

# THE TORMENT OF TIME

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A Jewish Perspective on Time & Pain



DOVID BASHEVKIN

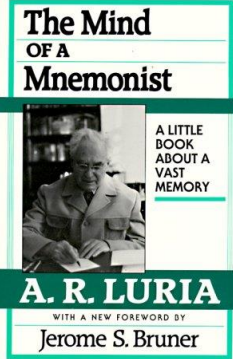
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# TIME & MEMORY

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THE MIND OF A MNEUMONIST  
BY A.R. LURIA

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*His Mind*  
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Abstract ideas meant another round of problems and torments for him, another series of attempts to reconcile the incompatible. Note how he struggled to grasp these ideas.

... *Infinity*—that means what has always been. But what came before this? What is to follow? No, it's impossible to see this ...

In order for me to grasp the meaning of a thing, I have to see it... Take the word *nothing*. I read it and thought it must be very profound. I thought it would be better to call *nothing* something ... for I see this *nothing* and it is something ... If I'm to understand any meaning that is fairly deep, I have to get an image of it right away. So I turned to my wife and asked her what *nothing* meant. But it was so clear to her that she simply said: "*Nothing* means there is nothing." I understood it differently. I saw this *nothing* and felt she must be wrong. The logic we use, for example. It's been worked out on the basis of years of experience. I can see how it has developed, and what it means to me is that one has to rely on his own sensations of things. If *nothing* can appear to a person, that means it is something. That's where the trouble comes in ...

When I hear it said, for example, that water is colorless, I remember how my father once had to cut down a tree at the edge of the Bezymyannaya Stream because it blocked the flow of the current... I began to think and wonder what *Bezymyannaya Stream* could mean

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[Russian: *bezmyannaya*, "nameless"]. It means the stream has no name ...

What pointless images come up on account of a single word. Take the word *something*, for example. For me this is a dense cloud of steam that has the color of smoke. When I hear the word *nothing*, I also see a cloud, but one that is thinner, completely transparent. And when I try to seize a particle of this *nothing*, I get the most minute particles of *nothing*.

(Record of December 1935.)

How odd and yet how familiar these experiences are. They are inevitable for any adolescent who, having grown used to thinking in terms of graphic images, suddenly finds there is a world of abstract ideas to be mastered. He is bound to be confused by the questions these pose: What do we mean by *nothing* when something always exists? What does *eternity* mean? What came before? What will follow? Similarly with *infinity*—what will there be after *infinity*? These concepts exist and are taught to us in school. Yet how can we picture them in our minds? And if it is impossible to imagine them, what do they mean?

These are the questions that perplex and overwhelm young people when they realize that abstract ideas cannot be understood in graphic terms; they are thus forced to grapple with ideas that seem so contradictory. This soon ceases to be a problem for

the adolescent, however, for he shifts from thinking in concrete terms to dealing with abstractions; the role graphic images once played in his thinking is replaced by certain accepted ideas about the meaning of words. His thinking becomes verbal and logical in nature, and graphic images remain on the periphery of consciousness, since they are of no help in understanding abstract concepts.

Once we have made the transition to another level of thought, the problem of abstractions is just a memory of a painful experience we had in the past. S., though, could not make the transition as rapidly as others. He was unable to grasp an idea unless he could actually see it, and so he tried to visualize the idea of "nothing," to find an image with which to depict "infinity." And he persisted in these agonizing attempts all his life, forever coping with a basically adolescent conflict that made it impossible for him to cross that "accursed" threshold to a higher level of thought.

The images abstract concepts such as the above evoked were of no help to him. What could he really deduce from the fact that upon hearing the word *eternity*, an image of some ancient figure, of God no doubt, whom he had learned of from Bible stories, would appear to him? At times, instead of images he would see "puffs of steam," "splashes," and "lines." What did they represent? The content

of the abstract ideas S. was trying to visualize? What did he derive from the images which, as we know, he would see in response to the sounds of a word he was not familiar with? It is difficult to say whether these images were of any help to him in understanding an idea. But they continued to emerge, crowding together and taking up much of his conscious awareness.

