

# It's Late...But There's Enough Time

*Yizkor 5769 (2008)*

*R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel*

On September 18, 2007, Randy Pausch, a computer science professor in his late forties, and a father of three young children, stepped in front of an audience of 400 people at Carnegie Mellon University to deliver a last lecture called "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." Three months earlier Randy was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He had only a few more months left to live and Randy seized this opportunity to leave a lasting message to his three young children.

The lecture, which was later published as a book, contains the following story:

*"I recently got pulled over for speeding not far from my new home in Virginia. I hadn't been paying attention, and I had drifted a few miles an hour over the speed limit.*

*"Can I see your license and registration?" the police officer asked me. I pulled both out for him, and he saw my Pittsburgh address on my Pennsylvania driver's license.*

*... "So what brings you here?"*

*He had a direct question. Without thinking very hard, I gave him a direct answer. "Well, officer," I said, "since you've asked, I have terminal cancer. I have just months to live. We've moved down here to be close to my wife's family."*

*The officer cocked his head and squinted at me. "So you've got cancer," he said flatly. He was trying to figure me out. Was I really dying? He took a long look at me. "You know, for a guy who has only a few months to live, you sure look good."*

*... "Well, officer, I know that I look pretty healthy. It's really ironic. I look great on the outside, but the tumors are on the inside." And then, I don't know what possessed me, but I just did it. I pulled up my shirt, revealing the surgical scars.*

*The cop looked at my scars. He looked in my eyes. I could see on his face. He now knew he was talking to a dying man. ... He handed me back my license. "Do me a favor," he said. "Slow down from now on."*

*The awful truth had set me free. ...I drove home under the speed limit, and I was smiling like a beauty queen." (Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*, pp. 103-104)*

Sadly, on July 25, 2008, Randy lost his battle to pancreatic cancer.

Here is a man who has terminal cancer. He's dying. His time is running out and he knows it. His doctors tell him, his surgeons tell him, his scars tell him – there is no time. There is no time. And yet, this same man finds meaning, direction, good counsel, and advice in the words: "From now on, slow down."

Words that seem to imply, against all odds, that indeed, there is time. Even now, slow down, take your time, there is time.

During these days, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we come here, to reflect on time. On time that was. And on time that is yet to be.

We pray repeatedly:

*"Zachreinu L'chaim."* Remember us for life – give us life, give us time, give us more time.

*"Melech Chafetz B'chaim."* King who desires life, King who desires for us to have more time, just a little more time.

What kind of life, specifically, what kind of time, are we asking for?

A story is told about the current Am'shinover rebbe – a precious and God-fearing Jew, an authentic Torah scholar, who was sitting one year along with his Chasidim, his followers, enjoying the *Seudah Mafseket* (the meal before the fast of Yom Kippur). Time passed and the

Am'shinover Chasidim noticed that the hour was getting late – Yom Kippur was about to start, it was almost time for *Kol Nidrei*.

But the rebbe continued with the meal. Not knowing what to do, they finally asked the oldest of the Chasidim to say something to the rebbe. Gently, he approached the great rabbi and said:

*“Rebbe, zis shpate”* – “Rabbi, it’s late.” The rebbe looked at his watch, he saw the hour, and said:

*“Zis takeh shpate”* – “It’s true, it’s late, it is late... but a Jew must always have two watches.

One watch says, *“zis shpate”* – “it’s late” and another watch says: *“zis genug tzeite”* “there’s enough time” (there’s still time).”

The introductory section of the Yizkor service also offers two distinct models for understanding time. In the beginning of the service we say the following:

*“Adam la’hevel damah  
yamav ka’tzel over”*

“Man is like a breath,  
His days are like a passing shadow”

A person’s life is brief, impermanent, momentary, fleeting; our days pass like a shadow.

Time flies by and there’s just not enough of it.

And yet the very same introductory section concludes with a different message altogether. In it, God makes the following promise:

*“Orech Yamim Ashiye’hu  
Ve’arehehu b’yeshu’ati”*

God promises:

“You will be satiated with long days  
and I will show you My salvation.”

On the one hand “*Yamav ka'tzel over*” – “our days are like passing shadows,” and on the other hand, “*Orech Yamim Ashiye'hu*”, “our life is over saturated with long days.”

Which one is it? How are we to understand our time here on earth? Do we or don't we have enough time?

