

PROLOGUE

I RECENTLY DEVOTED A DAY to renewing my passports. Early in the morning, I took the subway to midtown Manhattan for my appointment at the Swiss Consulate. It was important for me to arrive on time; otherwise I would have missed the twenty-minute slot I had scheduled months in advance. When I entered the pristine and peacefully quiet office, a clerk greeted me by name and helped me immediately. The appointment lasted precisely twenty minutes, and I was told that the passport would be delivered to my home in exactly two weeks' time. The machine used to generate passport photos and other biometric data looked as though it belonged to the distant future. I barely had time to notice the state-of-the-art design of the space, the modern paintings on the walls, and the beautiful views before I headed out.

My next stop was the Israeli Consulate, two blocks away. I hadn't made an appointment because there are no appointments to be made; one can arrive at any time during their working hours, whenever one pleases. After I passed through numerous rounds of security and x-ray machines, I entered the office, which was already filled with dozens of people, some standing and many others sitting in the waiting area. Before I had time to take a number, I heard a young man yelling at the clerk behind the counter: "The passport will only be mailed in three weeks? The website says that passports are returned in two weeks, and now I came for nothing, as my trip is two and a half weeks away. *Bizbazi et ha-zman sheli!* You've wasted my time!" While I waited and waited in the chaotic room—televisions blaring, families chatting boisterously—for my number to be called, I noticed that the place had not been renovated in years. Photographs from archaeological excavations hung from the walls.

The contrast between the Swiss and Israeli consulates could not be more pronounced, but I am especially amused by their different attitudes to time: appointments in advance versus spontaneous walk-ins; instant service versus long waits; certain versus uncertain time frames; uncompromising punctuality versus temporal flexibility.

These differences don't surprise me, though. I find myself in these consulates precisely because I grew up with a Swiss mother and an Iraqi Israeli father. Competing conceptions of time and temporal rhythms were a part of my childhood. I vividly remember two oft-repeated patterns. The first unfolded whenever we took a family vacation. My mother, who has an internal Swiss clock, was ready to leave for the airport hours before our scheduled departure and grew increasingly nervous that we would not arrive at the check-in desk a full three hours in advance of take-off time, as the airline recommended. My father, for whom punctuality is not particularly important, would slowly finish packing his

suitcase and find other excuses to stall so that he would not have to wait unnecessarily at the gate. This would occasionally result in a missed flight, but a missed flight was usually not the end of the world because there would be another flight headed to the same destination soon enough, and my father had patience to wait for it. My second memory is from extended family gatherings, when my Swiss relatives arrived at the exact time listed on the invitation, while my Iraqi Israeli aunts and uncles interpreted the start time as a suggestion, anytime after which they were welcome to show up. The former left at the end of the meal or event, even if they had no plans to go elsewhere thereafter, as the norms of politeness dictated; the latter preferred to stay indefinitely, as the host brought out additional rounds of desserts, nuts, and fruit, and everyone continued to enjoy one another's company, as the norms of politeness dictated.

These temporal cultures exist simultaneously in the present—neither is more “advanced” or “modern,” nor more “primitive” or “backward,” neither superior to the other. They are both contemporary. They are simply different, and they exist today for a complex set of interwoven cultural, political, economic, social, and historical reasons.¹ Both cultures, along with their attitudes to time, are beloved to me, and I am a product of both. Within every society, various time frames and attitudes to time operate simultaneously, and they all continually intersect, not only in my family but also on a global level, mutually affecting one another.

The study that follows explores the ways in which hourly, daily, weekly, and annual times unite groups and communities as well as form distinctions between them, and how temporal rhythms change over time. Time, I argue, can create or reinforce difference, and it can also elide difference. Moreover, such a process can be variously motivated: the formulation of daily schedules and annual calendars, for example, can be consciously conceived. But the process can also be less deliberate, an unintended consequence of other activities and traditions.

I have a third passport, too. I am reminded of this on the subway ride back from the consulates as I pass the post office in the Bronx where I recently renewed my American passport. It is my experience of time here, in the United States, that has most significantly informed my interest in time as a marker of difference. Adhering to two conflicting calendars has struck me as one of the most disorienting aspects of observant Jewish life in America. Observing the Sabbath, and thus being unavailable to work (or drive, and much else) on Saturdays, kept me from pursuing acting professionally and fencing competitively when I was younger. In college, and now as a university professor, I regularly face the challenge of Jewish holidays overlapping with class meetings, rather than the luxury of my vacations corresponding with my festivals. Being an observant Jewish American entails a constant negotiation between two—or more—temporal rhythms, ones that are rarely aligned. The same is true, for example, for an observant Muslim American. In these cases, again, time accentuates difference.

