

אשר זעליג וויס

כגן 8  
פעיה"ק ירושלים ת"ו

בס"ד

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ברכתי למחבר שליט"א שדבריו יעלו לרצון ורבים יאותו לאורו.

באהבה

אשר זעליג וויס

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*Rabbi of Moshav Matityahu*  
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Dear Friends,

I have read "The Time of Your Life" by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene. As in his previous books Rabbi Levene offers a quality presentation of the many and varied issues concerning time and Jewish living.

The material is based on many and varied solid Torah sources all well documented. The breadth and depth of the presentation is very impressive. I found it informative, interesting, enlightening, and inspiring.

I commend Rabbi Levene for providing an additional quality Torah work and recommend it's read as a very worthwhile manner to spend one's time. I pray that Hashem Yisborach bless Rabbi Levene and his family with life, health and the wherewithal to continue to merit the community in his many and varied ways.

Sincerely,  
With Torah blessings



Rabbi Zev Leff

# Contents

Preface ..... xv

## ONCE UPON A TIME

### An Introduction

A Timely Lesson ..... 3  
Our Life Companion ..... 5

## IT'S ABOUT TIME

### What Is Time?

You Say “When” ..... 13  
A Brief History of Time ..... 17  
Time—For What? ..... 23

## IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME

### The Tenses

All the Time in the World? ..... 33  
A Thing of the “Past” ..... 37  
No Time Like the “Present” ..... 43  
The Not-Too-Distant “Future” ..... 49

## DO YOU HAVE TIME?

### How Time Works

There's a Time and a Place . . . . .	59
The Passage of Time . . . . .	68
Time and Time Again . . . . .	73
It's High Time . . . . .	76

## THE TIMEKEEPER

### How Man Relates to Time

Time-Sensitive . . . . .	83
Under the Influence? . . . . .	86
To Make a Man out of You! . . . . .	93
Is Time on Your Side? . . . . .	97

## THE TIME IS NOW

### What to Do with Your Time

No Time to Lose . . . . .	107
A Waste of Time . . . . .	113
Quality Time . . . . .	123
At This Moment in Time . . . . .	126
Time Management . . . . .	132

## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TIMING

### Periods of Time

At the Right Time . . . . .	145
For the "Moment" . . . . .	152
Needs of the "Hour" . . . . .	157
Time to Call It a "Day" . . . . .	162

By the “Week” . . . . .	167
Something New This “Month” . . . . .	170
That Time of “Year” Again. . . . .	174

## IN A LIFETIME

### The Life Cycles in Time

Birth: A Time to Be Born. . . . .	183
Rejoice, O Youth . . . . .	188
The Coming of Age . . . . .	194
In Old Age . . . . .	197
Death: Out of Time . . . . .	202

## IN TIMES GONE BY

### The Historical Timeline

Time for a Story . . . . .	213
History in the Making . . . . .	218
Time Will Tell . . . . .	227

## TIMELESSNESS

### How to Transcend Time

Beyond Time . . . . .	235
A Timeless Nation, a Timeless Torah. . . . .	238
Faster than Time . . . . .	242
Forever and Ever. . . . .	247



# ONCE UPON A TIME

## An Introduction



NOT SIMPLY A BY-PRODUCT OF CREATION,  
TIME IS AN ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF LIFE.





# A Timely Lesson

**R**av Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *zt"l*, Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Ore in Jerusalem, was once invited to be the guest speaker at a prestigious educational institution. Everyone respectfully stood as the distinguished Torah scholar entered the study hall. A faculty member ushered him toward a lectern that was prominently positioned at the front of the room.

The students took their seats. Silence fell as they waited for the lecture to begin. The crowd widely expected the great Torah personality to deliver a brilliant Talmudic discussion on the complex subject matter currently being studied at the yeshiva. But they were in for a surprise.

The *rosh yeshiva* opened his mouth to utter just one word. "Time!" After a few moments, he repeated this word in a louder voice. "Time!" Then, in a voice overcome with emotion, he cried it out once again. "Time!" What was going on? The audience waited in astonishment to hear more. But there was nothing else. Rav Chaim Pinchas moved away from the lectern and promptly took a seat. This confirmed to all that the unconventional discourse had concluded. No philosophical discussion. No novel insights. No inspirational stories. The same word thrice. This episode left an indelible impression upon everyone present.

