



*Parshat Ha'azinu*  
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**How About Now?**

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The historian David McCullough tells of the time that the portrait painter John Singer Sargent had been commissioned by the White House to paint a portrait of President Teddy Roosevelt. Presidents are busy people. Sitting for a portrait takes lots of time. John Singer Sargent, working with the president's schedulers, could not get onto his schedule. The President did not have a block of time. So Sargent spent several days hanging around the White House, hoping for a chance encounter with the president. One day, that chance encounter happens. Sargent sees President Roosevelt and asks: Mr. President, is there any time within the next several days when I could get onto your calendar to do your portrait? President Roosevelt responded: how about now!

Then and there, Sargent paints the president, where he happened to be standing at the time of the encounter, at the foot of the stairs, with the president's hand on the stairwell post. That portrait has hung in the White House ever since.

How about now? Do we say that, do we do that, when an opportunity comes up in our own life? We are fresh off of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and our resolutions to do *teshuvah*. This year we are going to take a class to amp up our Jewish learning. We are going to take better care of our health. We are going to advocate for some cause near and dear to our hearts. We are going to be in better touch with family and friends. When it comes to implementing our *teshuvah* resolutions, do we say, how about now?

Two things get in the way of doing it now.

We are legitimately busy with other things. We are already juggling too much. A common theme I have heard from those who juggle lots of things is that they feel they are getting a B or a C in everything. It is hard to feel like you are getting an A in everything when you have so much going on. If we are already juggling too much, that teshuvah resolution may just have to wait.

Other times we may delay, instead of saying how about now, because we don't want to rush into anything. We don't want to commit too soon to the wrong plan. There is this new play that came out—*Hamilton*—Shira made me promise enough with the *Hamilton* already. I have been doing *Hamilton* non-stop. The congregation feels helpless with all this *Hamilton*. Rosh Hashanah sermon, *Hamilton*. Yom Kippur sermon, *Hamilton*. The four weeks leading up to the holidays on Shabbat morning, *Hamilton*. This morning in Talmud class, *Hamilton* again. She said you have to stop with the *Hamilton*. People are going to think you are a one-note rabbi. She is absolutely right. I am going to stop with the *Hamilton* after one last reference. In *Hamilton*, Aaron Burr sings this song called *Wait for It* in which he expresses a natural antipathy to acting now because he wants to wait for it to make sure that when he finally acts, he is doing the right thing.

Does Judaism have anything to say about this question of how about now vs. how about *not* now because we are already too busy or because we don't want to rush and make a mistake? The answer is yes, and this is precisely the season when we engage this question.

Let's go back to Wednesday night. We just fasted and prayed and gave it our all on Yom Kippur. We then sat down to a break-fast, and most of us ate too much, too soon, and then just wanted to collapse. At that point, most of us would have been happy to drift off to sleep. Is that the right move, according to Jewish tradition?

Answer: No, the principle that applies is: *mitzvah haba'ah leyadcha al tachmitzenah*. If an opportunity to perform a mitzvah presents itself to you, do it now. Do not delay. That principle leads to the halakhic conclusion that there is a mitzvah *to at least begin* the building of the sukkah, *to do something* to start the sukkah project, the night that Yom Kippur is over. How about now?

But what about the twin impediments to doing it now?

The first problem, I already have too much stuff going on. I don't have bandwidth.

To that, my teacher at the Seminary, Rabbi William Lebeau, used to say: Don't prioritize your schedule. Schedule in your priorities. Make the time to do the things that matter most to you.

In his biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, not surprisingly entitled Rebbe, Joseph Telushkin has a chapter entitled: "Anything Worth Doing is Worth Doing Now." He tells the story of the time in December, 1978 that a Rabbi Shabsi Katz came to see the Rebbe. Rabbi Katz was a rabbi in South Africa, and he was the head Jewish chaplain for South Africa's Department of Prisons. At this time there were many Jewish prisoners in South Africa's prisons, most of whom were political prisoners because they objected to Apartheid. Rabbi Katz was visiting the Rebbe one day before Hanukkah. The Rebbe asked him: can the Jewish prisoners in South Africa light Hanukkah candles?

No, Rabbi Katz, responded. They are not.

Well, what are you going to do about that, asked the Rebbe?

You're right, Rabbi Katz said. I'll look into it for next year.

For next year, said the Rebbe? What about for this year?

This year, Rabbi Katz observed, there's not enough time. Hanukkah starts in one day.

To which the Rebbe responded:

**Do you realize how much a little bit of light would mean to a person incarcerated in a dark cell, how important it would be if he could light the candles? Can't you arrange for the prisoners to light Chanukkah candles?**

But if I call now, Rabbi Katz objected, it will be the middle of the night. I'll wake up the South African official in charge of such things.

If you call now, the Rebbe countered, that official will know how urgent this is.

Spurred on by the Rebbe, Rabbi Katz called the South African official in the middle of the night, woke him up from his sleep, and asked if he could arrange for Hanukkah candles for the Jewish prisoners the next day. That official responded: I don't know what Hanukkah is, I don't know what the candles are for, but I do know that if you are calling me in the middle of the night, it must be very important. The next day, this official sent word to all South African prisons that Jewish prisoners were to be able to light Hanukkah candles the very next day.

Do not prioritize your schedule. Schedule in your priorities. Make what's important to you happen now.

But what about the second problem, not rushing into things because we want to make sure we are right?

My father in love, Rabbi Arnold Goodman, observes: Decisions are seldom right or wrong. They are *made* right or wrong. It is what we do *after* the decision to make it right that matters.

A woman in our congregation recently lost her mother one day shy of her 104<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her mother, Betty Brandner, had quite a story when it came to her wedding. When she was 20, and the man she loved was 24, they wanted to get married. But her parents objected. The couple decided to get married anyway. In her eulogy, the daughter shared what happened next:

**Mom and Dad, on the spur of the moment, went to City Hall and got married. But Dad needed to get a wedding ring quickly, so he stopped at Woolworth's and picked this up for what? 50 cents, a dollar? And Mom had this ring on her finger for 83 years. And now it sits here, on my finger. Eventually, they also got married in the Temple, in 1934.**

Betty's wedding ring from Woolworth's cost 50 cents or a dollar because they wanted to get married *now*, so they went to a nickel and dime store and just got a ring.

But she wore it for 83 years because decisions are not right or wrong. They are *made* right or wrong. And the daughter now wears her beloved mother's ring which symbolizes that a decision made to do something right now can be epically wise if we make it so.

*Mitzvah haba'ah leyadcha al tachmitzenah.* If an opportunity to do a mitzvah presents itself to you, do it now.

Teddy Roosevelt knew it. How about painting my picture now.

Jewish tradition knows it. How about starting to build your sukkah now.

The Rebbe knew it. How about getting those prisoners Hanukkah lights now.

Betty Brandner and her husband knew it. How about getting married now.

We are fresh off of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Whatever your teshuvah resolutions were that would enable you to build a better life in this new year, how about now?

Shabbat shalom.