

## Schools, Covid-19 and Jewish Time

Continued

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While I am confident that most teachers have well-written, carefully researched lesson plans and follow state-mandated curricula, I am less confident that it is possible to know what kind or amount of learning takes place in their classrooms. Children have individual learning styles, some move easily and steadily forward, some learn by fits and starts, and still others require all kinds of extra support.

Nor am I sanguine that the most critical lessons in school are those prepared by the teacher as opposed to those that are part of the unwritten, hidden curriculum of values and behaviours that are transmitted in far less obvious ways. In schools children are inculcated into a culture that teaches them when to question and when to remain silent; what constitutes valued knowledge and what are devalued ways of knowing; how to succeed within the system and how to resist its constraints.

Like many educators, I know that learning is often a messy and uncertain process and that meaningful curriculum emerges in the social space between students and teachers. This is to say that no child arrives at school as a *tabula rasa* but rather all come with funds of knowledge acquired at home, in the community, and through the media. It is their existing knowledge that enables them to make sense of new information and ideas. Children are learning all the time, school knowledge just one component of their educations.

In the past I would have rested my case against simplified notions of educational time here, in the classroom filled with busy complicated individuals who mostly dance to

their own drummers. But this year my thinking about time was further challenged during the *Yamim Noraim*. The Yom Kippur services especially seemed to send contradictory messages about time. They are both a last moment to secure our place in the firmament and an opportunity for a fresh start. We look back to acknowledge our sins and shortcomings in the months gone by and then, on the most solemn night of the year, Kol Nidre, we look forward, praying that any vows we make to God in the coming year will be preemptively annulled so that we don't unwittingly break them. Twenty-five hours later at Ne'ilah, we urgently plead for one last chance to slip through the closing gates of heaven. After a fifth and final repetition of the Prayers of Confession, seven declarations that Adonai is God, and an ultimate blast of the shofar, we arrive at the edge of time.

This year I came to services with a heightened sensitivity to these questions of temporality. The virus has played havoc with my sense of time. Many of us have spent long days cloistered at home, unending weeks undifferentiated by social engagements and doctor appointments, months no longer punctuated by trips to visit friends and family. We have learned to measure time in spikes and declines of new infections, lockdowns imposed and others lifted, anxious speculations about how long it will take to develop vaccines, effective therapeutics and herd immunity.

Regarding schools, there are no simple answers for what kinds of options they should offer families and, in turn, families must make difficult cost benefit analysis about the choices they face. But toggling between my secular commitment to progressive education that is child-centered and responsive to the lived realities of children and my new appreciation of Jewishly considered time, I find it possible to turn down the temperature

on these debates. The Jewish tradition offers a more expansive understanding of human temporality than dominates modern life, one that is less fraught and commodified, less weighted down with anxieties about loss and gain, certainty and unpredictability.

Abraham Joshua Heschel draws our attention to the architecture of time. Our weekday lives, he points out, are often consumed with efforts to build things, control space, and leave our mark on the physical world. By contrast, the Shabbat respite allows us to let go of our desire to manage and give ourselves over to the sacredness of the moment. Here we have the opportunity to encounter time with awe, not a thing to be mastered but a mystery to be appreciated.

The tradition is rich in opportunities to reimagine time and to unsettle our assumptions about its linear and unforgiving nature. Like Yom Kippur itself, the entire Jewish calendar is inflected with continuous opportunities for new beginnings. It contains no less than four New Year celebrations, corresponding to different responsibilities, obligations and moments to set things right in the world. Similarly, every month we celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* as a moment of spiritual and moral rebirth. Time just doesn't run out nor is it irrevocably lost.

And our foundational text Bereshit, in the beginning/out of beginnings, tells at least two different stories about the creation. Eli Wiesel wisely reminds us, "Human beings were given a secret, that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again."

Puzzling over the architecture of time in the midst of a frightening pandemic with the overwhelming demands of work and childcare while staying socially distanced may seem like a luxury. We are all impatient for an end to the pandemic. But a return to face-to-face education requires that we leave behind our anxiety about lost time and become

more effective advocates for investment in the material and human resources to make schools safer, healthier places for all who inhabit them. Let's become less certain about how and what children learn in schools and more open to the ways that learning takes place at home and in the community, as well as clearer about the distinctions between custodial needs of families and the pedagogical responsibilities of educators. A more generous and multilayered understanding of time will benefit children and adults alike during and after the pandemic has subsided.

Putting my teacher hat on I'd like to believe that children were better off — more confident learners, skilled social actors, and narrators of their life stories — for having spent time in my classroom. There is no way to be sure. I worked hard to trust the children, follow their lead, and surface the opportunities for learning that were implicit in their questions. When adults raised concerns about formal learning, ever present even in the days before common core standards and high stakes testing, I found reassurance in Rousseau's admonition to overly zealous educators: "the most important rule 'is not to gain **time** but to **lose** it.'"

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