

COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Rabbi Harlan J. Wechsler

The twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig suggested that the secret to returning to Judaism is to connect to Jewish time. The Sabbaths and the Festivals structure life; they transform time that is otherwise constructed on the basis of secular obligations and opportunities into sacred time.

A few weeks ago, Rosenzweig's advice was in my mind as I looked at a clock unlike any clock I had ever seen before. High above the street in Prague's former Jewish ghetto, sits a clock whose face is different from all other public clocks in the world. Placed on the tower of the Jewish Town Hall, it was made in 1764 by Sebastian Landensberger, clockmaker to the royal court. To begin with, its numbers are in Hebrew letters – but that is only the beginning. Not only are its numbers different, the hands move counterclockwise. After all, if the Hebrew language reads from right to left, then shouldn't a Hebrew clock go opposite to the direction of all other clocks, right to left from a clock's perspective?

Above the clock with the Hebrew face, on the Rococo tower above it, is a normal clock, with Roman numbers and hands that go as clocks should go, "clockwise." The two clocks stand there frozen in time, both stopped at 8:10. But their hands are positioned totally differently in order to convey the same time. A Jewish clock and a secular clock, looking as different as clocks can look and both conveying the same time? It was Rosenzweig in clock time, a metaphor for Jewish life in the modern world when we are trying to do at least two things: to live in the sacred and the secular, to be different and the same, to be particular and universal. All that, said in the silent clocks over Prague's Jewish Town Hall.

Going counterclockwise is not entirely strange to Jews. Did you ever notice, for example, that when the Torah is marched around the synagogue, we march it counterclockwise to the ark which is, theoretically, at twelve o'clock? That custom comes from the procedures of the priests in the Temple who walked up the slanted front of the altar and then would proceed counterclockwise around its periphery performing their required functions.

So it is not entirely strange then that a Jewish clock goes in the opposite direction.

Yet that is not the only thing I learned from the Prague clock. It wasn't just the different direction of the Hebrew clock. It was that, if read independently and correctly, both clocks told the correct time.

Seamlessly, then, two different planes of identity and existence are able to each go in their own and appropriate direction and each is readable and makes sense. Each arrives at the same place though through a separate route.

Now the paradigms of secular and sacred time are, indeed, two different responses to the inexorable passing of the temporal. In this temporal existence of ours, time moves only forward. Though theoretically, we might imagine moving fast enough to affect the reality of time, we cannot go that fast and our lives are filled with moments that pass. Time is a losing proposition. Whether it flies or it crawls, it doesn't come back.

Not so, however, with the Hebrew clock. It goes in a different direction, backwards instead of forwards. Thus it retrieves the past naturally. In Jewish time, every week repeats the creation of the world. Every day recreates the evening and the morning of the first day. Every year is a "mahzor," a repetition (as is the name of our High Holy Day prayerbook, a repetition of a sacred vocabulary). Every year brings another Rosh Hashanah, another beginning of the year, another recollection of the timelessness of the first creation in order to be able to tell the time of this year. Every year brings a repetitive cycle of Pesah, Sukkot, and Shavuot, going back in time to re-experience the paradigms of liberation, dwelling in booths and receiving the Torah.

This is not secular time but sacred time. Yet it is only one of two possible frames of reference in which Jews are expected to find themselves. The time that goes backwards lives together with the time that goes forwards. And, when you put the two clocks together, one on top of the other, one next to the other, you are still in the same moment. Both readings work, though they hide as much as they say.

Is this not then the perpetual challenge of entering a New Year? It doesn't take much for us to be on secular time. The world around us, the structure of our society and the overarching structure of our lives is subject to moving only in one direction. The question is: Do we have room for the other clock? Can we move in two directions at once? Can we live in the sacred as well as the secular?

I have a watch now that, though made in Switzerland, reproduces the movements of the Prague clock. I have decided to wear it periodically, to see whether I can restructure my innate sense of how to look at a clock in order to make room for a clock that turns counterclockwise. It theory it should be possible. The question is: am I, or any of us, ready to live in two directions at once?