The Tyranny of Time

Reclaiming Presence in a Culture of Busyness

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Over the past year, I discovered that my husband, Mark and I see time very differently. For me, every moment feels like a unit of potential. If I finish emptying the dishwasher and have three minutes before I need to leave, I immediately search for another task to accomplish. Time, to me, is something to be conquered—efficiently, thoroughly, relentlessly. I measure the success of a day by how much I've managed to get done.

Mark doesn't think this way. He values space—buffer time between activities. He appreciates moments that aren't filled with productivity, but with stillness. To him, time isn't a ruler, it's a river. Something you flow with, not something you dominate.

And as we came to understand this difference, I started to wonder—how many of us, sitting here today, might feel the same tension?

Some of us pride ourselves on being busy. We measure our worth by how much we accomplish. We thrive on deadlines, multitasking, checking things off the list.

Others feel quietly overwhelmed—exhausted by the constant pressure to keep up, unsure why all this doing leaves us feeling so empty.

There are those who lie in bed at night wondering where the day went. Those who can't remember the last time they felt truly present. Those who ache not for more hours, but for more *meaning* in the hours they already have.

As we enter this sacred day, I want to ask you to do something uncomfortable. I want you to sit with that ache. That longing. I want to invite you—not into more answers—but into deeper questions.

The pressure to be busy, to be constantly productive, is everywhere. We live in a society that worships busyness. We wear it like a badge of honor. We say, "I'm so busy," not just as a complaint—but as a way of saying: "I matter. I'm needed. I'm relevant."

But what if we're doing so much that we've forgotten why we're doing it at all?

This 'cult of efficiency' mindset is not a modern invention. The cultural roots of this conviction stretch back centuries. In *Do Nothing*, Celeste Headlee traces the development of our productivity obsession to the Protestant Reformation, which popularizes the association between hard work and moral virtue. This was paired with the Industrial Revolution, which transformed time into a measurable commodity.

The workday used to be determined by the number of hours of sunlight. With the advent of commercial candles and later electricity, owners of companies realized that they could make more money if their employees worked longer hours. This was the beginning of the idea that time equals money. Just as machines needed to be efficient, industries began measuring humans in the same way.

But you and I are not machines.

We are not defined by our output.

We are not here simply to check off boxes until our bodies give out.

And yet—how often do we believe that we are only as worthy as our calendars are full?

This history isn't just something to learn—it's something to name so that we can begin to heal from it. It's a mirror that helps us understand why we feel so overwhelmed, why we can't sit still, why stillness feels like failure.

Celeste Headlee argues that busyness rarely leads to joy. It's a compulsion rooted not in necessity but in fear—fear of falling behind, of appearing lazy, of feeling unworthy. She challenges us to examine not just how we spend our time, but *why*.

I recently sat with a young father in our community—he had come to me because he was burned out. He worked full time, coached his kid's soccer team, served on a local board, and barely slept. 'I feel like I'm failing at everything,' he confessed. 'I'm doing so much, but none of it feels good anymore.'

He wasn't asking how to do less. He was asking how to feel whole again.

This is what Headlee is really getting at: that busyness is not just a scheduling problem, it's a spiritual one. We keep running because we're afraid of what might catch up with us if we stop.

Rest, she insists, is not a luxury—it's a human necessity.

Rest is a creation by God.

“On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken: [God] ceased on the seventh day from doing any of the work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy—having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done (Genesis 1:2-3).

The first thing declared *kadosh*—holy—in all of creation is not a place, not a thing, not even a person. It is *time.* The seventh day. Shabbat. And what was created on the seventh day? Rest!

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches:

“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time.”

In *The Sabbath*, Heschel speaks of Shabbat as “a palace in time,” a sanctuary we build not with bricks but by pausing. He writes: “Technical civilization is man's conquest of space… but time eludes our grasp.” Shabbat is not a reward for getting everything done—it is a rebellion against the idea that getting everything done is what gives us worth.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they didn’t own their time. It wasn’t theirs to manage. Sforno comments on Exodus 12:2 that God’s instruction to Moses to mark the new month was the first act of liberation. Only free people get to control their time. To choose how they spend it.

Today, we may not serve Pharaoh, but many of us still feel bound by the pressures of modern life—work that follows us home, expectations of constant availability,

and the ever-present ping of notifications. Our devices call for our attention, and we answer, often without pause. We count our steps, monitor our sleep, measure our productivity. Even rest can feel like another item on the calendar. True freedom in our world may mean learning to reclaim our time—not only as a matter of schedule, but as a matter of spirit. Not simply taking a break from work, but finding release from being ruled by it.

It is worth asking: Have we exchanged Pharaoh's bricks for our Google calendars?

There's a moment in Torah that haunts me, in the best way. God tells Moses:

"Come up to the mountain and be there."

The Kotsker Rebbe asks: If Moses has already come up the mountain, what does it mean to *be* there?