A glance along the crowded booths on Spitalgasse tells the story. The shoppers walk hesitantly from one stall to the next, discovering what each shop sells. Here is tobacco, but where is mustard seed? Here are sugar beets, but where is cod? Here is goat's milk, but where is sassafras? These are not tourists in Berne on their first visit. These are the citizens of Berne. Not a man can remember that two days back he bought chocolate at a shop named Ferdinand's, at no. 17, or beef at the Hof delicatessen, at no. 36. Each shop and its specialty must be found anew. Many walk with maps, directing the map-holders from one arcade to the next in the city they have lived in all their lives, in the street they have traveled for years. Many walk with notebooks, to record what they have learned while it is briefly in their heads. For in this world, people have no memories.

When it is time to return home at the end of the day, each person consults his address book to learn where he lives. The butcher, who has made some unattractive cuts in his one day of butchery, discovers that his home is no. 29 Nägeligasse. The stockbroker, whose short-term memory of the market has produced some excellent investments, reads that he now lives at no. 89 Bundesgasse. Arriving home, each man finds a woman and children waiting at the door, introduces himself, helps with the evening meal, reads stories to his children. Likewise, each woman returning from her job meets a husband, children, sofas, lamps, wallpaper, china patterns. Late at night, the wife and husband do not linger at the table to discuss the day's activities, their children's school, the bank account. Instead, they smile at one another, feel the warming blood, the ache between the legs as when they met the first time fifteen years ago. They find their bedroom, stumble past family photographs they do not recognize, and pass the night in lust. For it is only habit and memory that dulls the physical passion. Without memory, each night is the first night, each morning is the first morning, each kiss and touch are the first.

A world without memory is a world of the present. The past exists only in books, in documents. In order to know himself, each person carries his own Book of Life, which is filled with the history of his life. By reading its pages daily, he can relearn the identity of his parents, whether he was born high or born low, whether he did well or did poorly in school, whether he has accomplished anything in his life. Without his Book of Life, a person is a snapshot, a two-dimensional image, a ghost. In the leafy cafés on the Brunneggshalde, one hears anguished shrieking from a man who just read that he once killed another man, sighs from a woman who just discovered she was courted by a prince, sudden boasting from a woman who has learned that she received top honors from her university ten years prior. Some pass the twilight hours at their tables reading from their Books of Life; others frantically fill its extra pages with the day's events.

With time, each person's Book of Life thickens until it cannot be read in its entirety. Then comes a choice. Elderly men and women may read the early pages, to know themselves as youths; or they may read the end, to know themselves in later years.

Some have stopped reading altogether. They have abandoned the past. They have decided that it matters not if yesterday they were rich or poor, educated or ignorant, proud or humble,

in love or empty-hearted—no more than it matters how a soft wind gets into their hair. Such people look you directly in the eye and grip your hand firmly. Such people walk with the limber stride of their youth. Such people have learned how to live in a world without memory.

### MAIMONIDES LAWS OF TESHUVA 3:4

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying:

Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time...

ד. אע"פ שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עוררו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן

# ENTROPY: THE PAIN OF TIME

## GENESIS CHAPTER 15

- 7.** And He said to him, "I am the Lord, Who brought you forth from Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it." ז. ויאמר אליו אני יהוה אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים לתת לך את הארץ הזאת לרשתה:
- 8.** And he said, "O Lord God, how will I know that I will inherit it?" ת. ויאמר אדני יהוה במה אדע כי אירשנה:
- 9.** And He said to him, "Take for Me three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird." ט. ויאמר אליו קחה לי עגלה משלשת ועז משלשת ואיל משלש ותר וגוזל:
- 10.** And he took for Him all these, and he divided them in the middle, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he did not divide the birds. י. ויקח לו את כל אלה וכתר אתם בתנוד ויתן איש בתרו לקראת רעהו ואת הצפר לא כתרו:
- 11.** And the birds of prey descended upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. יא. וירד העיט על הפגרים וישב אתם אברים:
- 12.** Now the sun was ready to set, and a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and behold, a fright, a great darkness was falling upon him. יב. ויהי השמש לבוא ותרדמה נפלה על אברים והנה אימה חשכה גדלה נפלת עליו:
- 13.** And He said to Abram, "You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years. יג. ויאמר לאברים ידע תדע כי גר | יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם ועבדים וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה:
- 14.** And also the nation that they will serve will I judge, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions. יד. וגם את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אנכי ואחרי כן יצאו ברכש גדול:
- 15.** But you will come to your forefathers in peace; you will be buried in a good old age. טו. ואתה תבוא אל אבותיך בשלום תקבר בשובה טובה:
- 16.** And the fourth generation will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites will not be complete until then. טז. ודור רביעי ישובו הנה כי לא שלם עון האמרי עד הנה:
- 17.** Now it came to pass that the sun had set, and it was dark, and behold, a smoking furnace and a fire brand, which passed between these parts. יז. ויהי השמש באה ועלטה הנה והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש אשר עבר בין הגזרים האלה:
- 18.** On that day, the Lord formed a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt until the great river, the Euphrates river. יח. ביום ההוא כרת יהוה את אברים ברית לאמר לזרעך נתתי את הארץ הזאת מנהר מצרים עד הנהר הגדל נהר פרת:
- 19.** The Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, יט. את הקניזי ואת הקניזי ואת הקדמוני:
- 20.** And the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Rephaim, כ. ואת החתי ואת הפרזי ואת הרפאים:
- 21.** And the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Girgashites and the Jebusites." כא. ואת האמרי ואת הפגזי ואת הגרגשי ואת היבוסי:

