

A young man learned what's most important in life from the guy next door. It had been some time since Jack had seen the old man. College, girls, career, and life itself got in the way. In fact, Jack moved clear across the country in pursuit of his dreams. There, in the rush of his busy life, Jack had little time to think about the past and often no time to spend with his wife and son. He was working on his future and nothing could stop him.

Over the phone his mother told him, "Mr. Belser died last night. The funeral is Wednesday."

Memories flashed through his mind like an old newsreel as he sat quietly remembering his childhood days.

"Jack, did you hear me?"

"Oh sorry, Mom. Yes, I heard you. It's been so long since I thought of him. I'm sorry, but I honestly thought he died years ago," Jack said.

"Well, he didn't forget you. Every time I saw him he'd ask how you were doing. He'd reminisce about the many days you spent over 'his side of the fence' as he put it," Mom told him.

"I loved that old house he lived in." Jack said.

"You know, Jack, after your Father died, Mr. Belser stepped in to make sure you had a man's influence in your life," she said.

"He's the one who taught me carpentry," he said, "I wouldn't be in this business if it wasn't for him. He spent a lot of time teaching me things he thought were important. Mom, I'll be there for the funeral," Jack said.

As busy as he was, he kept his word. Jack caught the next flight to his hometown. Mr. Belser's funeral was small and uneventful. He had no children of his own and most of his relatives had passed away.

The night before he had to return home Jack and his Mom stopped by to see the old house next door one more time.

Standing in the doorway Jack paused for a moment. It was like crossing over into another dimension, a leap through space and time. The house was exactly as he remembered. Every step held memories. Every picture, every piece of furniture...Jack stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong, Jack?" his Mom asked.

"The box is gone," he said.

"What box?" Mom asked.

"There was a small gold box that he kept locked on top of his desk. I must have asked him a thousand times what was inside. All he'd ever tell me was, 'The thing I value most'," Jack said.

It was gone. Everything about the house was exactly how Jack remembered it except for the box. He figured someone from the Belser family had taken it.

"Now I'll never know what was so valuable to him," Jack said, "I better get some sleep. I have an early flight home, Mom."

It had been about two weeks since Mr. Belser died. Returning home from work one day Jack discovered a note in his mailbox. "Signature required on a package. No one at home. Please stop by the main post office within the next three days," the note read.

Early the next day Jack retrieved the package. The package was old and looked like it had been mailed a hundred years ago. The handwriting was difficult to read, but the return address caught his attention.

"Mr. Harold Belser" it read.

Jack took the package out to his car and ripped it open. There inside was the gold box and an envelope. Jack's hands shook as he read the note inside.

"Upon my death please forward this box and its contents to Jack Bennett. It's the thing I value most in my life". A small key was taped to the letter. His heart raced as tears filled his eyes. Jack carefully unlocked the box. There inside he found a beautiful gold pocket watch.

Running his fingers slowly over the finely etched casing, he unlatched the cover.

Inside he found these words engraved:

"Jack, Thanks for your time! - Harold Belser."

"The thing he valued most...was...my time."

Jack held the watch for a few minutes, then called his office and cleared his appointments for the next two days. "Why?" Janet, his assistant, asked. "I need some time to spend with my son," he said. "Oh, by the way, Janet, thanks for your time".¹

Time. It is the thing that we never seem to have enough of and is one of the greatest gifts we can give. Between responsibilities to our families, tasks to do at work, precious time seemingly squandered sitting in traffic, and maybe if we can squeeze it in, time to exercise and volunteer, there are never enough hours in the day. When I look at my own calendar some days I can feel my own anxiety rising at the busyness of my schedule.

There are so many things to love about Judaism. Our sacred texts, matzo ball soup, the importance of lifelong learning, hamantashen, Mel Brooks, lox and bagel, the ability to reform and make our tradition meaningful, challah. Yet, when I have to distill one of the greatest things about Judaism it is the way that our tradition honors time.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.

Unlike the space-minded [hu]man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, quality-less, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.

