COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Counting Time

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The human body contains 100 trillion cells. Within each cell is a nucleus. Within each nucleus is a double copy of the human genome. Each genome contains 3.1 billion letters of genetic code, enough if transcribed to fill a library of five thousand books. Each cell, in other words, contains a blueprint of the entire body of which it is a part. The cumulative force of these scientific discoveries is nothing short of wondrous. In ways undreamt of by our ancestors, we now know to what extent the microcosm is a map of the microcosm. From a single cell, it may be possible to reconstruct an entire organism.

Does this apply to Judaism?

I want in this study to look at an apparently tiny detail of Jewish law – a single cell, as it were, of a highly complex structure. Could it be that patient and detailed study of this fragment will reveal to us something of the totality of Judaism's spiritual world? If so, more may be at stake than understanding one aspect of Judaism. We might begin to see how halachah and aggadah are related, law and narrative, practice and philosophy. Judaism might then begin to disclose itself to us as more than a series of laws – as, in fact, nothing less than an entire way of seeing the world and responding to it with the totality of our being. We might discover a more expansive way of studying Jewish texts.

We are at the moment in the midst of fulfilling one of the commands in this week's sedra, the counting of the Omer:

> From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD .

Historically, this passage had profound reverberations within Judaism because of the ambiguity in the phrase, "from the day after the Sabbath." This was important because on it depended the date of Shavuot, Pentecost. Some groups in ancient Judaism read the phrase literally to mean Sunday, with the result that for them Shavuot always fell on a Sunday seven weeks later. Others, relying on oral tradition, interpreted it to mean "from the day after the festival [i.e. the first day of Passover]." That is our custom. The resulting argument over the calendar was one of the major disputes within Judaism in the late Second Temple period. However, that is not our concern here. While the Temple stood, the counting was initiated by bringing an offering of new grain. Since the destruction of the Temple, the command has been fulfilled by counting alone – each night for seven weeks. A question arose during the period of the Geonim (between the closure of the Talmud and the era of its great commentators, i.e. between the eighth and eleventh centuries). What is the law for someone who forgets to count one of the 49 days? May he continue to count the rest, or has he forfeited the entire command for that year? There were two sharply contrasting views. According to the Halachot Gedolot (a work usually attributed to R. Shimon Kayyara) the person has indeed forfeited the chance to fulfil the command. According to R. Hai Gaon he has not. He continues to count the remaining days, unaffected by his failure to count one of the forty-nine.

How are we to understand this disagreement?

According to the Halachot Gedolot, the key phrase is "seven full [temimot, i.e. complete] weeks." One who forgets a day cannot satisfy the requirement of completeness. On this view, the 49 days constitute a single religious act, and if one of the parts is missing, the whole is defective. What is this like? It is like a Torah scroll. If a single letter is missing, the entire scroll is invalid. So too in the case of counting days. According to R. Hai Gaon however, each day of the 49 is a separate command – "Count off fifty days." Therefore, if one fails to keep one of the commands, that is no impediment to keeping the others. If, for example, one fails to pray on a given day, that neither excuses nor prevents one from praying on subsequent days. Each day is a temporal entity in itself, unaffected by what happened before or after. The same applies to the Omer. Forgetting one day does not invalidate the others.

The final law mediates between these two opinions. Out of respect for R. Hai, we count the subsequent days, but out of respect for the Halachot Gedolot we do so without a blessing – an elegant compromise.

We might, before moving on, note one salient fact. Usually in the case of a dispute about Jewish law, the doubt lies in us, not in the biblical text. God has spoken, but we are not sure what the words mean. In the case of counting the Omer, however, the doubt lies within the biblical text itself. Unusually, the command is specified in two quite different ways:

1. "Count off seven full weeks"
2. "Count off fifty days"

There is a view that this dual characterization signals two distinct commands, to count the days, and to count the weeks. However, as we have seen, it also suggests two quite different ways of understanding the counting itself – as a single extended process (Halachot Gedolot) or as fifty distinct acts (Hai Gaon). This duality was not born in the minds of two halachic authorities. It is there in the biblical text itself.

