

### What does Gd do all day?

*Gd said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

*Gd saw that the light was good, and Gd separated the light from the darkness.*

*Gd called the light יום, day, and called the darkness לילה, night. And there was evening, and there was morning: one day.*

Genesis 1:3-5.fvfvv

One way of understanding the story of Creation, the story we look toward as we celebrate the renewal of the year, is that it is about time. The separation of light and darkness is the first way we learn to mark time. The first things Gd names are light, which Gd calls *yom*, day, and darkness, which Gd calls *laila*, night. Gd immediately complicates those two categories by adding evening, *erev*, and morning, *boker*, the times in between. As the story continues, we learn that days are in a cycle of seven. The seventh day, Shabbat, differs from the other days: it is holy. Here, the Torah introduces the concept of holiness not through an object or a person, but through a distinction in time: Shabbat.

Ever since those first words of Genesis, Jewish concepts of time have been a partnership between the words of Torah and us, the people. The Torah establishes the cycle of days, weeks, months and holidays. And the Torah commands us, the people, to sanctify time.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. ... 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."<sup>1</sup> Our liturgy, with its melodies and words, helps us mark those distinctions: darkness and light, the weekdays and Shabbat, the months, the holidays, and the new year. The liturgy locates us in time. For example, Ma'ariv, the evening service, begins with a blessing describing Gd as the One who *ma'ariv aravim*, who "brings on the evenings." Tonight, we sang those familiar words in the unmistakable melody that welcomes in the High Holidays, *yamim nora'im*, the Days of Awe.

So it makes sense that the ancients, with their care and concern for how humanity lives within a structure of sacred time, would also be curious about how Gd uses time. Perhaps Gd's daily schedule could provide insight into how we should spend our time.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951, p. 8.

They ask: what does Gd do all day?

The Talmud answers with a story:

*Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: There are twelve hours in a day. During the first three hours, the Blessed Holy One sits occupied with the Torah. During the second three hours, the Blessed Holy One sits in judgment of the entire world, and when Gd sees that the whole world needs to be destroyed, Gd gets up from the seat of judgment and sits on the seat of mercy. During the next three hours, the Blessed Holy One sits and feeds the entire world, from the horned wild ox to the eggs of lice. During the final three hours, the Blessed Holy One . . . teaches Torah to the tinokot, the little ones.<sup>2</sup>*

The four activities, with which Gd equally divides the time of Gd's day, are:

- studying Torah;
- judging the world and granting forgiveness;
- nourishing the creatures of the world; and
- teaching Torah to *tinokot*. The rabbis clarify *tinokot* means little children, just after weaning, children we'd today call preschoolers.<sup>3</sup>

In truth, I shortened the story a little. In the Talmud, the rabbis go on a digression about the final part of the day. First they propose that Gd plays and laughs during that period. Then they decide that after the destruction of the Temple, Gd grieved the destruction so deeply that Gd stopped playing and laughing. Tellingly, the rabbis also imagined the balm for that grief was to teach Torah to babies. Teaching children Torah is necessary not only because it transmits the tradition to each new generation. It is also necessary because it has the potential to heal: we recall and repeat the stories that formed our own identities and reacquaint ourselves with wonder.

Let's look at the other parts of Gd's day. The first thing the rabbis imagine Gd doing is studying Torah. Of course, the rabbinic mindset emphasizes studying Torah, so this may not seem surprising. But let's consider how this highlights humility. If Gd, the One who gave us the Torah, devotes three hours every day to studying Torah, it's a reminder to all of us that there is always more we can learn about our obligations to each other and to the world. If Gd is still learning, and if Gd learns from human readings of Torah, the rabbis are saying, there is no point

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zara 3b.

<sup>3</sup> In the culture of the ancient rabbis, the age of weaning was generally between two and five years old. Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 60a.

at which we can sit back and tell ourselves we have learned enough. Instead, we are invited into the radical humility of the Divine: the commitment, every day, to ask questions and seek answers; to be curious rather than self-satisfied; to spend time learning.<sup>4</sup>

Another part of Gd's day is spent "sitting and feeding the entire world, *kol ha'olam kulo*." Specifically, the rabbis say, Gd feeds the horned ox—a large, powerful animal—and the eggs of lice—tiny seeds of life. When I hear that Gd sits and feeds the entire world, I don't imagine Gd serving lunch. I imagine Gd ensuring there are enough resources to nourish all life on Earth, balancing plant life, animal life, water, and sunlight, caring even about nits less than one millimeter long, reminding us that nothing is too insignificant to merit Gd's care.

