

Parshat Shemini
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Don Imus. Where does a rabbi begin? It all happened so fast. One day he makes a stupid remark about the Rutgers Women's Basketball Team on his radio show and the next day we are watching a media storm of monumental proportions. Because of the way information travels in our day – the story moved from one venue to another and it all played out in a matter of days. “News thrives on the same thing entertainment does: character and narrative,” as Martin Kaplan, a professor of media and entertainment at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California said: In this case, a barely repentant curmudgeon had effectively mugged Cinderella. It was a perfect story. You have a grizzled cowboy up against innocent victims.” As so it spread like wildfire and before you knew it there was Imus apologizing. Then there was the news conference by the Rutgers Basketball team. Then Don Imus makes the required appearance on Al Sharpton's radio show. And before you know it the story reaches its denouement with MSNBC and CBS announcing that they were firing Imus.

There is so much here that deserves further exploration. The nature of race relations in our society; the place of women and the issue of victimology, the whole exercise of public apology and what it has become. And these and many other aspects of this drama deserve our attention and our exploration. But, on this Shabbat, I would like to focus on just one aspect of this whole uncomfortable affair – and that is the speed with which it was played out before us. Like a literary Drama we had the Introduction of the Characters, the Exposition of the Narrative, the Climax and Denouement all acted out before our eyes as in a two hour play without intermission.

We live in a world where things keep coming at us faster and faster. And Judaism, in general, and this Shabbat, in particular, comes to remind us that faster is not necessarily better. Maybe that is why I love baseball so much.

Speed defines our world. A bomb goes off in the Iraqi Parliament and we see it on our television screen in a matter of moments. The first battle of the Revolutionary War was Bunker Hill. I read where it took two months for the message of that attack to travel by boat back to England, for there to be a discussion and debate in the English Parliament and their decision to be returned by boat to their forces in the colonies. Those days are so over! So - don't you find it just a tad bit quaint that this morning we *benched rosh hodesh*? Don't you find it a bit old fashioned in this fast paced world -that we recited a special prayer to announce the coming of the new moon?

This requires a few words of explanation.

In ancient times there was no established calendar and the decision on when the holidays were to fall were made by the rabbinical court, the Sanhedrin. The Torah states, for example, that Passover is to be proclaimed on the 15th day of the month of Nisan. It was no problem to count 15 days from the first of the month. The challenge was to ascertain when the first day of the month occurred. The first day began when a new moon was visible in the sky. In order to precisely fix this moment, the rabbis invited individuals to observe the night sky and then to come and testify before them about exactly what they had seen. When enough witnesses had supplied

identical descriptions of the position of the moon, the rabbis decreed that the new month had begun.

The Sanhedrin was assembled in the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem on the 30th of each month, from morning to evening, waiting for the reports of those who had observed the new moon. After examination of at least three reliable witnesses, the president of the Sanhedrin in the presence of at least three members, called out: "The new moon is consecrated!", whereupon the whole assembly of people twice repeated the words: "It is consecrated." The blowing of the shofar at the time of the proclamation was also a frequent practice.

Originally, the rabbis developed a system of announcement of the new moon to all the people scattered throughout Israel and then Babylonia as well. Remember this is a tad before "instant messaging" was available.

Huge bonfires were kindled on the hills outside Jerusalem - the message was transmitted from hilltop to hilltop. It was a beautiful sight. The whole country looked like a sea of fire from Jerusalem all the way to Babylonia the message was sent. Everyone in ancient Judea knew within a few minutes that the new month had begun.

However, the outlying communities, those that lived at a distance from Palestine did not get the message in a timely fashion. There was uncertainty about the date of the new month and consequently the practice developed of observing two days of the major holidays, rather than the one Biblical day, in order to avoid any difficulty.

How incredibly low tech! And how quaint. And we still *bench rosh hodesh*. We still recite the prayer on the Shabbat before a new moon to announce to the assembled congregation the arrival of a new moon and hence a new month. Can you believe we are still doing this? Good God rabbi -hasn't it dawned on anyone in this great religion that things have advanced - just a bit since the days of the Temple over 2000 years ago? Why are we still dealing with new moons and prayers announcing the coming of a new month? Get a calendar!

Why, we could set up a program today that would send out an email to every Jew anywhere in the world, informing them of the coming of a new month - and we could program that program for the next 2000 years and barring a computer failure or power shutdown - never have to worry about fixing another Rosh Hodesh ever!

But my friends - this is not news. Rosh Hodesh *benching* became obsolete long before the invention of the computer. Maybe 2000 years ago it was necessary to convene a court and hear witnesses and light bonfires - but already by the middle of the fourth century about the year 358, a great rabbi named Hillel the Second wrote down the rules for fixing the dates of the Jewish calendar - rules that have been followed for the last 1300 or so years. Even back then, rabbis who knew the rules could figure out the correct calendar for years, indeed for centuries, in advance. It was no longer necessary to use messages, it was no longer necessary to use witnesses and the uncertainty associated with the original forms of establishing the dates of the calendar and the new month was completely removed. I have here in my hand a book entitled, the Comprehensive

Hebrew Calendar - from 1900 to 2100. A two hundred year Hebrew calendar that we use for arranging weddings, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs - not that we schedule them 200 years in advance (although we are getting close to that). I can, in a matter of seconds, tell you exactly when Rosh Hodesh Iyar will occur - not only for this year - but in the year 2022! (May 2 - in case you are interested) And although this book is only good for 200 years, I have a program on my computer that can do these calculations indefinitely - Rosh Hodesh Iyyar in the year 2222? - April 13. So who needs Rosh Hodesh benching anymore? And without it, just think, we could get out of shul about 10 minutes earlier, which means 10 minutes more kiddush time -what is the problem?