Within Judaism there are two kinds of time. One way of seeing this is in a Talmudic story about two of the great Sages of the Second Temple period, Hillel and Shammai:

They used to say about Shammai the elder that all his life he ate in honour of the Sabbath. So, if he found a well-favoured animal he would say, "Let this be for the Sabbath." If he later found a better one, he would put aside the second for the Sabbath and eat the first. But Hillel the elder had a different approach, for all his deeds were for the sake of heaven, as it is said, "Blessed be the Lord day by day" (Ps. 68:20). It was likewise taught: The school of Shammai say, From the first day of the week, prepare for the Sabbath, but the school of Hillel say, "Blessed be the Lord day by day."

Shammai lived in teleological time, time as a journey toward a destination. Already from the beginning of a week, he was conscious of its end. We speak, in one of our prayers, of the Sabbath as "last in deed, first in thought." Time on this view is not a mere sequence of moments. It has a purpose, a direction, a destination.

Hillel, by contrast, lived each day in and for itself, without regard to what came before or what would come after. We speak in our prayers of God who "in his goodness, each day renews the work of creation." On this view, each sequence of time is an entity in itself. The universe is continually being renewed. Each day is a universe; each has its own challenge, its task, its response. Faith, for Hillel, is a matter of taking each day as it comes, trusting in God to give the totality of time its shape and direction.

The dispute is strikingly similar to the more recent disagreement about the nature of light. Is it a continuous wave or a series of particles? Paradoxically, it is both, and this can be experimentally demonstrated.

The argument, however, goes much deeper. Much has been written about two highly distinctive forms of time consciousness.

Ancient civilizations tended to see time as a circle – cyclical time. That is how we experience time in nature. Each day is marked by the same succession of events: dawn, sunrise, the gradual trajectory of the sun across the sky to its setting and to nightfall. The year is a succession of seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Life itself is a repeated sequence of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. Many of these moments, especially the transition from one to another, are marked by religious ritual.

Cyclical time is time as a series of eternal recurrences. Beneath the apparent changes, the world remains the same. The book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) contains a classic statement of cyclical time:

> Generations come and generations go,
> but the earth remains forever.
> The sun rises and the sun sets,
> and hurries back to where it rises . . .
> All streams flow into the sea,
> yet the sea is never full.
> To the place the streams come from,
> there they return again . . .
> What has been will be again,
> what has been done will be done again;
> there is nothing new under the sun.

In Judaism, priestly time is cyclical time. Each part of the day, the week and the year has its specific sacrifice, unaffected by what is happening in the world of events. Halachah – Jewish law – is priestly in this sense. Though all else may change, the law does not change. It represents eternity in the midst of time.

In this respect, Judaism did not innovate. However, according to many anthropologists and historians, a quite new and different form of time was born in ancient Israel. Often, this is called linear time. I prefer the phrase covenantal time. The Hebrew Bible is the first document to see time as an arena of change. Tomorrow need not be the same as yesterday. There is nothing given, eternal and immutable about the way we construct societies and live our lives together. Time is not a series of moments traced on the face of a watch, always moving yet always the same. Instead

it is a journey with a starting point and a destination, or a story with a beginning, middle and end. Each moment has a meaning, which can only be grasped if we understand where we have come from and where we are going to. This is time not as it is in nature but as it is in history. The Hebrew prophets were the first to see God in history.

A prophet is one who sees the end in the beginning. While others are at ease, he foresees the catastrophe. While others are mourning the catastrophe, he can already see the eventual consolation. There is a famous example of this in the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva is walking with his colleagues on Mount Scopus when they see the ruins of the Temple. They weep. He smiles. When they ask him why he is smiling, he replies: Now that I have seen the realization of the prophecies of destruction, shall I not believe in the prophecies of restoration? They see the present; he sees the future-in-the-present. Knowing the previous chapters of the story, he understands not only the present chapter, but also where it is leading to. That is prophetic consciousness – time as a narrative, time not as it is in nature but in history, or more specifically in covenant history, whose events are determined by free human choices but whose themes have been sent long in advance.