The exact word used in the Yizkor service to describe the passing of time is quite peculiar. Notice that it does not state, “*Orech Shanim ashiyeh*”- “I will satiate a person with many years.” A promise of many years would indeed be a promise for a long life. And yet God makes no such promise – no promise of adding substantial units of time at all. Instead, God only promises that we will be satiated with long days.

Now imagine saying to someone: “Happy birthday! I bless you with... a lot of days...” Or, “Happy Anniversary, may you enjoy each other for many days together.” What happened to long life, many, many years, till a hundred and twenty?

I believe that this introductory section is speaking of time on two different plains.

The first statement is objective and quantitative. “*Yamav ka'tzel over*” – our days do pass like a shadow.

This year I have attended several, I would say too many, *shivahs*, for men and women who were blessed with very, very long lives. And yet, go to those *shivahs*, listen to the conversations, the stories that are being shared, the deep sense of loss expressed by family and friends, and you will quickly realize that even a very long life is just too short.

Ask anyone who has been a parent for over twenty, thirty years and they'll tell you that just yesterday their child was three, and just yesterday they were five, and then ten, and then twenty... and in retrospect, they just can't tell you, where all that time went.

*"Yamav ka'tzel over"* – "our days pass like a shadow." That's a fact.

In contrast, however, the second statement is subjective and qualitative.

*"Orech Yamim Ashiye'hu"* – our life can be satiated with long days.

For a moment, think of your childhood, of times you shared with a parent, a sibling, or a grandparent. Alternatively, think of important events that occurred in your life. For the most part, we don't remember years, or months, or weeks. In fact, we don't even remember entire days. Instead, we seem to remember moments, eternal moments, moments that become timeless in our hearts and minds.

Our sages teach: *"Yesh koneh et olamo b'sha'ah achat"* – "One can redeem his entire life in a single hour." Or in other words, some hours are worth an entire lifetime.

We have the capacity to transform objective, quantitative time into subjective, qualitative time – to transform short days into long days. This is not a statement about how many hours fit into a day, but rather it is a statement about the depth and quality of meaning each day can have.

*"Orech Yamin Asbiyehu"* – our salvation is not found in a long life, for every life, even a very long and blessed life – and it is a blessing to have a long life! – even the very longest life, is just too short. Rather, our salvation is found in small units of time – in days, in hours, in minutes, that become timeless through their ability to quench and satiate our thirst for meaning.

As the Book of Psalms reminds us:

*"Limnot yameinu khi hodah,  
Ve'navi levav chochmah"*

“Teach us to count our days,  
That we may obtain a wise heart”

Yes, time is short. Time is running out. But a wise heart, a sensitive and tentative heart, is able to seize upon each and every moment, turn short days into longer days, turn limited time to eternal time.

A little less than a year ago, I visited Ernie Alexander, of blessed memory, in the hospital. As many of you know, Ernie was a pillar of our local Jewish community and a beloved *zaide* in our shul. At the time, Ernie, who was in his late eighties, was just recently diagnosed with cancer. He was a dying man, but his smile and spirit hid all that away. At some point Ernie glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Rabbi,” he said to me, “it’s almost *Erev Shabbos* (the Eve of Shabbat), the hour is getting late, go home to your *rebetzin*.”

Indeed, the hour was late, time was running out.

As I got ready to leave, I apologized to Ernie profusely for forgetting to bring wine with me so we could say Kiddush in honor of Shabbat.

Ernie smiled, in a way that only Ernie could.

“Rabbi,” he said, “don’t worry so much. I’ll say Kiddush on orange juice.”

Without a moment’s rest, Ernie began to recite Kiddush. With the glass of orange juice in his hands, he said the blessing with great intent, “*Boreh peri ha’gafen*” – “Blessed be the Creator of the fruit of the vine.”

It was almost Shabbos, time was running out, but for a moment, Ernie had all the time in the world. Slow down, slow down, there’s time. We still have time.

*“Yamav kha’tzel yavor”* – a person’s life can pass like a shadow. *“Orech yamim asbiyehu”* – but we are capable of transcending time.

We’re about to turn our attention to say Yizkor, a prayer that evokes tears and memories. I pray that our memories of the past serve to remind us that time is measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Some moments last forever, some hours are worth an entire lifetime. May our memories of the past guide us as we learn to count our days with wisdom.