

In the long history of how humans measure distance, the foot, the mile, the meter and kilometer – one unit of measurement stands apart – the Smoot. Oliver Smoot was a member of the class of 1962 at MIT. As part of pledging a fraternity, he allowed his fraternity brothers late one night to use his body to measure the length of the Harvard Bridge linking Boston and Cambridge across the Charles River. This happened on October 4, 1958, 64 years ago, pretty much to the minute. To implement his use as a unit of measure, Smoot repeatedly lay down on the bridge, let his companions mark his new position in chalk or paint, and then got up again. Eventually, he got tired from so much exercise and was carried thereafter by the fraternity brothers to each new position. After a few hours, fraternity members had established that the length of the Harvard Bridge was 364.4 smoots, plus or minus an ear. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Smoot became chairman of the American National Standards Institute and then, president of the International Organization for Standardization.

If this sermon were a century long we'd be ending the first decade. If it were the 20th century we'd be thinking about getting a telephone installed and wondering if we should trade in our horse for a car.

Human beings have long used our bodies for demarcating distance. The foot and the biblical cubit, for example, both were defined by the length of royal extremities. As we explored our world and the universe, we needed scientific ways to measure ever growing distances, like the light year. And as we had to come up with larger units to measure distance, we had to devise smaller and smaller units to demarcate time.

Such developments are often at first not universally adopted. Imagine interviewing a farmer about a normal day: “Normally I wake up then depending on the month I might plant or reap the harvest.” And you say, “How do you know what to plant?” And the farmer says, “I’ve got this poem that we’ve been using for generations, so like, in June I mow my corn, in August I harvest my wheat with a sickle, stuff like that.”

And as you’re trying to build understanding, you say, “That poem sounds really useful. But I’d like to talk about a new approach to time. What if I could divide every single day into 24 big parts called hours, and each of those into 60 little parts called minutes? So now instead of having just a whole day, you have 1,440 little pieces of time and you can arrange them and do whatever you want. What is your reaction to that?” And I think the farmer would probably be polite but I’m guessing he’d be thinking, “Clock? That’s the single stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Tonight, I want to talk about the ways we measure time in our lives, starting with the time horizons we employ. I first encountered the term time horizon in the world of financial planning, where it means defining the point in time when you will need the money – saving for retirement entails a longer time horizon compared to saving for college tuitions.

First, let’s talk about the ways we experience time throughout our lives. When we are young, time seems to pass slowly; we ask: are we there yet? Yet, as we age, time seems to move faster. Of course, in actual time a minute is just a minute—but is this true? A minute when you’re

asleep is nothing. A minute on Twitter is as many as three hundred thousand tweets. If it were your job to read them, that's a month or two of full-time work.

The time horizons we employ are often defined by the task at hand. In the world of business, the important period of time is the quarter. In University, the semester; in politics, the elected term. And as more human experience gets crammed into shorter periods of time, our measurements become more complex. Did you know, for example, that decades are a recent invention? Not the concept of having ten years of course, but the concept of the decade as a sort of major cultural unit, like when I say "the 90s" and you think of flannel shirts and grunge music and the creation of email and the world wide web, or when I say "the 60s" and you think of tie-dyed clothing, the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam war. The fact is you need a lot of change for a decade to be a meaningful demarcation. Back in the 1600s they didn't really talk about centuries as much either. Time was measured by the reign of the king, for example, in the third year of King James' reign...

Yet, as the industrial revolution hastened the pace of change, measurements of time such as hours and minutes and seconds became essential. Eventually, the computer revolution would necessitate the use of nanoseconds. As the units of measuring distance grow larger and the measure of time grows shorter, there can be ironic juxtapositions. Consider: the most advanced telescope platform in space, like the James Webb telescope, can see things so far away that the light arriving to the telescope began its journey the very first moments of the universe, just nanoseconds after the big bang. And that's the irony. To see the furthest distance, to the very beginning of the universe, that light travels billions of miles over billions of years. And when it arrives to us, it depicts a moment only nanoseconds in duration.

If this sermon were a millennium long, William the Conqueror would have just begun building the Tower of London.

Our sense of time and distance is shaped not just by technology but also by the sheer amount of information at our finger tips. Why does time seem to go faster the older we get? Some scientists think it's simply that less of our life is ahead of us than lies behind us. And perhaps other factors play. One such factor was described by futurist Richard Theime. He noticed a curious behavior: the older he gets the more he finds himself, as he puts it, redacting the future. "When I was younger," he wrote, "I closely followed the events and inventions people predicted would occur during my lifetime. Now," he concluded, "I pay much less attention to things predicted to happen after I've died. I've come to refer to this as redacting the future."

Limiting one's time horizon to the length of one's life is a starting point, but Jewishly it can't be the end point. I just got back from New York where on Friday we buried my stepfather, Alan. Alan did not subscribe to the idea of redacting the future. Until his dying day, he remained enthusiastically interested in the future he would never experience, particularly as it will affect younger friends and family. He didn't ruminate on the past, preferring instead to talk about the future.

If this sermon were a century long, the Dow Jones would have just closed above 1000 for the first time in history.

The High Holy Days are our opportunity to recalibrate our time horizons, two in particular: the first is this past year since last Yom Kippur. We engage the spiritual practice of Keshbon HaNefesh, the accounting of our souls, the review of this past year with special attention paid to moments of weakness and error, the times when we didn't act as we know we should have. This season provides not only a time for contemplation but an opportunity to redress our errors, apologize to those whom we hurt and make a plan to avoid repeating the error ever again.