If we look at the festivals of the bible – Pesach, Shavuot and Succot – we see that each has a dual logic. On the one hand, they belong to cyclical time. They celebrate seasons of the year – Pesach is the festival of spring, Shavuot of first fruits, and Succot of the autumn harvest.

However, they also belong to covenantal/linear/historical time. They commemorate historic events. Pesach celebrates the exodus from Egypt, Shavuot the giving of the Torah, and Succot the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It follows that the counting of the Omer also has two temporal dimensions.

On the one hand, it belongs to cyclical time. The forty-nine days represent the period of the grain harvest, the time during which farmers had most to thank God for – for "bringing forth bread from the ground." Thus understood, each day of the counting is a separate religious act: "Blessed be the Lord day by day." Each day brought forth its own blessing in the form of new grain, and each therefore called for its own act of thanksgiving. This is time as Hillel and R. Hai Gaon understood it. Count off fifty days" – each of which is a command in itself, unaffected by the days that came before or those that will come after.

But the Omer is also part of historical time. It represents the journey from Egypt to Sinai, from exodus to revelation. This is, on the biblical worldview, an absolutely crucial transition. The late Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of two kinds of freedom, negative liberty (the freedom to do what you like) and positive liberty (the freedom to do what you ought). Hebrew has two different words for these different forms of freedom: chofesh and cherut. Chofesh is the freedom a slave acquires when he

no longer has a master. It means that there is no one to tell you what to do. You are master of your own time.

This kind of freedom alone, however, cannot be the basis of a free society. If everyone is free to do what they like, the result will be freedom for the strong but not the weak, the rich but not the poor, the powerful but not the powerless. A free society requires restraint and the rule of law. There is such a thing as a constitution of liberty. That is what the Israelites acquired at Mount Sinai in the form of the covenant.

In this sense, the 49 days represent an unbroken historical sequence. There is no way of going directly from escape-from-tyranny to a free society – as we have discovered time and again in recent years, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Here, time is an ordered sequence of events, a journey, a narrative. Miss one stage, and one is in danger of losing everything. This is time as Halachot Gedolot understood it: "Count off seven full weeks," with the emphasis on "full, complete, unbroken."

Thus, both forms of time are present in a single mitzvah – the counting of the Omer – as they are in the festivals themselves.

We have traced, in the argument between the two authorities of the period of the Geonim, a deeper duality, going back to Hillel and Shammai, and further still to the biblical era and the difference, in consciousness of time, between priests and prophets. There is the voice of God in nature, and the call of God in history. There is the word of God for all time, and the word of God for this time. The former is heard by the priest, the latter by the prophet. The former is found in halachah, Jewish law; the latter in aggadah, Jewish reflection on history and destiny. God is not to be found exclusively in one or the other, but in their conversation and complex interplay.

There are aspects of the human condition that do not change, but there are others that do. It was the greatness of the biblical prophets to hear the music of covenant beneath the noise of events, giving history its shape and meaning as the long, slow journey to redemption. The journey has been slow. The abolition of slavery, the recognition of human rights, the construction of a society of equal dignity – these have taken centuries, millennia. But they happened only because people learned to see inequalities and injustices as something other than inevitable. Time is not a series of eternal recurrences in which nothing ever ultimately changes. Cyclical time is deeply conservative; covenantal time is profoundly revolutionary. Both find their expression in the counting of the Omer.

Thus an apparently minor detail in Jewish law turns out, on inspection under the microscope of analysis, to tell us much about the philosophy and politics of Judaism – about the journey from

liberation to a free society, and about time as the arena of social change. The Torah begins with creation as the free act of the free God, who bestows the gift of freedom on the one life-form that bears His image. But that is not enough. We must create structures that honour that freedom and make it equally available to all. That is what was given at Sinai. Each year we retrace that journey, for if we are not conscious of freedom and what it demands of us, we will lose it. To see God not only in nature but also in history – that is the distinctive contribution of Judaism to Western civilization, and we find it in one of the most apparently minor commands: to count the days between negative and positive liberty, from liberation to revelation.