In this book, I argue not only that time establishes difference but also that it can obscure or diminish difference. One of my favorite artifacts from life in New York City is the annual “Alternate Side Parking Suspension Calendar” that the city distributes to its residents. The calendar contains a list of religious holidays when the city suspends its parking rules (in place to allow street sweepers to tidy up the roads) so that those celebrating any of the holidays on the list need not be bothered to move their cars. I do not know the politics behind the creation of these lists, how some holidays—such as Eid Al-Fitr, the Asian Lunar New Year, Ash Wednesday, Orthodox Good Friday, Diwali, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Yom Kippur—are included and others are not, nor when new ones were added and others removed. Regardless, the printed calendar that hangs on our fridge has assembled a remarkably diverse set of religious and civic festivals, lining them up alongside one another and, in the process, eliding their differences. From the perspective of sanitation workers, parking enforcers, and car owners, they are all regarded equally as days on which some members of the city have more sacred tasks to fulfill than moving their cars. This is particularly striking on years when two or more holidays fall on the same day. The calendar also alerts residents to the sacred days of their neighbors, coworkers, and friends, of which they might otherwise not have been aware—but from which they likewise benefit, for they, too, are exempt from moving their cars during these holidays, even if they do not observe them. In this seemingly mundane document—“junk mail,” as it were—the city’s parking calendar has actually synchronized the various holidays and created a rhythm of time that bridges, rather than accentuates, the religious and cultural differences of its city’s residents. It is through this idiosyncratic parking calendar that the city is able both to communicate its commitment to pluralism and to cultivate respect for others and acceptance of the diverse religious and cultural traditions of those who live within its city limits.

The stakes for determining time remain high. I lived in Jerusalem as I worked on this book. One of the aspects of this year abroad that I most appreciated was experiencing the temporal rhythms of a different civic calendar. I felt a sense of belonging when shops closed early on Friday afternoons (I realized, of course, that others felt alienated by these same temporal rhythms, that did not acknowledge Christmas or the start of a new year on January 1 or a secular lifestyle, which is precisely the point). Living in a context that recognized—and indeed was organized around—the same calendar and weekly schedule that I observed highlighted for me what it means to temporally “fit in” and accentuated for me, when I returned to the United States, the challenges of being a temporal “outsider.”

Nonetheless, experiences in Jerusalem reminded me that other dimensions of difference can be constructed even among those who share a calendar. On a research tour of the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City that included a visit to the Hurva Synagogue, only the men in our group were permitted to enter

the main sanctuary. The women were told that, as it was “time for prayer [*sha’at tefillah*],” we were forbidden from viewing the sanctuary from within. We would need to climb a narrow winding staircase to the women’s balcony for a glimpse at the space. I looked at my watch in bewilderment: it was 10 a.m., long past the time for the morning recitation of the Shema according to traditional rabbinic law.² “The time for prayer,” I realized, was being treated as a fluid temporal category, invoked whenever the men within the sanctuary pleased, for they could begin spontaneously praying as soon as a woman pried the door open. In the Hurva Synagogue, the time for prayer functioned as much as a way of differentiating women from men—and thereby limiting women’s access to the sacred space and their participation in the practices of prayer and worship that occurred within it—as a fixed period of time during which prayer was mandated and recited. Time and difference, in this case as in numerous other instances from ancient sources that I analyze in the pages that follow, have always been, and remain, intimately intertwined. The one constitutes the other.

Back in New York, I taught an undergraduate course about time and value. During one particularly illuminating discussion with my students, I asked each of them to articulate what it meant for them to be “punctual.” Their answers varied; there were just as many answers as students in the room. As we listened to one another, we learned that for some students being punctual meant being early, while for others showing up before the end of an event constituted punctuality. I shared with students the idea of “Jewish Time” (which simply means “late”), and they introduced me to “Dominican Time,” “CPT,” and “Gay Standard Time.”³ We realized together not only that conceptions and practices of time are culturally specific, relative, and local but also that time can deliberately be used, individually and communally, to assert and celebrate ethnic, racial, religious, or gendered difference. The legislation and use of time can oppress others. It can likewise be harnessed as a form of resistance.

Many contemporary traditions and conceptions of time and difference have roots in antiquity: in calendar reforms, in conceptions of punctuality and power, in the formation of rituals and of religions, in debates about the value of time and how best to spend it. This book focuses on one segment of this ancient history—the experiences and writings of late antique Jews, and specifically those preserved in the corpus of rabbinic literature—to illuminate the ways in which time operated, in antiquity as it does today, to generate, construct, crystallize, articulate, blur, and dismantle various kinds of difference. It studies some of the rhythms of time that animated the rabbinic world of late antiquity, the temporal footprints that the rabbis left behind in their writings, and the lasting impact that they had on those who have continued to grapple with the legacies of these times and differences.⁴

TIME AND DIFFERENCE IN RABBINIC JUDAISM