Exile is a product of time, while redemption is dependent on man.

הקלוקלים נתלים בזמן, והתיקונים באדם.

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ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND

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In these deep solitudes and awful cells,  
Where heav'nly-pensive contemplation dwells,  
And ever-musing melancholy reigns;  
What means this tumult in a vestal's veins?  
Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?  
Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?  
Yet, yet I love!—From Abelard it came,  
And Eloisa yet must kiss the name...

How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!  
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.  
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!  
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd;

...

Let him our sad, our tender story tell;  
The well-sung woes will soothe my pensive ghost;  
He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most.

- *Eloisa to Abelard*, Alexander Pope



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**Joel:** I can't see anything that I don't like about you.

**Clementine:** But you will! But you will. You know, you will think of things. And I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.

**Joel:** Okay.

**Clementine:** Okay.

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## THE PAIN OF OUR PAST

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### NOT JUST ANOTHER CONTEMPORARY JEWISH PROBLEM: A HISTORICAL DISCUSSION OF PHYLACTERIES

R. EPHRAIM KANARFOGEL  
GESHER 5 (1976)

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In the Gaonic period the problem of neglect of the commandment to put on phylacteries intensified. Furthermore,

as evidenced by the responsa of that period, the problem was no longer one of how long to wear phylacteries, but whether to wear them at all.

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#### TALMUD, TRACTATE SHABBOS 49A

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Tefillin require a clean body like Elijah the prophet. What does this refer to? Abaya says it means you should not flatulate in them. Rava says you should not sleep in them.

גמרא. אמר רבי ינאי: תפילין צריכין גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים. מאי היא? אביי אמר: שלא יפיח בהן. רבא אמר: שלא יישן בהן.

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#### CHINUCH, MITZVAH 421

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ומה שאמרו [שבת מ"ט ע"א] שתפילין צריכין גוף נקי, ואמרו בגמרא מאי גוף נקי, שיזהר שלא יפיח בהן. אבל אין הענין לומר שצריכין גוף נקי מעבירות או מטומאה, כי כל אדם ואפילו טמא ובעל עבירות מחוייב במצות תפילין ובלבד שידע להזהר שלא יפיח בהן, ואולי מתוך התמדתו במצות התפילין שהן זכרון גדול לאדם במלאכת שמים ישוב מדרכו הרעה ויטהר מכל גלולי...ומזה יש להבין שדעת רבותינו זכרונם לברכה להיות כל אדם מחזיק במצוה זו ורגיל בה כי היא עיקר גדול ושמירה רבה מן העבירות וסולם חזק לעלות עמה להכנס בעבודת הבורא ברוך הוא, והמחמירים בקדושת המצוה ומניאים לב ההמון בדבריהם מהתעסק בה, אולי כוונתם לטובה, אבל באמת יש בזה מניעה לבני אדם בכמה מצוות והיא רעה רבה....ולא כן ביתי אני עם האל, כי ידעתי שאין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא, ועם כל זה לא נמנעו מהתעסק במצוה בעת רוח אלהים טובה תלכשהו לעשות טוב, כי מי יודע אם אולי ימשך בדרכו הטובה עד עת מותו והמות פתאום תבוא. וכבר למדונו זכרונם לברכה [אבות פ"ד מ"ב] שמצוה גוררת מצוה, וששכר מצוה מצוה. בכל אלה הדברים ומוסרים טובים קדמונו והורונו זכרונם לברכה, והמתחכמים להוסיף על דבריהם או לגרוע אינה חכמה.