The great Torah scholar was urging the student body to deeply contemplate the concept of time. Being such a significant topic, it warranted a radical departure from the assumed topic of his address. This incident would stand out as a memorable lesson that none of those present would ever forget.

Too many of us take time for granted. Too many of us live our lives as if we have all the time in the world. And too many of us do not give time

#### 4 *The Time of Your Life*

more than a moment's thought. But a failure to properly reflect upon the meaning of time is nothing short of tragic.

*It is about time to start taking time seriously.* For our very lives—both in this world and the World to Come—depend upon it.

# Our Life Companion

To exist is to be alive. The most natural way to relate to our life in this world is by reference to the phenomenon of time. We are alive because of it. Without it, we cannot live.

Time is, quite literally, a matter of life and death. In everyday conversation, the terms “life” and “time” are used jointly (“in my *lifetime*”) or interchangeably (“time is short” as a substitute for “life is short”), with time often being called the “currency of life.” Is time life? To be sure, time is *not* life itself. Existence is independent of time; it simply is. But according to the operating system within our physical world, existence without *time* is inconceivable. “For there to be existence, there must be time.”<sup>1</sup>

Our time on Earth is all too fleeting. As mortal beings, our primal desire is to live and to urgently hold onto that gift of life that God has granted us. The preservation of human life (*pikuach nefesh*) within Judaism supersedes all other laws (with the notable exception of the three cardinal sins). The key objective is to live and to stay alive.<sup>2</sup> We should greatly value the time of our life by placing it over and above everything else. What lengths would each of us not go to in order to remain alive?

Our material belongings are worth nothing compared to securing another moment of time. An anecdote is told of a medieval European queen lying on her deathbed. The minister called to her side tried to console the ailing monarch by describing her fabulous wealth, her extraordinary

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1 *Maharal, Nesiv Ha'avodah* 10.

2 *Vayikra* 18:5; *Sanhedrin* 74a.

talents, and her outstanding achievements. But all efforts to lift her spirits were in vain. In her final words before taking her last breath, she cried out: “All of my possessions for another moment of time!”

## THE WHOLE TIME

*Time is the life companion* that accompanies us during our existence in this world.

All living things need it. Time is relentless, not stopping for anyone or anything. Time cannot be frozen—even momentarily—to give us a reprieve or a chance to catch our breath.

Because our lives are experienced in its presence, time is the natural medium used to chronicle our journey through life. Our individual existence starts with birth and ends with death. More broadly, our existence can be framed within the context of world history that is also recorded using the “timer” of time.

We live our daily lives ever mindful of the passage of time. We make use of “timetables” and regulate our behavior by operating within the context of prescribed deadlines. Time is ubiquitous. We refer to it in our everyday conversations without even realizing it. Indeed, a study found that the word “time” was the most frequently used noun in the English language!

Playing such an integral role in our lives, time *should* be the leading subject always first and foremost in our minds. However, this is surprisingly not the case. Despite our ongoing encounters, people are largely ignorant about the nature of time. They might make constant reference to it in their everyday lives. They might have a vague notion of how the sun and moon are used to calculate the passing of time. But when all is said and done, every man’s knowledge of time, both its inner properties and how to effectively manage it, remains superficial.

The paradox about man’s attitude to time was brilliantly expressed by a nineteenth-century English essayist: “Nothing puzzles me more...and yet nothing troubles me less.”

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT TIME?

We all presume to know what time is. But what do we really know? The question “What is time?” was once posed to a prominent fourth-century

theologian. He thought long and hard about how to best respond. Finally, he confessed, “If no one asks me, I know; if I try to explain it, I do not.”

This candid answer highlights the difficulties of attempting to illuminate the phenomenon that is time. We are confident about what it is—until we are challenged to describe it. Only then do we come to the stark realization that we are clueless!

Time is not something we can detect using our five physical senses. We cannot see it, smell it, hear it, taste it, or touch it. Nothing else within creation is remotely similar. Despite encountering time at every moment, we do not really know what it is.

We realize that time is a precondition for staying alive but do not know why. We recognize that time greatly influences our lives but do not know how. And we are aware that our time in this world will end at some point but do not know when.

