

**SHEMINI ATZERET**  
**OCTOBER 20, 2011**  
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*Time Flies! For that you win a Nobel Prize?*

This is the year I feel cheated. The Nobel prizes have been given out ... and I was not included! And I should have been! I should have won the Nobel prize in physics, this despite the fact that I never took a class in physics and, in fact, may not even know how to spell the word correctly! But I should have won it this year. The Nobel Prize in physics was won by three men ... Saul Perlmutter, Brian Schmidt and Johns Hopkins' own Adam Riess. What it took these three great minds many years to discover, I had already discovered long before them! Their award was given "for the discovery of the accelerating expansion of the universe through observations of distant super novae." It had been thought that the expansion of the universe was slowing down, but in fact, the Nobel Prize winners discovered quite the opposite ... that the expansion is accelerating and "if the expansion will continue to speed up, the universe will end in ice." For this you win a Nobel Prize? For discovering that things are going faster and faster? I've known that for nearly seven years now, ever since the day I turned 60.

You know, for many people, every big birthday – 40, 50, 60, 70 – seems to mark a change, a turning point. I never felt that way. Not until I turned 60. From the day I turned 60, I feel things have changed ... I have experienced the feeling that many others have undergone: everything seems to be happening faster and faster ... the seasons change more quickly, the years go by more quickly. It was just yesterday when I started needing reading glasses and now I'm getting close to needing a hearing aid! Just yesterday I became a grandfather, and now my 6<sup>th</sup> one is on the way! Just yesterday in seeking advice I might call a psychologist. Now I find myself calling a urologist! It is said that "time marches on," but that's not the way I feel. For me, time is racing and the clock is ticking ... and I can't seem to be able to do much about it. But then again, God seems to have the same problem! And that's why He came up with this holiday of Shemini Atzeret.

What is this holiday all about? Unlike most other festivals, it has no special ceremony, nor does this day mark any historic occasion. Shemini Atzeret is a holiday unto itself . . . independent of Sukkot and independent in its manner from any other major observance. So why this holiday and why now? Our sages delved into God's psyche, so to speak, and explained this holiday accordingly: For nearly a month now, the Jewish people and God have been drawn together by way of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Now, when the Jew is about to go back to business as usual, God established one more holiday saying, "*Ikvu imi od yom* – stay with me another day . . . *kawsha olai pridashem* – your parting is difficult for me." From God's perspective – from our perspective – after months of waiting, the High Holidays finally arrived, and then seemingly with the blink of an eye, they are gone. It happens so quickly . . . and God wants to slow it down, even if for only another day.

The truth of the matter is, there is no slowing down time. The only thing we can control is how we spend our time. We live in a civilization overly obsessed with time . . . the new I Phone is a split second faster than the old one and that makes it worth having. We keep pushing the button as we wait for the elevator, as if pushing it one more time will make it come one second sooner. But with all the time consuming devices, it seems as if previous generations had more time to do things, to sit back and relax, to cherish each moment. But we fill our "things to do" list and we allow time to pass us by without even realizing it.

I'll tell you one person who realizes it. His name is Gilad Shalit! And while we are all thrilled that he has returned home, no one is happier than Gilad himself. For him, these last five years, time moved very slowly. It wasn't just five years . . . it was 1,940 days where nothing changed. Can we comprehend what he missed out on during the last five years . . . Justin Beiber was only 11 years old . . . Facebook had only ten million users . . . then there was the arrival of the iPhone and iPad. He knows nothing about Harry Potter or Sarah Palin or Lady Gaga. He missed nearly 300 Shabbats with his family. There have been more than a quarter of a millions weddings in Israel since he was captured. He was not able to celebrate at any of them. He will never take any of these things for granted. But we do!

Explain it to me:

- Why are able to always find the time to attend a funeral or pay a condolence call but we skip the simcha of an out-of-town relative because we are too busy – there’s a conflict in our schedule.
- Why are we able to make a business luncheon appointment but we are too busy to get home in time for dinner with our spouse and children?
- Why are we able to do all that is written down on our “list of things to do today” except to call an elderly parent who lives to see and hear from us?
- We can spend hours on the phone but can’t find the time to tell those nearest and dearest to us just three words: I love you.

Our children, our spouses, our parents ... they need us today because we all only have today – tomorrow may be too late. What is the good of saying tomorrow: “I meant to visit him ...” “I wish I had written ...” “I never told her ...” Some of the saddest words too frequently spoken are at the end of a man’s life. They go something like this: “He worked so hard all his life, but he never really took time to enjoy what he had. Now that he could really enjoy life, *nit da kein yarhren* ... he ran out of years.”

Steve Jobs ran out of years at the early age of 56. And his death was mourned throughout the world. His genius really was one-of-a-kind. In a famous speech that he gave at Stanford University in 2005, he reflected upon life and death when he said: “When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something. Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything - all external expectations, all

pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”

Without his even knowing it, Mr. Jobs’ words came from the depths of Jewish tradition. In the Talmud our sages ask, “Do you want to know how to live life the way it should be lived?” And they provide us with a three part system. When beset by temptations, when influenced to sin, the procedure recommended is as follows: first, learn Torah. If that does not work, then recite the Shema. If still not resolved, then *yazkir lo yom hamisa* – let a person think of the imminent day of death.” You want to know how to live life? Then think of death! Why? What good can this do for us? Think of death so that you will begin to appreciate life.

In Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, there is an unforgettable scene at the grave of Emily, who died when she was 26. As the scene opens, Emily’s spirit is allowed to turn back the clock and re-live any day she may choose from her past life. She selects to re-live her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday and suddenly Emily is back home. Her mother, cooking over a hot stove, doesn’t even pay attention to her. Her father, returning on the commuter train from a business trip, ignores her. Only Emily realizes the preciousness of those moments, and she cannot bear it. She cries out to her parents, but of course, they cannot hear her: “Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really see me. Fourteen years have gone by and I am dead, but just for a moment now we are all together. Mama, just for a moment, we are all happy. Let’s look at one another.” When no one hears her, she says, “I can’t go on with it. It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another. Bursting into tears, she breaks down. Her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday fades away and she is back in the graveyard. “O Earth,” she cries, “you are too wonderful for anyone to realize. Do any human beings realize life while they live it – every day, every minute?”

The reality of life is . . . time moves very quickly . . . before we know it, our parents are gone, our children move on. And one more thing: before we know it, we are going to be gone! None of us are going to be here forever. So let us learn from this day.

You know, this day of Shemini Atzeret is also the concluding day of Sukkot. Rabbi Harold Kushner points out: we celebrate Sukkot by building a small annex to our homes; just a few boards and branches, inviting friends in and drinking in it and eating fruit in it for the week of the holiday. Sukkot is a celebration of the beauty of things that don't last: the little hut that is so vulnerable to wind and rain and will be dismantled at week's end, the ripe fruit which will spoil if not picked and eaten right away, the friends and family who may not be with us as long as we would wish, the beauty of the leaves changing color as they begin the process of falling and dying from the trees. Sukkot comes to tell us that the world is full of good and beautiful things, but that we have to enjoy them right away – today because they will not last. They will not wait for us to finish other things and get around to them.

So now, let us hold on tight to those we love and to those things which truly matter in life so that when that moment arrives, that inevitable moment, when we all have to let go, our children will someday gather to say Yizkor for us as we now do for our loved ones; blessing their names for having lived and shared, given and cared. Amen.

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