Well, I think there are a number of good reasons that we still *bench rosh hodesh*. First of all, we keep the prayer as a reminder, as a connection to a rich past. We keep the prayer because of the centuries of associations that have become connected to it - centuries of magnificent cantors have created moving and touching renditions of this prayer - a heritage that we maintain and continue each time we recite it in the synagogue.

And we recite it to remind us that faster is not always better.

There is a phenomenon that I read about in the New York Times, that is intended to explain why productivity in service industries lags behind that of manufacturing, and probably always will. I discovered it in an article that was explaining why college costs are so out of control. Having put three children through college there is little I find reassuring about the expense except for the sympathy I have for those of you who have young children as estimates suggest it may cost you more than \$250,000 for four years at a top college. And to try and explain this they have developed a concept called Baumol's disease. It is named after Dr. William J. Baumol, director of the C.V. Starr Center for Applied Economics at New York University who suggests that any service that is inherently labor intensive - education, law, social work, health care - will experience a productivity gap when compared to "hard" industries. And that over time the cost of these industries will continue to go up and not down. Baumol's disease attempts to explain why computers will get cheaper but college education will get more expensive. Prof. Baumol uses Mozart as an example of the nature of his, *disease*. In the centuries since the composer's death in 1791, playing one of his quartets for string still requires four instruments and four players and the same number of minutes. No way has ever been found, in more than 200 years, to make this process more efficient, even though huge gains in industrial productivity have occurred during the same time.

According to Dr. Baumol although it costs a lot more to put a professor in a classroom today than it did 10 years ago or a hundred years ago - one professor and a limited number of students remains constant for education to be meaningful. Hospitals struggle to become more efficient, and to discover cost saving methodologies but for the most part, doctors still see one patient at a time and perform one surgery at a time and write one prescription at a time.

But I believe there is a flip side to Baumol's disease which the New York Times did not explore, I would like to call Baumol's blessing and I think it is similar to the Rosh Hodesh blessing - and I would like you to consider its application this morning.

Listening to a Mozart string quartet today is very much like it was when people first listened to it in the 18th century. There is no way to improve on perfection. Playing it faster does not make it better. Doing it with two instruments rather than four will not improve the quality of the piece. Faster is not always better. Some things need to be appreciated precisely for what they are.

As a rabbi, I hear this constantly. Make it short rabbi! It has become a kind of theme song which people sing to me regardless of the occasion. Brevity becomes the criterion. Hurry up with joy. Hurry up with sorrow. The wedding ceremony is not a 100 yard dash, nor is the Seder a four minute mile. And if speeding on the highway is dangerous to physical life, speeding through the pathways of faith is dangerous for the spiritual life.

Today we celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of Rochelle Schnitzer. And based on my understanding of Baumol's blessing and the Rosh Hodesh blessing, I say to Shari and Howard to Ari and Josh and all the family and friends, savor the moment, embrace the miracle of this very precious time, appreciate the gift that is yours precisely because of what it is in the gift of your daughter's life. In the twinkling of an eye – children grow up – or at least that is probably what Shari and Howard would say – Rochelle would probably tell us that it feels like it has been forever to get here. Which of them is right? Is life fast or slow? Who is right - from here to there, from today to tomorrow - is it long or is it short? This is Baumol's blessing, this is the message of the Rosh Hodesh Blessing - life has its own pace, it takes it's own time - it is what it is and it cannot, it will not be rushed or delayed.

We watch our TV's and life comes at us so fast. We read the newspapers and everything seems to move in fast forward. We are dazzled by events in our fast paced world and we come to shul overwhelmed by the pace of our modern world – and we bench Rosh Hodesh.

Life takes time. Baumol's blessing, the Rosh Hodesh blessing reminds us that some things – maybe the important things in life – well they just take time. The savoring of a holy word, the measured experience of sacred acts, the dialogue conducted in no haste between the generations of the past and our own. The challenge is to embrace our children, our life, at every moment.

The blessing of the New Moon, which we recited today, is a reminder of this truth. We chanted it today, just like we did last month and just like we did a thousand months ago. In an ever changing world - it will still take the same time for the moon to process its phases today as it did in the days of Hillel the Second, as it did in the days of the Sanhedrin. Some things never change, some things shouldn't change. Some things just take time. I feel bad for the women of the Rutgers Basketball team, I even feel bad for Don Imus – they all must feel like they have been run over by a bus. The speed of our contemporary world can do that to you. That is why I am glad you came to shul this morning to bench *Rosh Hodesh*, to catch your breath in this fast paced world.

The new month of Iyyar will begin on Wednesday and Thursday. May it hold blessing for us and for all the people Israel. May the Holy One bless this new month with life and peace, joy and gladness, deliverance and consolation. And let us say: Amen