

*A Close Look at one of the Most Iconic Texts in the Bible*  
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b e a t s	לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ תחת השמים.	A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:	
4	עת ללדת ועת למות	A time for birthing and a time for dying,	+ -
4	עת לטעת ועת לעקור נטוע.	A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted;	+ -
4	עת להרוג ועת לרפוא	A time for slaying and a time for healing,	- +
4	עת לפרוץ ועת לבנות.	A time for tearing down and a time for building up;	- +
4	עת לבכות ועת לשחוק	A time for weeping and a time for laughing,	- +
4	עת ספוד ועת רקוד.	A time for wailing and a time for dancing;	- +
6	עת להשליך אבנים ועת כנוס אבנים	A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,	- + + -
5	עת לחבוק ועת לרחק מחבק.	A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces;	
4	עת לבקש ועת לאבד	A time for seeking and a time for losing,	+ -
4	עת לשמור ועת להשליך.	A time for keeping and a time for discarding;	+ -
4	עת לקרוע ועת לתפור	A time for ripping and a time for sewing,	- +
4	עת לחשות ועת לדבר.	A time for silence and a time for speaking;	- +
4	עת לאהב ועת לשנא	A time for loving and a time for hating;	+ -
4	עת מלחמה ועת שלום.	A time for war and a time for peace.	- +

There is a time for just reading a text, and a time for exploring it deeply. There is a time for just assuming that we understand it, and a time for trying to discover something new. There is a time for *peshat* and a time for *derash*. There is a time for reading it as wisdom, and a time for reading it as liturgy. There is a time for saying *meh*, and a time for saying *hmm*...

If I had to make a list of favorite biblical texts, this would be in the top 10. Maybe even the top 3. We recite it during our Yizkor service; I quote it at funerals. And it is my go-to text for accessible and applicable wisdom. Like most things that roll off of our tongues, we think we know it. But, as the Hillel said: *איינו דומה שונה פרקו*.. *מאה פעמים, לשונה פרקו מאה*

*ואחד*. *One who one who reviews his/her studies one hundred times is not comparable to one who reviews his/her studies one hundred and one times.* (Chagigah 9b). There's always something new to discover and always something new to learn. As the R. Yehoshua said: *אי אפשר* *it is impossible to have a house of study without a new idea* (Jerusalem Talmud

Verses:	Title+7
Items/verse	4
Words:	7+60
Syllables:	139
Letters:	240
Letters/word:	4
Syllables/word:	2.05

Sotah 3:4). So let's explore it. First some stats (see chart). The body of the poem has 7 verses made up of 4 items per verse. Encoded in these numbers is the fullness of time (7 days) and the fullness of space (4 directions). 60 is the smallest number divisible by 1,2,3,4,5, and 6. We still count time and measure the circle in units of 60. 60 also suggests perfection. For the rabbis, 60 has tremendous significance. For example, Shabbat is 1/60 of Eden; dreams are 1/60 of prophecy. There is a common expression that

there are "60 myriads of letters in the Torah"<sup>1</sup> corresponding to the "60 myriads of souls of the Jewish People"<sup>2</sup>. If we read the 14 couplets as a poem, we discover that each line has 4 beats, except for the middle two lines (*stones, embracing*), which have 6 and 5 beats respectively. The exact middle world of the poem is: *עת להשליך ועת כנוס אבנים*. **That tells us something. Hmm.** Here is one more piece of data to think about. Each couplet has both a positive and a negative item. Eg. Birthing is positive. Dying is negative. War is negative. Peace is positive. And so on. What emerges is a pattern:

2 pos/neg	Birth/Death Planting/Uprooting
2 neg/pos	Slaying/Healing Tearing down/Building up
2 neg/pos	Weeping/Laughing Wailing/Dancing
1 neg/pos	Throwing/Gathering
1 pos/neg	Embracing/Shunning
2 pos/neg	Seeking/Losing Keeping/Discarding
2 neg/pos	Ripping/Sewing Silence/Speaking
1 pos/neg	Loving/Hating
1 neg/pos	War/Peace

At the very least, the poem invites us to follow the alternation between positive and negative states, but also challenges us to consider that in each of these cases, the outcome can be opposite to what we expect. Take the birth of Benjamin. Arguably that did not end well for Rachel. What was supposed to be happy turned out to be tragic. Is *speaking* always better than *silence*? We all know situations where we should have kept our mouths shut. Is *hating* always a

<sup>1</sup> Even though the actual number is 304,805.

<sup>2</sup> Even though the census of adult males who left Egypt totaled 603,550.

bad thing? After all, *lovers of God hate evil*. (Psalm 97:10) We would all agree *peace* is better than *war*, but we would not be alive if the Allies didn't defeat the Nazis in a great war. And what about those stones at the center of this poem? What does it even mean?