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## CONFRONTING THE FUTURE: THE BEAUTY OF WAVES

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### BAVA BASRA 4A

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It was said: Whoever did not see the Temple building erected by Herod-has not seen a truly beautiful building in his lifetime. With what materials was it built? Rabbah said: With stones of green and marble. There are those who say: With stones of blue, green, and white marble. One row of stones protruded and the other row was recessed in order to provide a place to hold the cement. Herod thought to cover the entire Temple with gold plating, but the Rabbis said to him: Leave it as it is, for this way is more attractive since the swirling collaboration of the marble facade appears like the waves of the sea.

אמרי מי שלא ראה בנין הורדוס לא ראה בנין נאה [מימיו]  
במאי בנייה אמר רבה באבני שישא ומרמרא איכא דאמרי  
באבני כוחלא שישא ומרמרא אפיק שפה ועייל שפה כי  
היכי דנקביל סידא סבר למשעייה בדהבא אמרו ליה רבנן  
שבקיה דהכי שפיר טפי דמיחזי כי אידוותא דימא

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### PSALMS CH. 89

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10 Thou rulest the proud swelling of the sea; when the waves thereof arise, Thou stillest them.  
י אַתָּה מוֹשֵׁל, בְּגֵאוֹת הַיָּם; בְּשׂוּא גְלִיּוֹ, אַתָּה תִשְׁבַּחֵם.

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### REISHIS CHOCHMA SHAAR AHAVA CH. 10

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That which it says in the Zohar on the verse, "The rise of the waves, You make them still." Teshabcheim, should be read literally, meaning "praise."

מה שפירש בזוהר (זוהר פרשה נ"ח דף ס"ז ע"ב) בפסוק (תהלים פ"ט י) בשוא גליו אתה תשבחם, זה לשונו, תשבחם ממש

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### R HUTNER, PACHAD YITZCHAK, PURIM #14 (YIDDISH KUNTRES)

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אז דאס טאקע מיין שבת. איך וויים אז עס וועט פלאצען. אבער כל זמן איך ביים טיש – שטורעם איך



