

JUST AS THE THEFT OF MONEY IS THEFT, SO IS THE THEFT OF TIME

People who run late, tend to see this as a minor fault, explaining, “Yes, I am often late. It’s not a good thing.”

Yet when you ask the victims of other people’s tardiness their feelings about such habits, you will learn that the offense is rarely viewed as trivial:

“He thinks he’s so much more important than me, that it’s irrelevant if he’s late. Clearly, my time isn’t important to him.”

Is such a response excessive? As one who tries to be punctual, and who is very annoyed when kept waiting, I confess to having had angry thoughts about the recurrently tardy.* I once came across an anonymous quote that summarizes the ethical issue involved:

“A man who has taken your time, recognizes no debt,
yet it is the only debt he can never repay.”

Jewish teachings regard wasting another person’s time as a kind of stealing. Rabbi Abraham Twerski tells a characteristic story about Rabbi Abraham Karelitz (1878-1953), the great talmudic scholar known in Jewish life by the title of his book, *Chazon Ish* (The Vision of a Man). He “once assembled a minyan (quorum of ten) in his home for Mincha (the afternoon prayer service), and one of the people told him that he was due at an appointment shortly. The Chazon Ish sent him on his way stating that keeping the other person waiting was theft of time, and one cannot pray on stolen time.”

If the Chazon Ish understood Jewish ethics as forbidding one from fulfilling the commandment of prayer on “stolen time,” how much more would it condemn your keeping another waiting just because you chose to sleep late, took a telephone call even when you knew you were already running late, or overscheduled your day without taking into consideration the person who would be waiting for you. Similarly, Jewish ethics, to cite one common example, would mandate that doctors who are running late with their appointments ask their secretaries to call patients who have not yet arrived and warn them of the delay. You might think of yourself as essentially a good-natured person who “sometimes” runs a little late.

But from the perspective of Jewish ethics, routinely keeping other people waiting turns you into a thief.

The Book of Jewish Values ...
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by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

In kinder moments, I realize that there frequently are deep-rooted psychological reasons why some people run late; in other words, their behavior often is more self-destructive than aggressive.