

Convenience Store: Rethinking Time Saved

I have a theory about how local pedestrians navigate New York City. I think we self-assign to one of two categories: those of us who like to keep moving (that's yours truly), and those of us who like to arrive as quickly as possible (my husband falls into this camp). For people like me, the city is a pulsing meter of walk and stop signs that determine which intersections we cross and when. For folks like my Adam, it all comes down to the route that can shave seconds or minutes off the walk. Both groups aspire toward the same goal: we gamify our commuting to engineer a sense of triumph. But what exactly are we winning?

This question echoed forward for me recently in Benjamin Lorr's *The Secret Life of Groceries*, a disturbing and important investigation into the American supermarket. In a stark depiction of our efficiency-obsessed relationship to food, he writes that today's grocery chains cater to a single ideal: "liberty. In the form we most typically worship these days: convenience. It is an ideal that says with a little help...stripping away the hurdles, barriers, inertia, and shipping time from your life, you can finally be free to make the best of your precious time here on planet earth."¹ Here again, a basic activity of adulthood—grocery shopping—is deemed too hurdle-filled and sanded down to deliver a frictionless transaction. Whatever we want. Immediately. And this, Lorr asserts, is our modern conception of liberty: freedom from wait.

Whether seconds off a commute or evaded checkout lines, we're all trying to steal back time. To pocket a little more freedom. But Lorr's research and my own lived experience suggest that we're not capitalizing on our savings. We're using the time we're banking to send another email, to work longer hours, or to scroll the web for more goods to conveniently acquire. It's understandable because the work and the shopping are always at hand in that phone we tether to ourselves like the mitten clips we donned as children. And, we can break this unconscious cycle of squandering our precious savings. If liberty now includes freedom from unproductive loitering, it also means freedom to use that newly unassigned time in ways that add meaning to our lives.

¹ Benjamin Lorr, *The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket* (New York: Avery, 2020) 266.

Let's dream together at this sunset dawn of a new year: how might we, with intention, better spend all this time we're saving?

The great revelation of Lorr's supermarket study is the deity of convenience that governs the food circulatory system. Getting products into consumer hands means greater profits for food chains. Credit card companies are ruled by the same god; that's why the swipe has been whittled down to an effortless tap or transformed all together into an avatar on our phones. Credit card points were invented to gamify our spending. Like strategic New Yorkers outmaneuvering stop signs, big spenders win points. And we worship them.

Credit card points offer a helpful paradigm as we consider our time spending power, but only as a thought experiment. The points system itself is deeply flawed. Credit card companies cover the cost of points by charging a transaction fee on every tap. Merchants don't want to shoulder the cost, so they raise the price of goods – shifting the burden to consumers. Whether or not a customer uses a credit card, she's still covering the fee. This means that those with the least, who often pay in cash and don't have access to a credit card, end up subsidizing points for those with the most.² Again, the system is problematic.

Credit card points are helpful as a metaphor. The system *depicts value* that consumers accumulate through their purchasing. As points increase, the credit card holder can plan how she will deploy them: booking that trip, earning cash back to pay off a bill, or buying a gift card for a loved one. The trail of points creates a reward system that invites us to layer consideration onto consumption. What if we repurpose the points idea away from perpetuating inequality and instead apply a similar structure to all that time we're trying to save? How might we allot those extra hours, or even days if we endowed them with the value we ascribe to our cherished points?

God signaled this kind of deliberateness when designing the world. We read in *Bereshit*, "On the seventh day, God had completed the work that had been done, ceasing then on the seventh day from all the work...Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, and ceased from all the creative work that God chose to do."³ Why all this repetition about not working on the seventh day? Rabbi Benaya explains in our midrash that God did twice the work on the sixth day, making everything for the

² Chenzi Xu and Jeffrey Reppucci, [The Dirty Little Secret of Credit Card Rewards Programs](#)," *The New York Times*, 3 March 2023 [accessed 1 July 2024].

