

Here's a question for you: Who owns your time? Silly question? You know the answer - your time belongs to you. You make choices of how to spend your time, just like you choose how to spend your money. Oh, but wait ... some of your money belongs to the Federal, State, and Local governments. If you choose not to give it to them, you'll be in hot water. There are also choices that you can theoretically make, such as taking a nice vacation rather than paying Consumer's Energy and DTE Energy, but you'll live with the consequences of a cold, dark house in the winter. So you really don't have complete freedom over what you do with your money, and the same is true with your time.

Your employer or business owns or claims some of your time. If you care about your relationships with your children, spouse, or friends, you have no choice but to give up large blocks of time. In our busy lives, there are a lot of demands on our discretionary time, including that given to God-directed practices, synagogue activities, and other activities within the Jewish community.

The fundamental question I'd like to address today is how do we balance our autonomy to make decisions about our time the way we want to, with our responsibility to others around us. In the words of Rabbi Eugene Borowitz [Renewing the covenant: a theology for the postmodern Jew, page 222]:

I am regularly exasperated by an American Jewry that, wallowing in freedom, prates piously of the sanctity of personal choice and uses it mainly to sanction casual nonobservance and flabby ethics. I seek only to restore a proper tension between our autonomy and social responsibility, one the contemporary idolization of the self has grossly distorted.

A kinder approach is expressed by Rabbi Irwin Kula (adapted from a Ravnet post):

Everyone [has] moments in their inner life where they feel resistance to doing something that "deep down" they know is right - where one part of themselves is speaking to another. We all have the experience of being in situations where a voice within says "I really ought to do that." It is often a situation that would be characterized as a call to greater social responsibility. That [whisper within] is the psycho-spiritual experience of being metzuvah, commanded. You need to witness from your own life as well as the tradition that listening to that voice which almost always calls for some short-term sacrifice of time, money, and energy, for some longer term good is what actually gives us an enduring happiness far richer than not listening.

I'd like to address two places where this tension of how we make choices about our time is played out in the area of Jewish practice: One, in the home, and the other, in the synagogue.

I've noticed an increasing number of people having a Seder on a day or days other than the 15th and 16th of Nisan. For example, if the Seder falls on Monday or Tuesday, it might be pushed up or back to the weekend, on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday night; and sometimes it is not during Passover at all, but rather held during spring break or another time when it is more convenient to get the whole family together.

Part of me rejoices that Passover is important enough to such families that they are having Seders, and in fact think that the Seder is so important that they want to make sure that the whole

family will be able to celebrate it. Surely, celebrating Pesah with a Seder at the “wrong” time is better than not celebrating it at all.

The other part of me wonders whether it is really good for Jewish ritual to lose the connection to the day that Jews all over the world are celebrating the Seder. Is there a mystical connection with God that opens up on the night of the 15th of Nisan that is not available on other nights of the year? Does that make a Seder more effective, whatever that means exactly, if celebrated at precisely the right moment?

We have a history in this country of creating long weekends by moving our celebration of events from the “correct” day -- for example, the fourth of July, Martin Luther King's, Abraham Lincoln or George Washington's birthdays -- to a Friday or Monday. There is nothing divinely ordained about our civic holidays. Yet, somehow it seems to me to diminish the message of celebrating the day when it is moved to form a 3 day weekend. Rather than being a reason to celebrate a meaningful message of freedom or sacrifice or equality or leadership, it becomes an excuse for vacation and time off and retail sales. The change of date doesn't have to change the message of the holiday, but the change of date for reasons of convenience subtly moves the focus of the holiday from being centered on an external value to being human centered.

The same is true with Jewish holidays. Altering the celebration of the day in order to satisfy an individual's or individual family's need alters the nature of the celebration. It satisfies the individual ego or small group of egos, diminishing or masking the opportunity to celebrate the collective experience. We may not intend to change the meaning of the celebration, but inevitably it will happen.

Autonomy suggests that you may celebrate Pesah when it works best for you and your family. Responsibility to a tradition suggests that you ought to celebrate the holiday based on the Jewish calendar.

The second practice I'd like to examine is not blowing the shofar on the first day of Rosh Hashanah when it falls on Shabbat, such as today.