In addition to reviewing this past year, the second time horizon at play is the rest of our lives. How do we plan avoid the conclusion reached by British comedian Peter Cook, "I have learned from my mistakes, and I am sure I can repeat them exactly." How can we be less like Peter Cook and more like my stepfather, Alan?

In addition to asking ourselves: what time horizons operate in my life, there is the related question of what are my moral horizons? In contrast with a time horizon, a moral horizon defines the extent of our caring for others. A moral horizon could stop at death but preferably would extend into the future we are a part of building.

Here what it sounds like when our moral horizon of concern terminates at our own deaths. I recently heard someone say, "I've lived my life in the best time – and all the new deal programs like Social Security and Medicare are now under attack. But those changes won't affect me. I'll be gone by then." Such a limited time and moral horizon may reflect the certainty of our own demise, but we aren't, nor should we be, limited to that narrow a view for our moral horizon of concern.

A Jewish conception of a moral horizon of concern extends past our own days on earth and extends to the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren's generations. This may seem self-evident, much like the Talmud's story of Honi who planted a carob tree that would bear fruit only in the days when his grandchildren would be adults. One generation feels responsibility for those who follow.

Yet, there is a hidden danger in taking the long view. For example, climate change. Do we take the extended time frame of geologic time and reason: well, the effect of human beings notwithstanding, earth's environment has and will always operate through cycles of warming and cooling and our efforts to curb human influence on the environment a just are drop in the bucket with little effect? And what's more, in geologic time, human existence will someday be relegated to a thin layer of our civilization, surrounded by the various epochs of geologic time. One might conclude our story's end has been written. Why bother trying to save the world? To which Judaism responds, in the voice of the Talmud's Rabbi Tarfon, it's not your job to finish the work but neither are you free to avoid doing it altogether. In other words, irrespective of what may happen millions of years down the road, we each have a current responsibility to assert and enact a moral horizon of care.

Setting one's moral horizon involves not only extending our care far into the future. It has implications, too, in the here and now, vis a vis our responsibilities to others who may be distanced from us by several degrees of separation. Where do our moral responsibilities begin and end? Our immediate family? Our community? Our country? The entire world?

If this speech was 50 years long then, right now, former president Jimmy Carter would be receiving the Nobel peace prize.

The challenge in calibrating one's moral horizon is encapsulated in the famous threefold maxim from Rabbi Hillel in Pirke Avot, Sayings of the ancestors. *Im ayn ani li mi li?* If I am not for myself who will be for me? *Ukshsh'ani l'atzmi, mah ani?* But if I am only for myself, what am I? *V'im lo akhshav, ehmatai?* And if not now, when? Hillel's series of questions asserts several moral truths: first, our primary obligation is to those closest to us, our friends, family and community. By extension this also means one's community. By way of example, when Russia began threatening to invade Ukraine, a number of Jewish refugee organizations, among them the joint distribution committee and the Hebrew immigrant aid society, AKA HIAS, sprung into action, creating lists of every Jewish family especially those with a member who is homebound because of age or disability. These groups also began stockpiling food and medications and cash that would be needed to rent buses and enable them to cross borders unmolested.

These actions might seem to reflect a limited moral horizon, but the fact is that if we don't take care of our fellow Jews, there will be no one else to assist us.

And Hillel's next statement impels us to look beyond those closest to us. *If I am only for myself, what am I?* Do I have an obligation to my neighbors and others with whom I don't have a direct link but who nevertheless deserve my attention and help? Such an emphasis explains why so many Jews are currently involved in resettling Afghan refugees. Our moral horizon, according to Hillel, must extend concern to even those who are not part of our family or community but who are a part of the larger human family. Taking our Jewish values into account, our moral horizons strongly demand that we are our brothers' keeper. And further, they warn us that if our moral horizon becomes foreshortened, beginning and ending with one's self, we are prone to not recognize how our actions affect others. In a worldwide pandemic, we might choose to not to wear a mask because it is uncomfortable.

If this speech was a century long, disco would be huge right now.

In addition to recalibrating our personal time horizons and moral horizons, modernity presents us with a challenge our ancestors never envisioned. Modern technology has radically altered the conditions for human action, endowing us with tremendous power to affect the future. Patterns of action that appear positive in their short-term effects must sometimes be judged unsustainable. Scientific thinking has raised questions that would have stumped our forebears. For example, the field of environmental ethics is divided between those who feel our concern for nature ought to be rooted in anthropocentric values connected to human culture and those who prefer values not connected to people but rather connected to nature, that is bio or and ecocentric. Emphasizing

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nature over human culture shines a bright light on overpopulation, deforestation and the pollution of the earth's supply of air and water, all of which affect people but also endanger the health of the entire planet. Until this point, ethics were understood to operate in human interactions. Now, science has given us other frameworks to consider.

If this speech was as long as the universe is old the earth would just be forming right now.

In this season of reflection, self-assessment and recalibrating our moral horizon of care, may we have:

the clarity to determine who and what are encompassed within our moral horizon;

the strength to note of the needs of those closest to us as well as those as a distance;

And in a world ping-ponging between light years and nanoseconds, enable us draw close to those in need and do as the prophet Micah put it: do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

If this SERMON were as long as this SERMON, it would be over. AMEN