¹ <http://www.orgcoach.net/time.html>

Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn; a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the Day of Atonement ...

Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time. Most of its observances--the Sabbath, the New Moon, the festivals, the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year--depend on a certain hour of the day or season of the year. It is, for example, the evening, morning, or afternoon that brings with it the call to prayer. The main themes of faith lie in the realm of time. We remember the day of the exodus from Egypt, the day when Israel stood at Sinai...²

The radical innovation that Judaism offered the world was the notion that time is sacred. In Hebrew, the word for sanctification is *kadosh*. We often translate this word as holy or holiness. Holiness is achieved is by separating a part from the whole and using ritual, naming the part *kadosh*, holy. The first time this word is used in the Torah it is about Shabbat. "And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had done."³ Shabbat is holy and sacred precisely because it is separate, marked by the lighting of candles and wine at the beginning and wine, light and spices at havdalah, to conclude it.

² *The Sabbath*. Abraham Joshua Heschel. p.8

³ Gen. 2:3.

Shabbat is our weekly divider and our greatest time reminder to mark Jewish time. Each Shabbat we sing, “The people of Israel shall keep Shabbat, observing Shabbat throughout the ages as a covenant for all time. It is a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days Adonai made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God ceased from work and was refreshed.”⁴

Shabbat is the gift that keeps on giving, every week, 52 weeks per year. For 25-hours we have permission to disconnect from our hyper-connected world. From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday we get to make Shabbat different. And I do not necessarily mean that we need to observe Shabbat in ways that are onerous or even what one might expect.

In my family, growing up we had an evolving observance of Shabbat. I attended Hebrew School and day camp at Temple Emanuel and definitely remember a sense of knowing what Shabbat was. But it was when I moved with my family to St. Paul, Minnesota that my family found our own Shabbat rhythm. The synagogue was about 30 minutes away from our house so my mom, my sister, Jessica, and I would get in the car, pick up my dad from work and drive towards the synagogue. We would eat dinner at a nearby restaurant to avoid the bad-for-Minnesota-traffic and go to temple for services. This might not be the traditional Shabbat meal with challah and Shabbat candles, but it was what worked for my family and brought us together and allowed us to create our own sanctuary in time.

Observing Shabbat should be something that is special and different, that increases joy and marks a separation from the rest of the week. Maybe it is lighting candles on Friday night whether you live by yourself or with other family members. Perhaps on Shabbat it is making one

⁴ *Mishkan T'filah*, p. 44

phone call to someone you love who it is hard to reach any other day of the week. I had a friend who wore a special necklace on Shabbat. Others I know intentionally don't wear a watch on Shabbat. Come to Shabbat here at TBH. If you are a regular at Kabbalat Shabbat, try another of our musical, spirit-filled Shabbat services or our monthly Shabbat morning minyan.

Shabbat is our weekly reminder of Jewish time. However, Jewish time helps us as we plot the course of our lives. And it is often at those pivotal lifecycle moments when the genius of Jewish time is most present in our lives. When a baby is born we formally welcome them into the covenant of our people at eight days of life. At 13, our young men and women become bar or bat mitzvah.

Jewish time though is most obvious in the days following the death of a loved one. It is also the moment when Jewish time and American culture clash. Rabbi Danya Rutenberg observes:

In a lot of ways, contemporary American culture is uncomfortable with the idea of mourning—and many other kinds of displays of extreme emotions. All too often, those who are grieving ... are told to chin up, look on the bright side, and to move on as quickly as possible. It sends the message, though, that these feelings are best dealt with quietly, without too much trouble, on one's own.