<p>It can be found in every action of man in the service of God, even though afterwards he does what he may do, God forbid, despite this, his initial efforts are not lost and they become part of the greater spiritual edifice he is creating...And if man strengthens himself his entire life to start anew, even if he has been through a tremendous amount, at the end all of his efforts will gather together to strengthen him in his return to God....And such is with the entire Jewish nation. All of the rectification which was brought with redemption, even though afterwards it may have fallen apart, nevertheless great impressions remain.</p>	<p>וּמִצָּא שְׂפָל מֵה שְׁהָאָדָם עוֹשֶׂה אִיזָה עֲבָדָא בְּעָלְמָא בְּעִבּוּדְתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ, אַף - עַל - פִּי שְׂאֲחֵר כִּף עוֹשֶׂה מֵה שְׁעוֹשֶׂה חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם, אַף - עַל - פִּי - כֵּן זֹאת הָעֲבָדָא אֵינָה נֶאֱבָדָת לְעוֹלָם וְכִבֵּר נִצְטַרְפָּה אֶל הַבְּנִין הַנִּפְלְאָ, וְגֵרְמָה תִּקּוֹן גְּדוֹל לְבְנֵי הַקְּדוּשָׁה, וְנִתְרַבָּה כִּמְה אֲלָפִים וְרַבֵּי רַבּוֹת בְּתִים עַל יְדֵה וְכִנּוּץ לְעֵיל. וְאִם יִחַזַק אֶת עֲצָמוֹ בְּכָל פַּעַם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיָּו לְהִתְחַיֵּל בְּכָל פַּעַם מִחֲדָשׁ אֲפִלוֹ אִם יַעֲבֹר עָלָיו מֵה שְׁיַעֲבֹר, אִזִּי סוּף כֹּל סוּף יִתְקַבְּצוּ כָּל אֱלוֹ הַתְּקוּנִים שְׁגֵרָם בְּכָל עֲבוּדָה וּבְכָל הַתְּחִלָּה, וְכֵלָם יִתְקַבְּצוּ לְעִזְרָתוֹ לְחִזּוֹקוֹ וּלְאַמְצוֹ לְשׁוֹב לֵה' יִתְבָּרַךְ בְּאַמְתּוֹ. וְאִם רֵאשִׁיתוֹ מִצָּעֵר אַחֲרֵיתוֹ יִשְׁגָּא מְאֹד, וְאִזִּי יִרְאֶה מֵה שְׁפָעַל עַל - יְדֵי כָּל עֲבָדָא שְׁבִקְדוּשָׁה שְׂאִין שׁוֹם דְּבָר נֶאֱבָד לְעוֹלָם. וְכֵן הוּא בְּכָל־לִיּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂפָל הַתְּקוּנִים שְׁנַעֲשׂוּ עַל - יְדֵי הַגְּאֻלוֹת הָרֵאשׁוֹנוֹת אַף - עַל - פִּי שְׂאֲחֵר כִּף נִתְחַלְקוּ בְּחֻטְאֵינוּ, אַף - עַל - פִּי - כֵּן נִשְׂאָרוּ מֵהֶם רְשִׁימוֹת נִפְלְאוֹת. וּמִשִּׁית צִדְקָנוּ מִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ עִמָּהֶם לְצַרְףּ הַבְּנִין הָאֲחֵרוֹן שְׁעוֹסֵק לְבָנוֹת שְׂפָלָם מִכְּרַחִים לוֹ. וְכִשְׁיִגְמַר בְּנִינּוֹ וְיָבוֹא וְיִגְאֻלְנוּ בְּמִהְרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ, אִזִּי יִרְאוּ עֵינֵינוּ וְיִשְׂמַח לְבָנוּ מִגְּדֹל הַתְּקוּנִים שְׁנַעֲשׂוּ עַל - יְדֵי כָּל גְּאֻלָּה וְגֻאֻלָּה וְעַל - יְדֵי כָּל עֲבוּדָה וְעִבּוּדָה בְּכָל־לִיּוֹת וּבְכַפְרֵיּוֹת. כִּמוֹ שְׂכָתוֹב זְכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבֵּת כָּל־יְלִיְדֶיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָר וְכו'.</p>
<p>And such is it with every individual in all times, even though he has experienced tremendous failure, and it appears to him as if nothing helps, and when he sees how far he has fallen he feels all of his efforts and renewal are for naught; nevertheless he must always strengthen himself to begin anew each time. For God will not abandon him forever. No good dead is lost. As our master said on the verse, "When the waves arise you still them," every time a man lifts himself up to God, even though his efforts do not necessarily succeed to bring him closer to God, since he falls afterwards, nevertheless, this in and of itself –that he is willing to continually begin again and lift himself up- is the greatest praise and treasure.</p>	<p>וְכֵן הוּא בְּכָל־לִיּוֹת בְּכָל אָדָם וּבְכָל זְמַן, שְׂאֵף - עַל - פִּי שְׁעוֹבֵר עָלָיו מֵה שְׁעוֹבֵר, וְנִדְמָה לוֹ כְּאִלוֹ אֵין מוֹעִיל כָּל־חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם מֵה שְׁהִתְחַיֵּל לְפַעֲמִים מְעַט בְּעִבּוּדָת ה', מֵאַחֵר שְׁרוּאָה שְׂרַחֲזוֹק כָּל כֹּף, אַף - עַל - פִּי - כֵּן בְּסוּף יִרְאֶה מֵה שְׁפָעַל בְּתַחֲלָה, בְּבַחֲנֵית תְּבוּאֵי תְּשׁוּרֵי מֵרֵאשׁ אֲמָנָה בְּנִזְכָּר לְעֵיל. עַל - פִּי צָרִיכִין לְהִתְחַזֵּק תְּמִיד כֹּל יְמֵי חַיָּו לְהִתְחַיֵּל בְּכָל פַּעַם מִחֲדָשׁ. פִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם אֲדָנִי. וְלִית רְעוּתָא טְבָא דְאַתְאָבֵד. וְכִמוֹ שְׂאֲמַר רַבֵּנוּ זְכַרְנוּ לְבָרְכָה עַל פְּסוּק בְּשׁוּא גָלְיוֹ אֲתָה תְּשַׁבְּחָם, שְׂפָל מֵה שְׁהָאָדָם מְנַשֵּׂא עֲצָמוֹ בְּכָל פַּעַם לֵה' יִתְבָּרַךְ אַף - עַל - פִּי שְׂאִינוֹ עוֹלָה בְּיָדוֹ חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם לְהִתְקַרֵּב לֵה' יִתְבָּרַךְ פִּי נוֹפֵל אַחֵר כִּף רַחֲמָנָא לְצַלּוֹ, אַף - עַל - פִּי - כֵּן זֶה בְּעֲצָמוֹ שְׁהוּא מִתְחַזֵּק וּמִגְבִּיָּה וּמְנַשֵּׂא עֲצָמוֹ בְּכָל פַּעַם לֵה' יִתְבָּרַךְ, זֶהוּ שְׂבַחָא דִּילֵיהּ וְיִקְרָא דִּילֵיהּ</p>

