

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann
Stanford University

Memorial Church
September 18, 2011

Time and New Beginnings
(Exodus 20:8-14, Ps. 92)

At this time each year, in the days when I was a young Hillel rabbi at UCLA, I had an annual ritual. I would meet the Hillel rabbi at USC, not for a cross-town rivalry or to plan a joint program. No, once a year, Rabbi Laura Geller and I would meet before school began to go shopping. But we only went in search of one thing—a calendar planner. We’d hit the stationary stores with abandon, compare systems, consider the flaws and benefits of the one we’d used the previous year and purchase a different one, in search of the holy grail, hoping that this time, we’d be able to better organize our time, gain a few moments of freedom and relaxation amidst the busyness of our professional lives. The pleasure was not just starting fresh—there was certainly our delight in turning pages and pages of unplanned days. But there was also something liberating about abandoning our old planners—a recognition that what’s been done is done and that as school begins we get to start anew.

But in our electronic world, it’s harder to mark the beginning of a new year as we once did. On the calendar on my computer, I never erase the previous year’s entries, and I suppose that if I did, it would still remain somewhere “in the cloud”. Perhaps this new reality symbolizes how we have become captive to our calendars, to our clocks, to our careful calculations of time. Perhaps our inability to literally turn over a new page speaks eloquently of how we have become imprisoned by time.

One day I found a cartoon in my box in the Round Room here in Memorial Church. In the first panel a man is on his knees with his hands clasped in prayer. The bubble reads “Lord, grant me patience.” In the second panel, still on his knees, he looks at his watch. In the third panel, still on his knees, he pulls out a cell phone and says, “Mind if I make a few calls while I’m waiting?”

I grew up with machines designed to save time. But now, in addition we rely on time saving people. Whole industries have developed to manage or save time. Packers and unpackers when we move. Dog walkers. Grocery shoppers. Companies to drive carpools. Delivery services for restaurants. In her delightful new novel, Three Daughters, Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s main

character runs a business that does all those things and more—the business is called, “My Time is Your Time”.

We’re always racing from one place to the next. We now have the phenomenon of road rage-- violence hugely out of proportion to the encounter that might have spawned it. While I would wager that most of us do not travel with a deadly weapon or use our cars as one, we probably have been known to curse and rage and cut off other cars when we’re late to an important appointment. Perhaps we have become more susceptible to road rage because we have organized our lives so tightly that a few minutes delay in our travel time allotment, and the consequences can be monumental.

I worked for eight years with a rabbi with whom I studied sacred texts weekly. We learned a great deal from one another through our shared work and study. But when I left he told me with complete sincerity that the most important thing I had taught him was the short cut through my neighborhood to get to the freeway!

I used that shortcut often, and could have used others. A few times in my life—a very few, I have been late to officiate at a funeral. One of those times, unaware of the irony of it, the genuinely appreciative daughter of the woman who died, gave me a column by Ellen Goodman, one of the great secular rabbis of our time. The first lines described exactly how I felt upon arriving late.

“It is rush hour when I pull up to my mother’s apartment, and I am still speeding internally. The momentum of the day is pushing me forward long after its engine has turned off.”

Ellen Goodman has come to help her mother to move. She goes through the objects with lightening speed, dispatching them to various piles.

“So I arrive from the office with my mind on efficiency and my eye on my watch...It takes a half hour of such speeding before I notice that my mother is in a different lane, traveling at a different pace altogether. While I am urging decisions, she is telling life stories. While I am trying to finish this job and get on to the next at home, she is considering this moment in her life. She wants to talk about the friend who gave her this scarf, about the thousand family dinners around that dining room table, about the day she bought the lamp. She wants to say good-bye to those pieces of her past, one by one, before she lets them go. Finally seeing this, I shift gears. I slow down and sit down. And

doing so, I realize how easy it is to speed through important moments without even noticing.”

“I have a friend whose mother says that our whole generation should wear T shirts that read “Gotta Go”. We are forever in a rush. We do drive by visits. They call us the sandwich generation because so many of us are caught between parents and children, work and home. But maybe we’re named after the one item on the menu made to be eaten on the run. “

In her bestseller Kitchen Table Wisdom, Naomi Rachel Remen reflects that as a child, people sat around the kitchen table and told one another stories. “Real stories take time,” she says. “We stopped telling stories when we started to lose that sort of time, pausing time, reflecting time, wondering time. Life rushes us along and few people are strong enough to stop on their own. Most often, something unforeseen stops us and it is only then we have the time to take a seat at life’s kitchen table. To know our own story and tell it. To listen to other people’s stories.”

Why are we too busy to be in our own story? What makes our lives so frantic? What are we pursuing? Whose expectations are we meeting? Where did we learn that more is better, richer is better, busier is better, faster is better, prestige is better, productivity is better, achievement is better? And why didn’t we learn the cost? Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has argued in her disturbing book, The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work that we have traded in efficiency in the workplace for efficiency at home. To the extent that we have tables in our lives around which we tell stories, they are in our offices and not in our kitchens.

For those of us whose place of work or study is the university, it is easy to understand the reversal. In the university, we are privileged to be engaged in meaningful work. Learning and teaching are lofty endeavors. The future leaders of our civilization are becoming those leaders here. Contributing to culture, science and knowledge is a worthy enterprise. Studying and researching a question that stirs our souls is a great blessing. But here, too, the costs mount. The bar becomes ever higher. The expectations more difficult to meet. In a place as full of prestige and talent as Stanford, it is immensely difficult to feel “good enough”, to revel in an achievement without calculating the next challenge. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* once published an article on the most prolific academics. The scholar of rabbinic Judaism, Jacob Neusner topped the list with an astonishing 750 books, followed by Arnold Goldstein with 50. The article was not written as satire. I wonder if in this publish or

perish universe, professors reading the Chronicle compared themselves to these colleagues and found themselves wanting.