The part of Gd's day most closely related to Rosh HaShanah is when Gd sits and judges the world. "When the Blessed Holy One sees that the whole world needs to be destroyed, Gd gets up from the seat of judgment and moves to the seat of mercy." This is part of Gd's schedule every day. Every day, Gd sees humanity making mistakes. Big mistakes. Rather than give up on us, Gd sits with us, committing to mercy.

On Rosh HaShanah, as we realize that we've come full circle on the calendar but we have not yet become the selves we know we can be, the truest expressions of our souls, we focus on teshuvah, on return. We account for our mistakes and seek to repair them. Our tradition teaches that Rosh HaShanah is an auspicious time for teshuvah. One of the reasons we sound the shofar is to move Gd from the seat of judgment to the seat of mercy, to receive our imperfect selves with compassion and love.<sup>5</sup> But in this story, the rabbis are teaching us that every day is an auspicious time to move Gd from judgment to mercy. Not just once a year. Gd sets aside time every day to extend mercy to us, if only we can open ourselves to that possibility.

The rabbis go on to wonder, when Gd is sitting there on the seat of judgment, and Gd notices that we make a mistake—for how long is Gd angry? Based on a Biblical verse, they answer that Gd's anger lasts just for "a moment," in Hebrew, a *rega*.<sup>6</sup> A "moment," they explain,

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<sup>4</sup> I'm grateful to Rabbi Mikhael Manekin for the insight about Gd asking questions.

<sup>5</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 29:4: Rabbi Yohayyah said, it is written "Happy are the people who know the joyful blast, Lord, they walk in the light of Your presence." (Psalm 89:16). Rather it is that they know how to sway their Creator with the blast; and God gets up from God's seat of judgment and [moves] to the seat of mercy and is filled up with mercy for them. For them God transforms God's attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy. When? In the seventh month.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 30:6, stating that Gd's anger lasts "but a moment."

is specifically, “one fifty three thousand eight hundred forty eighth (1/53,848th) of an hour.”<sup>7</sup> For me, it helped to convert that number to seconds: Gd’s anger lasts one-fifteenth of a second.<sup>8</sup> Remember, every day Gd moves from the seat of judgment to the seat of mercy. Every day Gd moves past that anger, in one-fifteenth of a second.

If you’re like me, you’ve probably held onto some mistake you made in the past year—held onto it for far longer than one-fifteenth of a second. Maybe for weeks or for months regret or embarrassment or pride has prevented you from taking steps to repair that mistake. Maybe you have spent far longer than one-fifteenth of a second criticizing yourself.

Or maybe what you’re holding onto, as many of us do, is criticism of someone else. Someone disappointed you, or made a mistake that hurt you, or did something affecting a person you care about. Rather than reach out to the person who made the mistake with *tochecha*, ethical reproof, maybe you’ve stayed silent. Maybe your resentment has grown. Maybe you hesitate to initiate a difficult conversation. You’ve held onto this for longer than one-fifteenth of a second, longer than an hour, maybe for months.

What can we learn from Gd’s schedule as we go into this new year, this new demarcation of sacred time?

We learn that all of us are to make time for studying the right path, and that this learning is ongoing, requiring our attention every day.

We learn that sustaining the earth’s resources also requires our attention and time, every day, and no task is too insignificant a step to take.

We learn to reserve time for teaching the next generation; and we learn that teaching children Torah may be a balm for our grief.

And we learn that the Holy One is waiting for us, every day, letting go of frustration over our mistakes, letting go of that frustration more quickly than we can imagine, moving to the seat of mercy not only when the shofar sounds on Rosh HaShanah, but every day.

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<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zara 4a.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to my daughter, who did this conversion for me at the dinner table! It may be that the ancients described this as a fraction of an hour because minutes and seconds were not yet being used as units of time.

In the haftarah for Ki Tetzei, one of the haftarot we read in September, preparing us for Rosh HaShanah, Gd tells the prophet, “For a small moment, *rega*, I abandoned you, but with great mercy I will gather you. . . . With *hesed olam*, eternal love, I will extend mercy to you.” Isaiah 54:7-8.

Here we are, gathered tonight and with anticipation of gathering over the next few days and over the next year. Gathered with great mercy. Gathered together, hoping and praying for a glimpse of *hesed olam*, eternal love.

Shanah tovah u’metukah! May it be a good and sweet year!