TALMUD BAVLI PESACHIM 64B

<p>Rav Shimon ben Lakish said: Do not pass over Mitzvos</p>	<p>דאמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש אין מעבירין על המצוות</p>
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## A WORLD WITHOUT A FUTURE

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### EINSTEIN'S DREAMS

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On the corner of Kramgasse and Theaterplatz there is a small outdoor café with six blue tables and a row of blue petunias in the chef's window box, and from this café one can see and hear the whole of Berne. People drift through the arcades on Kramgasse, talking and stopping to buy linen or wristwatches or cinnamon; a group of eight-year-old boys, let out for morning recess from the grammar school on Kochergasse, follow their teacher in single file through the streets to the banks of the Aare; smoke rises lazily from a mill just over the river; water gurgles from the spouts of the Zähringer Fountain; the giant clock tower on Kramgasse strikes the quarter hour.

If, for the moment, one ignores the sounds and the smells of the city, a remarkable sight will be seen. Two men at the corner of Kochergasse are trying to part but cannot, as if they would never see each other again. They say goodbye, start to walk in opposite directions, then hurry back together and embrace. Nearby, a middle-aged woman sits on the stone rim of a fountain, weeping quietly. She grips the stone with her yellow stained hands, grips it so hard that the blood rushes from her hands, and she stares in despair at the ground. Her loneliness has the permanence of a person who believes she will never see other people again. Two women in sweaters stroll down Kramgasse, arm in arm, laughing with such abandon that they could be thinking no thought of the future.

In fact, this is a world without future. In this world, time is a line that terminates at the present, both in reality and in the mind. In this world, no person can imagine the future. Imagining the future is no more possible than seeing colors beyond violet: the senses cannot conceive what may lie past the visible end of the spectrum. In a world without future, each parting of friends is a death. In a world without future, each loneliness is final. In a world without future, each laugh is the last laugh. In a world without future, beyond the present lies nothingness, and people cling to the present as if hanging from a cliff.

A person who cannot imagine the future is a person who cannot contemplate the results of his actions. Some are thus paralyzed into inaction. They lie in their beds through the day, wide awake but afraid to put on their clothes. They drink coffee and look at photographs. Others leap out of bed in the morning, unconcerned that each action leads into nothingness, unconcerned that they cannot plan out their lives. They live moment to moment, and each moment is full. Still others substitute the past for the future. They recount each memory, each action taken, each cause and effect, and are fascinated by how events have delivered them to this moment, the last moment of the world, the termination of the line that is time.

In the little café with the six outdoor tables and the row of petunias, a young man sits with his coffee and pastry. He has been idly observing the street. He has seen the two laughing women in sweaters, the middle-aged woman at the fountain, the two friends who keep repeating goodbyes. As he sits, a dark rain cloud makes its way over the city. But the young man remains at his table. He can imagine only the present, and at this moment the present is a blackening sky but no rain. As he sips the coffee and eats the pastry, he marvels at how the end of the world is so dark. Still there is no rain, and he squints at his paper in the dwindling light, trying to read the last sentence that he will read in his life. Then, rain. The young man goes inside, takes off his wet jacket, marvels at how the world ends in rain. He discusses food with

the chef, but he is not waiting for the rain to stop because he is not waiting for anything. In a world without future, each moment is the end of the world. After twenty minutes, the storm cloud passes, the rain stops, and the sky brightens. The young man returns to his table, marvels that the world ends in sunlight.

**R. JONATHAN SACKS**  
A LETTER IN THE SCROLL PP. 39-41

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**T**he Baal Shem Tov--founder of the Hassidic movement in the eighteenth century--said that the Jewish people is a living Sefer Torah, and every Jew is one of its letters. I am moved by that image, and it invites a question--the question: Will we, in our lifetime, be letters in the scroll of the Jewish people?

