

Rabbi Asher Knight
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Embracing Cosmic Insignificance

In July, NASA released the first pictures from The James Webb Telescope.



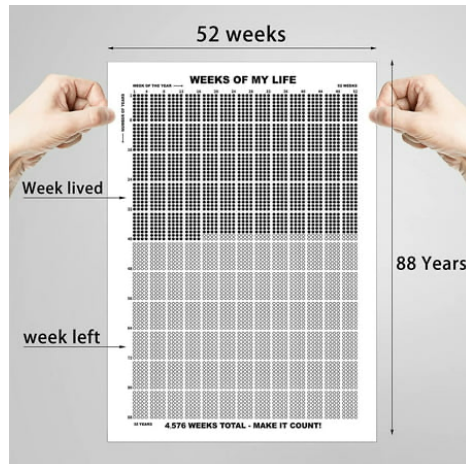
Each image peers back in time, showing the birth and death of stars and planets, and thousands of galaxies. The closest visible star to us in the Northern Hemisphere is roughly 5 light years away. It would take our fastest spacecraft, 21,300 earth years to get there. That's 266 generations of humanity from now. This is a picture of something we will never ever reach.

The scale of the universe is unfathomable, and the length of human history is hard to comprehend, too. How many generations of your own family can you name? 3 generations? 5 generations? I don't want to bum you out. Spoiler Alert: We live cosmically insignificant and short lives

The High Holy Days is a time to ask big, bold, and audacious questions. Questions about what we want to be doing. Are we living the life we want to be living? And if we are blessed to receive another year of life, how will we spend our precious days?

In his recent book, *4000 Weeks*, author Oliver Burkeman, suggests that we should embrace our cosmic insignificance. Because when we do, it helps us to reflect and choose what's truly important to focus our attention on what we care about most deeply.¹

¹ Burkeman, Oliver: *4000 Weeks*, Time Management for Mortals



4000 is the number of weeks a 77-year-old person has lived. I have personally lived 2,236 weeks – represented by the example, above. Each filled in dot is a week lived. Each unfilled dot is a week yet to be live. Fingers crossed I have about 2,000 weeks left.²

On the High Holy Days, we have historically recited the prayer *U’netaneh Tokef* – Judaism’s vivid version of 4000 Weeks. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, On Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die?” The prayer makes us uncomfortable because it makes us hold up a mirror and face the finite nature of our lives.³

When we perceive our own mortality with honesty, we realize that we don’t have time to wait. Need to apologize to your colleague? Do it. Your back is killing you from all the heavy lifting? Take care of yourself. You haven’t recently told your spouse or your child that you love them? What are you waiting for?

The Mistake of Time Optimization

We say, “So much to do, so little time.” But time is funny because the older we get, the faster the time goes. Ask a parent of a newborn and each day feels like a year. Listen to a parent tearing-up at their child’s wedding and they don’t know where the time went.

Roughly 4000-5000 weeks, that’s all we get. How will we read all the books we want to read? Snorkel the Great Coral Reef before it's gone. Cheer-on the Panthers in the Superbowl, *if they ever get there again*. How can we do it all when we have to take care of our own parents?

² This is not my personal poster, which I am coloring-in. I chose this image, found online, because it shows how the poster works. I purchased mine online.

³ At Temple Beth El in Charlotte, we use Mishkan HaNefesh. This prayer can be found on pg. 178. “On Rosh HaShanah this is written, on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it...”

And volunteer – here at Temple or other places? And the kids – don't forget their sports leagues and classes at the LJCC or other gyms.

And all the home repairs and maintenance. What about the purchases from Amazon we need to return!?! Didn't Ecclesiastes say that "there is a time and place for everything – a time and place for EVERYTHING under heaven?"⁴

Somewhere along the way somebody told us that that problem was us. We could do everything we want to do if we *just* became much more efficient with our time. And who told us that? Oliver Burkeman, the same guy who wrote 4000 Weeks!⁵

Years ago, he was a productivity consultant. He made his living teaching how to maximize our days, so we *might* achieve greater joy and satisfaction with whatever time was left over. But Burkeman realized during the pandemic, what many of us did too that time management does not necessarily create more space for meaning making. Time management is nearly impossible. Because every time you send an email – you get five more in return. Finish three projects quickly, someone's going to notice how fast you are and give you ten more

The time management books tell us that: If I just zero out my inbox; if I just finish my urgent task list; if I just segment my day into 15-minute increments; if I just stay up later or get up earlier.... I'll "Get it Done." Trust me I know; I've purchased each of those books!

But no matter how determined, creative, and task oriented you are, there will always be more to do, and there will be more to do after that. Paradoxically, efficiencies often make *more* work for us and can strip us of our humanity.

The Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai wrote a rebuke to Ecclesiastes:
"A [Person] doesn't have time
in [their] life
to have time for everything.

[A person] doesn't have seasons
enough to have
a season for every purpose [under heaven].
Ecclesiastes

⁴ Ecclesiastes 3

⁵ The first of many thanks, to Rabbi Dara Frimmer of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles. Rabbi Frimmer is an amazing friend and writing partner/collaborator.