But grief is a complex, multilayered process. It's not always linear. It winds itself around us again and again, changing shape and heft at various points. It's dark, and hard, and bitter. For some, it's like feeling underwater, or like all the color

has been sucked out of everything. For others, it's intense and vicious. For a lot of people, it takes different forms at different times.⁵

The Jewish laws of mourning, particularly those about proscribed timing of events create a structure for the roller coaster of grieving. I know this not only intellectually as a rabbi who has studied the laws of mourning, I know this from my own personal experience. Four years ago this November my mother died very suddenly. While there were infinite details for my dad, sister and I to take care of and manage even as we dealt with our own deep sadness, shock and grief the markings of Jewish time propelled us forward. As mourners, whose lives were turned completely upside down by death, the Jewish timing of mourning provided structure and comfort as we rode the roller coaster.

There was so much solace in knowing that we didn't have to think about how and when we might grieve, we could just do it. The genius of Jewish time along with the comforting words and embraces of so many allowed us to do just that. We sat Shiva, the seven days of mourning, marked shloshim the 30 days following a death, lit memorial candles 5 times per year and held an unveiling of my mother's headstone. Each of these moments in time are opportunities to remember my mother, process my grief in a Jewish way, and honor our Jewish tradition.

We cannot always plan when a death happens to someone we love. And as difficult as it can be, please, please use Jewish time to help you. Sit shiva. Mark shloshim, plan an unveiling of a headstone, join us to recite the Yizkor prayers at the appointed times. Jewish time has worked for our people for thousands of years. Honor it.

⁵ Rabbi Danya Rutenberg. <http://ritualwell.org/blog/out-isolation>

I turned the dial up to listen to a Saturday morning talk show I heard an older sounding gentleman, with a golden voice. You know the kind, he sounded like he should be in the broadcasting business. He was telling whoever he was talking with something about "a thousand marbles".

I was intrigued and stopped to listen to what he had to say...

"Well, Tom, it sure sounds like you're busy with your job. I'm sure they pay you well but it's a shame you have to be away from home and your family so much. Hard to believe a young fellow should have to work sixty or seventy hours a week to make ends meet. Too bad you missed your daughter's dance recital."

He continued, "Let me tell you something Tom, something that has helped me keep a good perspective on my own priorities."

And that's when he began to explain his theory of a "thousand marbles." "You see, I sat down one day and did a little arithmetic. The average person lives about seventy-five years. I know, some live more and some live less, but on average, folks live about seventy-five years."

"Now then, I multiplied 75 times 52 and I came up with 3900 which is the number of Saturdays that the average person has in their entire lifetime.

Now stick with me Tom, I'm getting to the important part."

"It took me until I was fifty-five years old to think about all this in any detail", he went on, "and by that time I had lived through over twenty-eight hundred

Saturdays. I got to thinking that if I lived to be seventy-five, I only had about a thousand of them left to enjoy."

"So I went to a toy store and bought every single marble they had. I ended up having to visit three toy stores to round-up 1000 marbles. I took them home and put them inside of a large, clear plastic container right here in the shack next to my gear. Every Saturday since then, I have taken one marble out and thrown it away."

"I found that by watching the marbles diminish, I focused more on the really important things in life. There is nothing like watching your time here on this earth run out to help get your priorities straight."

"Now let me tell you one last thing before I sign-off with you and take my lovely wife out for breakfast. This morning, I took the very last marble out of the container. I figure if I make it until next Saturday then I have been given a little extra time. And the one thing we can all use is a little more time."⁶

What this man was doing was exactly what the Psalmist taught thousands of years ago, "teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Tonight as you make your way out of the sanctuary for the oneg, ushers will have containers of marbles. I will also have some with me following the conclusion of our service as well. Take one marble. Keep the marble in your purse or your pocket to remind you of this story, this sermon, and the importance of making Jewish time. This marble is a symbol of numbering our days. Let

⁶ <http://moneyover55.about.com/od/managingdebt/a/1000marbles.htm>. September 8, 2014.

it be a reminder to focus on gaining a heart of wisdom. On using our precious time on earth with intention so that this New Year, 5775 may be filled with time, time for family and friends, time to meet our fellow congregants *panim el panim*--face to face, time to participate in community building, time to appreciate the sunrise or sunset, and time to construct palaces in time. Ken y'hi ratzon. Shanah tovah!

⁷ Psalm 90:12