At some stage, each of us must decide how to live our lives. We have many options, and no generation in history has had a wider choice. We can live for work or success or fame or power. We can have a whole series of lifestyles and relationships. We can explore any of a myriad of faiths, mysticisms, or therapies. There is only one constraint--namely, that however much of anything else we have, we have only one life, and it is short. How we live and what we live for are the most fateful decisions we ever make.

We can see life as a succession of moments spent, like coins, in return for pleasures of various kinds. Or we can see our life as though it were a letter of the alphabet. A letter on its own has no meaning, yet when letters are joined to others they make a word, words combine with others to make a sentence, sentences connect to make a paragraph, and paragraphs join to make a story. That is how the Baal Shem Tov understood life. Every Jew is a letter. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence and the Jewish people through time constitutes a story, the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.

That metaphor is for me the key to understanding our ancestors' decision to remain Jewish even in times of great trial and tribulation. I suspect they knew that they were letters in this story, a story of great risk and courage. Their ancestors had taken the risk of pledging themselves to a covenant with God and thus undertaking a very special role in history. They had undertaken a journey, begun in the distant past and continued by every successive generation. At the heart of the covenant is the idea of emunah, which means faithfulness or loyalty. And Jews felt a loyalty to generations past and generations yet unborn to continue the narrative. A Torah scroll that has a missing letter is rendered invalid, defective. I think that most Jews did not want theirs to be that missing letter...

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one.

From a description of the location and appearance of rivers, trees, buildings, people, all would seem common. The Aare bends to the east, is sprinkled with boats carrying potatoes and sugar beets. Arolla pines dot the foothills of the Alps, the trees' cone-laden branches curving upward like arms of a candelabrum. Three-storey houses with red-tiled roofs and dormer windows sit quietly on Aarstrasse, overlooking the river. Shopkeepers on Marktgasse wave their arms at all passersby, hawking handkerchiefs, fine watches, tomatoes, sour bread, and fennel. The smell of smoked beef wafts down the avenues. A man and woman stand on their small balcony on Kramgasse, arguing and smiling while they argue. A young girl walks slowly through the garden at the Kleine Schanze. The large redwood door of the Post Bureau opens and closes, opens and closes. A dog barks.

But seen through the eyes of any one person the scene is quite different. For example, one woman sitting on the banks of the Aare sees the boats pass by at great speed, as if moving on skates across ice. To another, the boats appear sluggish, barely rounding the bend in the whole of the afternoon. A man standing on Aarstrasse looks at the river to discover that the boats travel first forwards, then backwards.

These discrepancies are repeated elsewhere. Just now a chemist is walking back to his shop on Kochergasse, having taken his noon meal. This is the picture he sees: two women gallop past him, churning their arms wildly and talking so rapidly that he cannot understand them. A solicitor runs across the street to an appointment somewhere, his head jerking this way and that like a small animal's. A ball tossed by a child from a balcony hurtles through the air like a bullet, a blur barely visible. The residents of no. 82, just glimpsed through their window, fly through the house from one room to the next, sit down for an instant, shovel down a meal in one minute, disappear, reappear. Clouds overhead come together, move apart, come together again with the pace of successive exhalations and inhalations.

On the other side of the street, the baker observes the same scene. He notes that two women leisurely stroll up the street, stop to talk to a solicitor, then walk on. The solicitor goes into an apartment at no. 82, sits down at a table for lunch, walks to the first-floor window where he catches a ball thrown by a child on the street.

To yet a third person standing under a lamppost on Kochergasse, the events have no movement at all: two women, a solicitor, a ball, a child, three barges, an apartment interior are captured like paintings in the bright summer light.

And it is similar with any sequence of events, in this world where time is a sense.

In a world where time is a sense, like sight or like taste, a sequence of episodes may be quick or may be slow, dim or intense, salty or sweet, causal or without cause, orderly or random, depending on the prior history of the viewer. Philosophers sit in cafés on Amthausgasse and argue whether time really exists outside human perception. Who can say if an event happens fast or slow, causally or without cause, in the past or the future? Who can say if events happen at all? The philosophers sit with half-opened eyes and compare their aesthetics of time.

Some few people are born without any sense of time. As consequence, their sense of place becomes heightened to excruciating degree. They lie in tall grass and are questioned by poets

and painters from all over the world. These time-deaf are beseeched to describe the precise placement of trees in the spring, the shape of snow on the Alps, the angle of sun on a church, the position of rivers, the location of moss, the pattern of birds in a flock. Yet the time-deaf are unable to speak what they know. For speech needs a sequence of words, spoken in time.