Was wrong about that.”⁶

Which is why Burkeman suggests that the best way to move forward is to “choose a few things, [to invest your energy and time on]. Sacrifice [and jettison] everything else, and deal with the inevitable sense of loss that results.”⁷

Making a choice, means admitting we can’t juggle everything. The choice is whether we actively decide – with our freewill – to put down a ball and grieve that we can’t keep it in the air. Because – we know, too well that if we try to keep juggling all the balls we have, we will inevitably drop one with little to no agency about which one or how it gets dropped.⁸

We may feel sad about what we cannot do. We may sincerely mourn what we can’t accomplish in life. Like the distant stars, there is so much beyond our reach. We will not find soul-satisfaction in over productivity. We may, however, learn the “elusive feeling of soul-satisfaction [with greater] simplicity.”⁹

Making Choices

In Jewish tradition, there is a legal principle called: *tadir u’she’eino tadir, tadir kodem*.¹⁰ When there are two mitzvot before us, one rare and one more regular and commonplace, it’s reasonable to ask which mitzvah takes precedence? Some argue that we are supposed to complete the rare mitzvah, first. But the rabbis conclude that the trick to life is bringing our focus to the ordinary.

Our ancient wisdom is desperately waiving to us as we make choices right now: Will we choose to be with family - but keep checking the phone so we don’t miss a text? Will we talk about slowing down - but feel compelled to say “yes” to every invitation? Will we “end work” at 6 but answer emails until 11, failing to spend time with our spouse or our family?¹¹

Tadir u’she’eino Tadir, Tadir Kodem Is a way of thinking about our lives that says - choosing to elevate our health, our families, our wellbeing will also help us through the moments when we

⁶ Yehuda Amichai: “A Man Doesn’t Have Time in His Life.” Please note I changed the words to be gender neutral and to elevate my argument. Please read the poignant poem: <https://allpoetry.com/A-Man-Doesn%27t-Have-Time-In-His-Life>.

⁷ Oliver Burkeman, 4000 Weeks

⁸ Thank you to my Sister-In-Law, Julia Bonnheim for her brilliant insights.

⁹ Oliver Burkeman, 4000 Weeks

¹⁰ [Zevachim 89a](#)

¹¹ Rabbi Dara Frimmer

feel that to be a good parent, we are a bad colleague. And to be a good colleague, we are a bad friend.¹²

It will be tempting to try to reclaim the time that we lost to COVID. But the truth is, we can't reclaim it, because we simply don't have enough time. Ask anyone who has lived through the death of a loved one. They know, all too well, that there is never enough time. And I promise you, as a rabbi who has walked with many mourners, what they remembered and cherished most were the ordinary moments and simple expressions of love and forgiveness.

A few weeks ago, we said goodbye to a beloved Temple member, Harry Cronson, may his memory be a blessing.

Harry was husband, a father, a grandfather, and SPICE leader. He was a Shabbat and adult learning regular. Harry kept a journal. And I was fortunate to read from his journal entry for Rosh HaShanah in 1984. In it, he wrote:

“For the coming year, I'd like to be more at peace within myself, to come to better terms with my job and its demands, to strive to value people more and to be more caring, to continue feeling blessed and even more to.... keep my gratitude at the forefront of my thoughts, how blessed I really am with my life, with Ruth, our two great children, to keep and advance our great relations with the Sabbath Group – (their Chavurah or TriBE), and to reach out more to others.”¹³

Harry lived with some good Jewish wisdom: Each and every day, is an opportunity to make lemonade from our very real limitations. Each and every day we can make choices that elevate our lives. Which is why those who spoke at his memorial and the many who reached out to me from his previous congregation, remembered Harry for being extraordinary. Because he made choices – deliberate and intentional about prioritizing the ordinary, his family, his friends, and his community.

We, too, can make choices that prioritize the ordinary as truly being the extraordinary. We can elevate the daily moments, the joy and messiness of weeknight family dinners, the catch-up phone calls with a friend, a walk in the sun to the bus stop. The blessing of our thoughts and prayers as we watch the sunset, a hug from a friend, Shabbat dinner with your TriBE, or volunteering with Freedom School.

Our schedules are a moral budget of time.

¹² This idea also emerges in the important work by Peggy Orenstein, *Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Kids, and Life in a Half-Changed World*.

¹³ Shared with permission. My deepest thanks to Ruth Cronson and George Cronson.

Try to manage time and we realize how fast time slips by. Try to save time – and we realize how we end up serving time. What really matters is creating intention with the most valuable commodity we have.

If, in this next year, you find yourself getting pulled back into the chaos, with too many secondary or tertiary-tier priorities, in the primary position, then consider how you will set time aside to focus on yourself and on your relationships.

Whether that's building Shabbat or a Shabbat consciousness. Or taking care of your health and wellbeing. Or focusing on the people that matter most over other legitimate responsibilities. You may not get everything in your life accomplished. But you will live with greater purpose and meaning.

The High Holy Days arrive just in time to consider the finite nature of our lives. They invite us to get proximate enough with death in a way that helps us to *reframe our cosmic insignificance* as motivation to choose a life that is meaningful and fulfilling.

God, in these days of Awe, help us to consider the weeks we have left. We know that the heavens are beyond our reach. But we can create a beautiful life right here. In this New Year, we can choose to live a life we hope to be remembered for - a life well lived.

Shanah Tovah¹⁴

¹⁴ Huge thanks to Rabbi Dara Frimmer, Michele Lowe, Ana Bonnheim and Julia Bonnheim for their thought partners, editing, honest feedback, and support.