³ Genesis 2:2-3

seventh day early.⁴ At the dawn of time, God was angling toward an open day, some time away from the project of creation. What makes the seventh day “holy” is its invitation to discretion - to be used on purpose, not to meet the demands of our labor, but to meet the demands of ourselves. The biblical notion of completeness - seven days - means showing up for the work of the world while also discerning and meeting our needs as individuals.

How adept are we, though, at planning for that seventh, holy day? We’re wired to hoard extra minutes like squirrels after acorns, but it’s harder to practice restraint around our supply. Adopting an orientation of intention means deciding how to spend our time even before we save it. Like God, doubling down on the sixth’s day’s labor to open that seventh day to rest, like a consumer daydreaming about how to spend her points, we can and should be thinking about how to allocate our accumulated free time in advance.

Rodeph Sholom’s recent roof and sixth floor terrace renovation project offers us a model for this necessary evolution in planning and behavior. Even before the pandemic, our facilities team and House Committee knew we had a large capital project ahead. Leaks were increasing and our worn playground begged for an upgrade. It’s fair to say that the tried-and-true approach would have been managing the renovation quickly and economically.

In Exodus, when God commands, **וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנֹתַי בְּתוֹכְכֶם** “Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them”⁵ and appoints Betzalel as the chief designer, God signals that sacred spaces demand wisdom and creativity. Being a synagogue demands more than tried-and-true. Our leadership detected an opportunity to explore synergies between our mission and this large-scale renovation and they bravely slowed the pace. Where tenacity and headway were the impulse, they instead blocked time to dream of new possibilities. They engaged structural engineers who explored our building unfettered by limitations of convenience and savings. They rejected a present shaped by scarce time and resource and chose instead to imagine a future of abundance. Where our leadership could have felt hijacked and hamstrung by time, they instead put it to work shaping the next chapter of our community. They used time like we use our points – with purpose, to achieve a dream.

Ranking inspiration above expediency and layering our commitment to greening onto our commitment to economy, our leaders determined that installing solar panels to our

⁴ Genesis Rabba 11:9

⁵ Exodus 25:8

7th floor roof would reduce energy costs. They learned that black locust wood, which is plentiful and indigenous to our region, is an ideal resource for constructing our terrace. And most important of all, they discovered a group of congregants who are as passionate about the environment as they are about Rodeph Sholom. This project offered a pathway for numerous families to ensure that how we spend reflects who we are. A story of degradation and repair could have impaired us with its urgency. With time and deliberation, this project transformed into a seventh-day blank canvas onto which our leaders painted imagination, deepening relationship, and mission advancement.

Among the rituals of the new year is the annual call to reevaluate the systems that govern our lives. We can all benefit from some temporal renovation. Even if we feel like we're living life to the fullest, does the way we spend our time reflect the truth of who we hope to be? Are we meeting our obligations? And if we're able to do that, are we scheduling dates with the people we adore, showing up for the causes that inspire us, and/or updating our bucket list with new aspirations?

If God had not done twice the work of creation on the sixth day, if God had not thought ahead to taking a day of rest, we might consider labor as the end in itself. But because God gifted us Shabbat, God sanctified the act of treating unassigned time as an occasion to shape our lives with intention. Instead of frittering away the hours we accumulate through increasingly efficient sequencing of life's commitments, let's slow down and dream. If we invite structural engineers into the convenience store that is our consciousness - might we replace the aisles of heedless minutes with shelves of volunteer hours, glass cases of weekend adventures, and countertops arrayed with moments for people we love?

We've just lived through a very intense year, and with a presidential election looming and so much peril in Israel, we can expect ever more clamoring for our time and our attention. As we gamify our lives, pocketing minutes and hours with our penchant for efficiency, our midrash reminds us that those banked moments are holy. Our unassigned time deserves to be spent proactively living rather than reactively scrolling. In 5785, let's infuse our productivity with purpose and transform freedom from wait into a richer liberty: the freedom to imagine and to craft the story of our wild and precious lives.⁶

⁶ Mary Oliver, "[Poem 133: The Summer Day](#)," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1992) [accessed 15 July 2024].