## ONE OF LIFE’S GREATEST MYSTERIES?

“Time is the most unknown of all unknown things.” This saying, widely attributed to the great Greek philosopher Aristotle, demonstrates how time is one of life’s greatest mysteries.

Debates about “what time is” or “how time works” have been the subject of ongoing dispute, speculation, and conjecture. Time is one of life’s most intriguing and existential issues.

Is time real, or is it only an illusion? Is it a dimension or a measurement? Do we exist in time, or does time exist in us? What is the nature of our fragile yet complex relationship with time? Is every moment unique or inherently the same? Is every moment a separate entity, or is time an integrated whole unfolding with every passing moment?

Time is said to “pass us by.” But is it time that is going past us or are we going past it? Why is it that we only experience time in one direction (past > present > future) but not in any other sequence? How exactly are we to relate to the three tenses? Does the past still exist in the present? And does the future exist before it happens?

Opinions about the properties of time generate fierce discussion. Philosophers, scientists, poets, and writers throughout the ages have

wrestled over the puzzling nature of time without ever reaching a conclusive resolution.<sup>3</sup> Remarkable scientific strides in the last two centuries notwithstanding, there have been no definitive answers about the mysterious nature of time, which remains elusive.

Some physicists honestly concede that their understanding of time is “limited at best and outright pathetic at worst.” Ironically, the more scientists learn about time, the more mysterious it remains. A recent work made the critical observation that the subtotal of what contemporary scientists have achieved in their knowledge about time is that *they now know better what they do not know!*

## TO LIVE WITH THE TIMES

Despite not knowing exactly what it is, there can be no denying the wide-ranging influence that time exerts upon our lives. Our religious duties as formulated by the *Ramchal*<sup>4</sup> broadly fall into four categories as organized around our interactions with time:

1. The constant laws of Torah that have a universal application at every moment in our lives, such as the dictate to love and fear God
2. The daily laws like the Temple sacrificial service (and its contemporary parallel in the daily prayers)
3. Periodic laws that can only be observed at specific occasions like the famous time-bound commandments synonymous with the Jewish holidays (e.g., eating matzah on Pesach or fasting on Yom Kippur)
4. Circumstantial laws that arise when a particular situation occurs, such as the mitzvah to redeem a firstborn boy from a Kohen or to return a lost article

Together, these four categories highlight how time is the universal backdrop against which to frame our religious lives. Every Jew is obligated to “live with the times.” One of the first things that an observant Jew determines upon his arrival at a new location are the “[halachic]

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3 *Rambam, Moreh Hanevuchim* 1:73.

4 *Derech Hashem* 4:1.

times” (*z'manim*) in his locality. The universal nature of halachah dictates exactly how a Jew is obligated to conduct himself at every single moment. Where would we be without a calendar to signal when to perform the customized laws at their specific times?

The ongoing Jewish encounter with time within creation is self-evident from our introduction to Torah and mitzvos. The Written Torah starts with the genesis of the universe as it unfolded during the seven days of the week.<sup>5</sup> The first national mitzvah given to the Jewish nation also involved time by establishing the sanctification of months in a Jewish calendar.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Oral Torah opens with a question about time: “From when [מאימתי] may we fulfill the obligation to recite the evening *Shema*?”<sup>7</sup>

Time is the one thing that every member of mankind has in common. But it is also the one thing that distinguishes them from each other. The question of “who we will become” is predominantly shaped by how we individually use time. To attain a Torah outlook to this subject is essential to making the most of life.

A JEW REALIZES THAT THE TOPIC OF TIME IS BOTH “TIMELY” AND “TIMELESS.”

Paradoxically, it is possible for us to live a “timely” existence within this world while simultaneously turning it into a “timeless” existence. Our ongoing journey through time can—and should—truly become a life-transforming experience. The knowledge that we are heading toward a definitive endpoint in the World to Come empowers us with the firm resolve to work ever harder to ultimately realize our destiny.

We connect to the moments of time within our lives when used meaningfully. A broad, reverent approach to time has the ability to transform our lives forever. If time is a key factor in how to relate to life, then we must be able to develop an overarching outlook to life through a better perception of time and its workings.

This, in turn, can be practically developed as the means through which to effectively live with time.

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5 Bereishis 1:1–2:2.

6 Shemos 12:1.

7 Mishnah, *Berachos* 1:1.