It is possible, he teaches, to climb the mountain and still not be present. To do all the work and miss the moment. To be in the room and not truly be there.

I think about that all the time. How many mountains have I climbed—only to be thinking about what comes next? How often do we focus on getting the right picture with our camera instead of experiencing the moment? How many moments with my children, my spouse, my congregants, my God—have I been physically present but spiritually absent?

In 1965, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. It was a defining moment in American history — and in Jewish moral leadership.

But when Heschel returned home, he didn't describe the experience in political or even philosophical terms. He didn't give a press conference or write a long editorial.

Instead, he simply said:

"I felt my legs were praying."

This one sentence revealed so much — not only about moral conviction, but about presence. About what it means to live a life in which the spiritual and the physical are not separate. A life in which your whole being shows up for what matters most.

And yet, how often do we feel that way? How often do we feel our legs, our words, our hours, our days are prayers?

More often, if we're honest, our legs are running — to errands, to obligations, to inboxes. We aren't praying with our lives. We're rushing through them.

And perhaps that's why we're here today.

Not just to mark the New Year. But to ask:

What would it take to stop running?
What would it mean to feel — once again — that our lives are sacred?

The word *Ayekah*—"Where are you?"—appears for the first and only time in Genesis 3:9, immediately after Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and hidden themselves from God:

"The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, *Ayekah?*" (Genesis 3:9)

At first glance, it may seem like a simple question of location. But this is God—we can assume God knows exactly where Adam is physically. The question must be deeper. *Ayekah* is a spiritual inquiry. It's God's way of asking Adam:

Where are you in relation to Me?
Where are you in relation to your own integrity, your own choices?
Where are you in this moment?

Adam's response—*I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid, so I hid*—tells us everything. He is not present. He is ashamed. Disconnected. Out of alignment.

This is not just a question for Adam—it's the question for every human being after failure, after avoidance, after disconnection.

And the answer we strive for is: *Hineni.* Here I am. Fully present. No distractions. No task lists. Just me.

There is a story told of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach who was rushing to catch a train. He had a tight schedule, multiple events lined up. But then a child tugged at his sleeve and asked him to sing. He paused, sat on the floor of the station, and sang with the child. He missed the train—but he was present. "You can always catch another train," he later said. "You can't always catch another moment."

A congregant once told me a story that stayed with me. She had been working 60-hour weeks for years. She provided for her family, made sure her kids had everything they needed, but she missed a lot—the concerts, the quiet dinners, the bedtime stories.

When her father passed away, she was cleaning out his desk and found a letter he had written but never sent. In it, he wrote:

"I'm proud of you. But I miss you. I hope one day you'll have time to sit still and feel how loved you are."

She wept. Not just for the loss of her father, but for all the lost time. And I wept with her.

And occasionally, I miss moments too. It was just an ordinary weekday afternoon. I was multitasking—replying to emails while planning a sermon in my head, and

mentally running through my to-do list. My son, Boaz sat at the kitchen table, quietly. He looked up and said, “You no play with me mommy. You’re really busy today, huh?” He didn’t say it with judgment—just observation. But it landed heavily. I looked at him, really looked, and realized I had almost missed the way the light softened his face, the way his smile lights up a room. I put down my phone, and I sat with him and we played. For five minutes. Ten. I don’t remember what I was going to write in that sermon I had been formulating in my mind—but I remember his face. I remember the holiness of that quiet, ordinary moment—the kind of moment that slips away too easily if we’re not paying attention.

These are the moments we long for. Not more of them—but to be present when they happen.

Rosh Hashanah is about many things—judgment, renewal, awe—but at its core, it is about *waking up.*

The shofar is not a song. It is a jolt.

It says: Wake up. Look at your life. Are you living it? Or just scheduling it?

It says: Be present. Don’t wait until you’re forced to stop. Choose to stop.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer reminds us of the fragility of life:

“Humanity’s origin is dust, and their end is dust. Humanity is like a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower… a passing dream.”

It reminds us that presence is not optional—it's urgent.

When we plead, *Zachreinu l'chayim*—remember us for life—we are not only asking for more time on Earth. We are asking for a life that is filled with purpose, not just productivity; with connection, not just motion. We are asking to be remembered not just as doers, but as beings.

We begin this sacred year not with more to-do lists, but with a question:

Ayeka? "Where are you?"

Will you answer: "*Hineni*"? Will you be here?

So as the gates of a new year begin to open before us,

I offer you this blessing:

May this be the year you stop measuring your worth by your calendar.

May this be the year you honor your time not as a commodity, but as a gift.

May you have the courage to pause.

To rest without guilt.

To say *Hineni*—Here I am—

to your loved ones, to your community, to your God, and to your own beautiful soul.

May you remember that holiness lives not in your to-do list,

but in the space between tasks.

Not only in what you accomplish,

but in the sacred grace of simply being.

Shanah Tovah.

May it be a year of meaning, presence, and peace.