Naomi Rachel Remen tells a powerful story about her own education, a pause on the way to the important work of becoming a doctor. It occurred on the day her parents moved her into her dorm at medical school. Like parents who dropped some of you off at Stanford, her father carried her belongings upstairs and her mother lined the drawers with contact paper. After they left, she found herself alone in the room, visited by doubts about whether she belonged in medical school. She looked out the window into the night and saw that across the street was the main entrance of the hospital. It was ablaze with light. All night long, people came and went. The shift changed; one set of white clad people entered and another set left. Cars, ambulances, taxis and police cars came and went. When, at four a.m. she realized the lights never went out, they were being passed from hand to hand, Dr. Remen thought about the *ner tamid*, an eternal light above the ark that holds the Torah scrolls, in her grandfather's synagogue, the light that signifies the unseen presence of God. She understood that she belonged to this eternal light--the light of people present for those in crisis, for those in pain. Although she lived in that room for the four years of school, she wrote, "I can't remember ever having the time to look out that window again."

Even if the work we are doing is meaningful, essential, lifesaving, even if we understand ourselves to be part of the thread repairing the tears of our society, even if we have the privilege of being part of the university, we will have shortchanged ourselves if we never slow down enough to see the eternal light. We will have sacrificed something precious if we neglect to notice the unseen presence of God. We will have forfeited the gift of sight if we never look out the window.

In his book, The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote prophetic words that seem as if they were written in 2011 rather than when he penned them 60 years ago. "Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence."(The Sabbath, p. 3)

The Sabbath is the time to take off our watch; the equivalent of having clean pages on a calendar. To keep the Sabbath is to be liberated from the cell phone, the computer, the television, and the mall. To keep the day of rest is to stop the being driven, to stop being efficient, to stop being impatient. The Sabbath is an act of rebellion against the relentless pace of the people sporting Gotta Go t-shirts. On the Sabbath there is an abundance of time.

People who see the Sabbath from the outside think this is a luxury they can't afford. Often I hear, "If I can't manage all I have to do in seven days, how can I possibly do it in six?" But imagine a day when there is nowhere you have to be, a day to pray and study with others seeking to know God, a day to sit down with a good book, for a good conversation, to look out the window for as long as you like, to play with a child, to take a stroll with a friend or a lover, to linger over a meal. Imagine a day to contemplate where you are going, whether you are appreciating the eternal light, a day to savor and share the love of those closest to you. Imagine a day to share stories around the kitchen table, to listen, really listen to your friends, your parents and your children, to join children playing on the floor or in their treehouse or in their fantasies. Imagine a day when there are no expectations to be met, no money to be made, no errands to run, no deadlines to meet... Are you breathing deeper yet?

One of the paradoxes of keeping the Sabbath is that doing so creates time. From the outside, it looks restrictive. But from the inside, it feels liberating. On the Sabbath, we don't have to be better than, faster than, more prolific than or more famous than anyone else. The Sabbath lets us clarify, prioritize, gain perspective. The Sabbath lets us see what really needs to be done, what really matters. We have a greater capacity to appreciate, to praise, to see how we are connected, not simply because the sun has gone down, but because we have stopped to notice it, we have stopped to remember the Source of it all.

An artist, who was diagnosed with a fatal disease used to say, "I don't have time to hurry." If you know that your time is limited, you have to relish all of what you have. You can't afford to be always doing. You have to make time for being.

I don't speak about this today because I am good at making time for being. It took me a decade to question my pride in being called by a classmate Ms. Ruthlessly Efficient. But whenever I sit in the backyard and listen to the crickets or abandon my to do list to play board games with my family or take a

deep breath and tell my friends how they have buoyed me in rough waters, I begin to sense glimmers of the eternal light.

Once we become accustomed to noticing the eternal light, we see its illumination not only on the Sabbath, but also throughout the week. We see it flicker when we sit down to eat and bless the food and the conversation that sustains us. We see it glow when we put our kids to bed and ask God to protect them. We see it illuminate when we are generous to those whose lives have been left behind by the speed overtaking our own. We see it shine when we listen to the stories of those who came before us and tell our stories to those who look to us for wisdom. We see it gleam when we thank God for having another precious day in which to enjoy the possibilities of love and beauty and creativity and discovery that are ours to behold if we only look long enough. And if we are noticing the brightness of the eternal light in those moments, then we will have slowed down enough to fully live our lives.

In Jewish tradition, there is a special blessing said reaching, noticing and marking a precious moment known as *birkat zman*, “the blessing of time”. It is said in ritual moments but it is also said in more personal moments--at a reunion with a friend, upon acquiring a new home, or new clothes, when we eat a new fruit, at the naming of a new baby, at graduation, on the first day of college, at a wedding, upon accepting a first job offer. It is a blessing overflowing with appreciation for the little and large moments of our lives, a blessing which opens us to the eternity of every moment in time.

As we welcome a new class to Stanford this week, let us look those moments worthy of the blessing of time. Let us slow down and pause long enough to drink in the eternal light in our lives and to honor its brightness with a blessing. As we enter this academic year, may we be released from the bustle and pursuit that has sped up our lives.

Baruch ata Adonai, Elohenu Melech haolam, shehechyanu, vekiyamanu vehigianu lazman hazeh.

You abound in blessings, Source of time and space, who has given us life and sustained us and enabled us to live so that we may appreciate the blessing of time. Amen.