**The Stones. Some Interpretations** If you want to farm on a field that is filled with stones, you may have to scatter stones in order to clear the area, and if you want to build something, you may have to gather stones first. Or, perhaps this is talking about punishment. The most severe punishment was execution by stoning. There is a time for punishing, casting stones, and a time for refraining from punishing, gathering stones. There are commentators who consider this phrase to be a euphemism for intimate reproductive activity conducted between males and

females. One of the reasons for this is that following this phrase is the parallel phrase about embracing and shunning embracing. The fact that this line lies at the center of the poem, and "casting" is the central word, suggests another possibility: perhaps this is a veiled reference to the art of the poet, the composer, the psalmist, the weaver, the artisan, the sculptor, the person who fashions something beautiful from something else. I imagine that when this poem burst into the consciousness of its author, dozens of items came to mind, and like every great artist, choices had to be made as to what to "gather" and save, and what to cast out. All we see is the completed text, but wouldn't it be interesting to see what was discarded and figure out why these items were chosen to be in the final version? There is a time for keeping a phrase, and a time for discarding it.

And then there's this gorgeous midrash from Tanhuma:

Using the template from

Ecclesiastes 3, Midrash Tanhuma goes all the way back to creation and notes that just as there are various epochs in a human life there are epochs in the life of the world. Creation, the Flood, the entry into Ark, all of these are epoch making events. And the culminating event in this parallel list is: *the time for throwing stones and the time for gathering stones*. There was of course, one great epoch-making event in the Torah that involved the casting of stones, and that was the Golden Calf. Moses saw the people in an orgiastic frenzy worshipping the calf and having staved off God's desire to destroy the people, he *casts the stones*, ie. the tablets, to the ground. That singular moment, the breaking of the tablets, created a "before" and an "after". It was a rupture in the relationship between God and Israel that could only be repaired by God's forgiveness and by

<p>זה שאמר הכתוב: לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ תחת השמים (קהלת ג:א). זמן היה לעולם להבראות. זמן היה לדור המבול שיאבדו במים. זמן היה לנח להכנס לתבה, וזמן היה לו לצאת ממנה. וזמן היה שיברא אברהם, וכן לכל האבות. וזמן היה שיירדו אבותינו למצרים, וזמן היה שיצאו משם. וזמן היה שישתעבדו. וזמן היה שישתברו הלוחות. וזמן היה שיעשו אחרים אותו מעשה. הוי, פסל לה שני לוחות אבנים. אמר שלמה: עת להשליך אבנים ועת כנוס אבנים (שם פסוק ה). עת להשליך אבנים: אלו הלוחות הראשונות. ועת כנוס אבנים: עת היה לפסל לוחות אבנים אחרים, שנאמר: פסל לה שני לוחות אבנים. תנחומא עקב ט:א</p>	<p><b>This is what the verse stated:</b> <i>A time and season is set for everything, for every experience under heaven;</i> (Eccl. 3:1). There was a time for the world to be created. There was a time for the generation of the Flood to be destroyed in water. There was a time to go into the Ark, and a time to exit from it. And there was a time for Avraham to be created, and so too, for all the forefathers. There was a time for our fathers to descend to Egypt, and a time for them to get out of there. And there was a time for their enslavement. And there was a time for the Tablets to be broken. And there was a time when others would do that act [of the golden calf]. Hence it says, <i>Carve out two tablets of stone</i>. (Deut. 10:1) (King) Solomon said: <i>There is a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones. (Eccl. 3:5),</i> <i>A time for throwing stones:</i> these are the first tablets. <i>And a time for gathering stones:</i> there was a time for him to carve out other tablets of stone, as it is stated, <i>Carve out (pesal) two tablets of stone.</i> Tanhuma Ekev 9:1</p>
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God's instruction to Moses to take another set of stones and re-inscribe the Ten Commandments on them. The *time for gathering stones* is thus the time that defines repentance and restoration. While Ecclesiastes shapes our understanding of the seasons of a human life, the midrash shapes our understanding of the life of Israel. Tanhuma noticed that the verse about gathering stones stuck out in Ecclesiastes list. The midrashic connection was obvious and effortless: it had to refer to Moses at Sinai. But in a human life, are there moments of *breaking the tablets* and *carving out new ones*? A human life involves sin and repentance, errors and remediation, brokenness and repair. There is a season for breaking and a season for renewal. The key is to figure out which season we are in. HAG SAMEAH!



Samuel Bak, Tablets of Stone

**אג שמח!**