

A Timeless Place

I often find myself wishing that synagogues would not have clocks on their walls. After all, this is the sacred sphere of the Timeless One. This is where finite man seeks to enter that infinite realm of public and private prayer, the study of Torah, thoughts of God and our relationship to Him—those moments when time stands still and relinquishes its dominion to the One Who is beyond time. A clock in a shul is somehow a discordant note, a temporal intrusion in an other-worldly realm. A clockless shul would represent a timeless, eternal place.

But when non-transcendental reality sets in, I realize how inextricably woven into our service of the Timeless One are the elements of mundane time. Wherever one turns in the religious realm, one is confronted by the relentlessly pointing finger of time and its handmaidens: numbers and counting.

Consider prayer itself. Paradoxically, the act of communing with the Most High is enveloped by the constrictions of the clock. One must pray before the fourth hour of the day, recite the morning *shema* before the third hour, *mussaf* before the seventh hour, *mincha* after the sixth hour but before sunset, and the evening *shema* before midnight.

The fact is that a consciousness of the passage of time—manifested in the ubiquitous requirement to count—pervades our entire religious life.

- On the eighth day after birth comes the requirement of *berit mila*, and after thirty days, the requirement for *pidyon haben*.
- After giving birth, the mother counts her days of purity: seven days, fourteen days, thirty-three days, sixty-six days (*Lev.* 15:28); and she counts during every menstrual cycle.
- The courts count the days between new moons, and at the twenty-ninth day they await eagerly the moon-sighting of the witnesses.
- The Paschal lamb must be slaughtered after the sixth hour of the day.
- The daily offerings must be inspected for defects for four days prior to the sacrifice.
- The Biblical months have no names of their own, but are numbered: the first month, the second month. . . .

Not only do we reckon hours, days, weeks and months, we also count the years: in the first and second years, and the fourth and fifth years of the seven year cycle, we are required to give the First Tithe and the Second Tithe; in the third year and the sixth year, the First Tithe and the Tithe to the Poor; in the seventh year, the fields must lie fallow, open to everyone alike. And *Leviticus* 25:28 commands that the courts count seven times seven sabbatical years in order to arrive at the year of the Jubilee.

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Before creation, all is chaos. At creation, time and counting and numbers enter the universe, and with them come order and regularity. Time separates and classifies, maintains boundaries and limitations: the first day, the second day, the third day, culminating in the holy seventh day. The sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes, the tides advance and recede, the seasons come and go, all according to the clock established at creation and affirmed to Noah: *Zera ve-katsir, kor va-hom, kayyits va-horef, yom va-laila lo yishbotu* / “. . . Seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease” (*Gen.* 8:22; *Jer.* 33:20).

This is the pulse of the universe. Thus it is that, in *Exodus* 12, the very first commandment given to the Jewish people concerns the basis for religious times and seasons—the fixing of the new moon. The rhythm of numbers and the choreography of the clock are implanted in our genes, and man, the microcosm of the universe, cannot escape it. His very own heartbeat is a paradigm of time, a sign both of his creation and his mortality: when its pulse comes to an end, time for him comes to an end.

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A striking fact: although time is universal, there is a zone of religious time that exists only when man creates it. Certain numbers have no life unless man does the counting. *Lev.* 27:32, for example, requires us to tithe our cattle. How is this done? The *Mishna* (*Bekhorot* 9:7) describes the procedure explicitly:

“How do we tithe animals? We bring them to a shed and make for them a small opening [in the fence] so that two shall not be

able to go out simultaneously. We count [with the rod]: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. He marks every tenth lamb that goes out and says, "This is [the tithe]." If he failed to mark it or did not count [the lambs] with a rod, or if he counted them while they were crouching or standing, they are still considered tithed."

A fascinating question is addressed by the *Mishna*: What if a man wishes to give ten percent of his cattle at random but chooses not to engage in the act of counting? The answer is that this will not suffice. If he owns one hundred lambs and offers ten at random, this is not a valid tithe, even though he has given ten percent of his flock. The reason: the Torah explicitly requires that "the tenth shall be holy"—that is, he must physically count every tenth animal. If the count has not taken place, the tithe has not taken place. The act of counting by the owner is the crucial element in the tithing of cattle.

A similar insistence on human counting is found in *Lev. 23:15* concerning the counting of the days between *Pesah* and *Shavuot*: *U-sefartem lakhem sheva shabbatot temimot* / "You shall count seven full weeks . . . they are to be fifty days. . . ." The festival of *Shavuot* and its offerings will take place whether or not we count the days, but the Torah insists that we nevertheless engage in the act of counting.

More obligatory counting: As part of the *Yom Kippur avoda*, *Lev. 16* requires the *kohen gadol* to enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of the bull offering upon the Ark cover, once with an upward motion and seven times with a downward motion. The *Mishna* (*Yoma 5:3*) describes the procedure, which we recite in the *mussaf* of *Yom Kippur*: *Ve-kakh haya mone*: / "This is how he would count: 'One; one plus one; one plus two; one plus three; one plus four; one plus five; one plus six; one plus seven.'" Sprinkling alone is insufficient. He must engage in the act of counting.

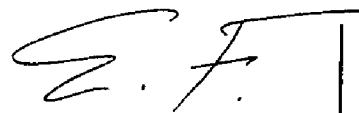
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Through such mandatory counting, God takes man by the hand and, in effect, says: "Come, I Who am the *Me-kadesh Yisrael ve-ha-zemanim* will teach you how to elevate the ephemeral moment into something eternal, how to number your days (*li-mnot*

yameinu ken hoda . . . Ps. 90:12). In the celebration of every seventh day, you attach yourself to the Infinite, and time, though it continues to move, is brought under your control. So, too, in *Yom Tov*. So, too, in every aspect of religious time. By enveloping your hours in the cloak of holiness, you soar upward to a sphere where time has no dominion. Although time is Mine, you can sanctify it with Me. Through your counting, the potential holiness in My universe is actualized.

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But despite the full realization that the world-to-come is the only timeless realm, it nevertheless seems to me that it would be felicitous if, in the one place on this earth which is an adumbration of that realm—the house of God—one would not be confronted by that relentlessly ticking reminder of this world's temporality. That is why I still find myself wistfully looking for a clockless shul.



EMANUEL FELDMAN

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