My colleague Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb has written that the law that we do not blow shofar today (S"O Or"Ch 568:5), has an interesting history. The Mishnah (R"H 4:1) notes that they did blow shofar in the Temple some 2000 years ago, when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat. It then says that after the Destruction in the year 70 CE Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, the leading rabbinic authority of the era, decreed that the shofar should be blown on Shabbat anywhere there was a beit din, extending the practice beyond Jerusalem.

Yet, despite these precedents, the Talmud rules that the shofar is not blown on Shabbat as a shvut, a Rabbinic safeguard, “lest someone [not proficient in blowing] take it to learn from an expert and carry it ... in the public domain.” The same safeguard is the reason we don't use the lulav on Shabbat during Sukot or read the Megillah if Purim falls on Shabbat (Rosh Hashanah 29b). An action permitted on Shabbat is cancelled lest the instrument for its implementation be misused in a way which violates the Shabbat.

The counter argument is that the shofar is the central Biblical Mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah. It makes the service special, distinct, unique. We look forward to it - it makes the holiday meaningful. We know that a portion of our congregation will not return on the second day of the holiday. If we don't blow the shofar today, they will not hear it at all on Rosh Hashanah. Don't we have an obligation to make sure that everybody hears the shofar?

I agree that is inconvenient to come back tomorrow to hear the shofar. Of course, those who celebrate only one day could, I suppose, come only on the 2nd day and not on the first day if hearing the shofar was a primary motivation for coming at all. But the more interesting question is, what do we gain but not sounding it on the first day, and what do we lose by sounding it on Shabbat.

Rosh Hashanah has sanctity. Shabbat has sanctity. The synagogue experience of Rosh Hashanah is overwhelming - the liturgy is big, far bigger than Shabbat. The music is grand, certainly more elaborate than Shabbat. We are in danger of burying Shabbat underneath Rosh Hashanah. Perhaps not sounding the Shofar is Shabbat's way of asserting its powerful voice. The voice of Shabbat is heard in the silence, drowning out the voice of the Shofar. By sounding the Shofar on Shabbat we lose the opportunity to remind ourselves that no matter how much we may be connected to Rosh Hashanah, it is only two days out of the year. We lose the opportunity to remind ourselves that whatever positive feelings we gain from Rosh Hashanah services are also accessible on a weekly basis on Shabbat.

What do we gain by not sounding the Shofar? Claude Debussy once famously remarked, that music is the stuff between the notes. The words on the page in front of you are not only black letters or dots. They are also the empty white spaces inside and between the letters. The Shofar is the noise, the dark space of Rosh Hashanah, but the real work of Rosh Hashanah is in the white space, the silent time for reflection, self-evaluation, and change.

Rabbi Goldfarb writes: Perhaps we can find in the silence of the shofar an opportunity. Silence can be a welcome relief, a source of inspiration and renewal. Like Elijah fleeing, in the cave in the wilderness (I Kings 19:11-12) "and the Lord was not in the great and mighty wind... not in the earthquake...not in the fire...and after the fire *kol dmama daka*, a still small voice," the voice of God. Sometimes it is in the memory of the Shofar, rather than in its blast, that we find the ability to reach beyond ourselves.

Again, it comes down to ego. Do we gain more by learning how to suppress our egos and looking for the larger meaning, or is our tradition better served by returning to an ancient Biblically based practice of blowing shofar on Shabbat?

Framed in the larger sense, the question is does the time set aside for Rosh Hashanah and Pesah and other Jewish holidays belong to us or to God? I mean this as a serious question, as either answers is possible. When all is said and done, holidays are celebrated for us, not for God. God doesn't need us to eat matzah or blow shofar or acknowledge God's grandeur in order to be God. However, by giving up our time and subsuming our will to a tradition that hears God's commanding voice in Torah and other sacred texts, we make space within ourselves for a difference experience.

When it comes to choosing between our time and God's time, you, like me, may have competing voices whispering within you. My tendency is to accept the answers that Jewish history and tradition give me unless there is a compelling reason not to. My tendency is to listen to the voice within call me towards social responsibility, which I understand as a responsibility towards *klal Yisrael*, the community of Jewish practice. As part of your process of the self reflection of Rosh Hashanah, I invite you to listen carefully to both the voice of personal meaning and the voice of tradition and the Divine beyond yourself.

May Rosh Hashanah be a time in which you deepen your own spiritual practice, learn to hear the still small voice within, and find enduring happiness in every moment spent either living in God's time or your own time.