

“Time is Never Up Until You Have Let Go”
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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

Time’s up. Time has run out on summer vacations and the freedoms that come with this relaxed time of year. Time is up on the leisurely pace, time is up on the trips to the park and time is up on those summer trips down the shore. Of course, there will be people who can squeeze a little more in and for some, school hasn’t quite yet begun but for most of us the time is up. For those of us engaged in preparation for Selihot and the High Holidays, essentially time is up. For those who are in academics, time is up. As this season comes to a close I, too, begin to recall the end of summer vacation when I was a child. The question always asked when we returned to school was, “What did you do for your summer vacation?” Sometimes there was an essay that we had to write, essentially reminding us that although we were off from school, we were supposed to be thinking about how to compose this essay when we returned. Although I disliked that assignment because it seemed to intrude on my hard-earned time off, it was a sudden and an impactful reminder that vacation time was over and the time was up.

There was yet another iteration of the phrase, “Time’s up” that really bothered me when we started back to school. I would study very hard for tests. I would do all of the preparation necessary and concentrate totally on the actual test, but at the conclusion of the test when the teacher would say, “OK, put your pens and pencils down because times up,” it caused the greatest amount of fright within me. It meant that I couldn’t go back and change anything else and I couldn’t review one more time. Although we had run out of time, I would still continue to review the test in my mind, wondering about the answers I gave and whether I should have answered differently. If it was multiple-choice, should I have gone with B over D? Ahhh!

The phrase, “Time’s up,” has such finality to it. Time’s up means you have no more time. It means that whatever is done is done and whatever is not, will not be completed. There is something about those words that are both liberating and terrifying. Liberating if we can just let go, terrifying if we cannot.

This morning’s reading teaches that there are ways to let go. There are things we can do in the last moments that shouldn’t be reserved just for our last moments. Moshe Rabeinu, Moses, our teacher, again steps into the spotlight and, in a profound instance, teaches us. For the last few weeks we have been watching Moses say, “Good bye.” He has offered lessons about life and about the Holy Land, about connection to God and the community but there is an undercurrent going on that I’m not sure is noticed. You know that Moses will never make it into the land of Israel because he was being punished. Maybe he wasn’t the right person for the job. Who knows!

What we do know is that he will never go into the Holy Land. This may be one of the greatest disappointments of his life. I can’t help but feel that every time Moses says the phrase, “When you go into the land,” he really means, “and I don’t.” It seems that he is pleading with the Jewish people to make the case to God that he should be permitted entry. Yet they don’t. After all of the times Moses came to their aid when God really wanted to destroy them and start over, they never come to his defense. So, Moses is frustrated, angry, and even hurt. If it wasn’t for him none of this would be possible and they can’t seem to muster a single argument on his behalf to alter his fate. Turn to page 1173. Moses begins, “I am now 120 years old and can no longer be active. God has said to me that I will not cross the Jordan.” The commentaries explain that what God means is that Moses is no longer active. Rashi says he could no longer teach Torah, Ibn Ezra said he no longer had military prowess,

and Sforno said that Moses was embarrassed to be seen in public because of his decline. However, it is Ramban that is the best. Ramban imagines the conversation more fully. Ramban draws on the statement of his actual demise to show he was fine and that he was just trying to make the people feel better. Turn to chapter 34: verse 7, page 1211. “Moses was 120 years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.”

Amazing – Moses lied to us. Either that or the later text did. Either Moses was just trying to make us feel better that he was going to pass on the Torah, or he wanted us to remember him in his prime, not as he really was – or both.

Moshe is a magnificent human being. He is uniquely empathetic, a characteristic we see when his sister is stricken with leprosy and when his nephews die on the tabernacle. Moshe really feels what others feel, and in this moment Moses is transformed from Moses our teacher, *Moshe rabeinu* to *Moshe horeinu*, to Moses our parent. So, Ramban says, “*kein l’nachamam*,” as he was consoling us. Moses, sensing the end is near says, “O.K. enough. I don’t want my legacy to be that I was complaining and I don’t want to be remembered for being a curmudgeon. I want to be the forgiving type and I want to be remembered for my kindness and my selflessness.” In the process a melody comes out. The lecturing finally comes to an end and one of the most beautiful poems emerges. Haranguing and reprimands have given way to song.

We can do the same. We can have the same. We spend so much of our lives telling others what we want from them. We disparage, we berate and sometimes we belittle. All the while we drag ourselves down. Look, people will disappoint. Friends, family, and co-workers let us down and we can be upset, but don’t let time run out. That is not how you want to live and it is certainly not how you want to die. When God says, “Time’s up” – you don’t want to have unfinished business.

A few years ago I had a wonderful friend in our congregation who had ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), Lou Gehrig’s Disease. As he deteriorated I became close with his family and we walked this holy place together. Somehow I became part of his family. Two years after his passing, his daughter became engaged and was going to be married in New Jersey. Due to circumstances beyond our control I was unable to officiate at the wedding but the family really wanted me to be part of the celebration. I suggested that the Friday before the actual wedding we might gather in my office to sign the ketubah, and that is what we did. We signed, and we remembered Dad. We cried and we felt him there. Two weeks after the wedding I received the following note from his wife, the mother of the bride:

Dear Rabbi Stein,

Karen’s wedding was lovely and she was the happiest of brides. I hope to share some of the special moments with you, but I wanted you to know that the ketubah signing ceremony was the defining moment of the entire weekend, putting it all into meaningful focus. The children and I were able to go forward from that moment, to be joyful and proud and know that Sandy was with us. Thank you for being an integral part of our wedding celebration.

*Best regards,
Judy*

We can all move on when we have let go because time is never up until you let go.