*.