

Work That Fills the Clock: Parkinson's Law and the Moral Shape of Time

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 30 August 2026

17 Elul 5786 · Week of Nitzavim · the King in the field

An Expanded Learned Essay

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Sunday · Week of Parshat Nitzavim · The King in the field

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I. Thesis

Time is not a container that work innocently fills. The sentence everyone knows from C. Northcote Parkinson treats the day as a box, and the box as morally neutral. Parkinson, writing in *The Economist* on 19 November 1955, did name a regularity of that kind. “It is a commonplace observation that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.” The line is famous because it is true. It is also thinner than the essay that follows it, and thinner still than what a covenantal person has to say about a day.

For a person who lives under *brit*, time is the field of *bechirah chofshit* — free will as a real capacity, not a slogan. Hours are given by G-d. They can be answered. They can also be occupied so thoroughly that answering becomes almost impossible while remaining, to the eye, industrious. The Torah already knew that a day can be emptied while remaining full of motion. *Bitul zman* is not only idleness. It is the filling of the clock with what does not obligate. Parkinson named a law of administrative growth. The moral problem is older, and it is not laziness. His officials are conscientious. They go home late. They restore the minute they would have written if the extra hands had never been born. The danger is a life — household, *beit midrash*, court, staff, polity — in which motion is mistaken for *avodah*.

Seventeen Elul is weather, not a frame. The shofar has been sounding since the first of the month. The Alter Rebbe's mashal, carried in the Chabad Elul literature and in the seasonal atmosphere of *Hayom Yom*, places the King in the field: accessible, receiving whoever comes. Accessibility does not cancel judgment. It maximizes *bechirah* inside a deadline. That is the air in which a naval historian's satire becomes, for a *talmid*, a question about the moral shape of time. Parkinson was not a *mekubal*. He was a naval historian writing satire that tells the truth. The work of a *talmid* is to sit with what he actually wrote, and then to ask what a free person under higher law owes a day that will fill itself if it is not claimed.

II. What Parkinson Actually Wrote in 1955

The popular slogan is the opening commonplace. The administrative law is the rest of the essay. A *talmid* of a text does not stop at the sentence that travels.

Parkinson begins not with a ministry but with a household. An elderly lady of leisure spends a whole day on a postcard to her niece at Bognor Regis: an hour finding the postcard, another hunting spectacles, half-an-hour for the address, an hour and a quarter in composition, twenty minutes deciding whether to take an umbrella to the pillar-box. The effort that would occupy a busy man for three minutes may leave another “prostrate after a day of doubt, anxiety and toil.” The joke is English and exact. What expands is not the postcard. What expands is the available day, and the available day colonizes the will.

From the postcard he moves to the office, and names two factors he calls almost axiomatic:

“Factor I. An official wants to multiply subordinates, not rivals”

“Factor II. Officials make work for each other.”

Official A, feeling overworked, does not appoint B as an equal. He appoints C and D, never B as equal, because an equal would share the credit and might inherit the chair. C and D generate E, F, G, and H. Seven officials now do what one did. Papers circulate. The conscientious A — Parkinson is careful about this — restores the reply he would have written if C through H “had never been born.” Then he goes home late to Ealing. The growth is the arithmetic of people who mean well and who generate work for one another as a byproduct of being numerous.

The Admiralty numbers are the essay's hard spine. Parkinson compares 1914 with 1928. Capital ships: 62 to 20, a decline of 67.74 percent. Officers and men: 146,000 to 100,000, a decline of 31.50 percent. Dockyard workers: 57,000 to 62,439, an increase of 9.54 percent. Dockyard officials and clerks: 3,249 to 4,558, an increase of 40.28 percent. Admiralty officials: 2,000 to 3,569, an increase of 78.45 percent, or 5.6 percent a year. He remarks the result as “a magnificent Navy on land.” The Washington Naval Agreement of 1922 limited ships, not officials. The thing administered was capped by treaty. The staff that administered it was not. Clerks can grow while the ships shrink, and the growth will look like seriousness.

The Colonial Office supplies the second table. Officials numbered 372 in 1935, 450 in 1939, 817 in 1943, 1,139 in 1947, 1,661 in 1954. The peacetime rates were 5.24 percent a year between 1935 and 1939, and 6.55 percent between 1947 and 1954, averaging 5.89 percent a year — “nothing to do with the size — or even the existence — of the Empire.” War inflates; peace does not deflate. The Empire can vanish as a political fact, and the office that once administered it will continue to hire.

Then the formula, in the 1955 wording: “In any public administrative department not actually at war a staff increase may be expected to follow this formula” $x = (2km + p) / n$, where k is staff seeking promotion through appointment of subordinates, p the difference between ages of appointment and retirement, m the man-hours devoted to answering minutes within the department, and n the effective units being administered; x is the new staff required each year. The percentage, he says, will fall between 5.17 percent and 6.56 percent “irrespective of any variation in the amount of work (if any) to be done.” The parenthetical “if any” is the knife. The staff increase does not consult the work.

He closes as a botanist, not a reformer: “Parkinson's Law is a purely scientific discovery, inapplicable except in theory to the politics of the day. It is not the business of the botanist to eradicate the weeds. Enough for him if he can tell us just how fast they grow.”

The popular version is a counsel against giving yourself too much time for a task. That counsel is not false. It is not what the 1955 essay is doing. Parkinson describes a structure that grows at a measurable annual rate whether or not the navy, the empire, or the work exists. To treat him as a productivity aphorism is to refuse the text.

III. The Law of Triviality

Two years later, in *Parkinson's Law, or The Pursuit of Progress* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1957; John Murray, London, 1958), he named a second regularity in the chapter "High Finance, or the Point of Vanishing Interest." The Law of Triviality: "the time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum involved."

The illustration is a finance committee. A nuclear reactor, whose cost exceeds anyone's private imagination, is nodded through. No member can visualize the object or the sum. Competence is assumed to live elsewhere. Then the agenda reaches a bicycle shed for the clerical staff. Everyone can see a shed. Everyone has an opinion about materials, about whether a shed is needed, about a sum that belongs to ordinary life. The committee spends about forty-five minutes. Members sit back with a feeling of achievement. Later writers, borrowing the image, call the pattern "bike-shedding." Parkinson's own name is the Law of Triviality. The inverse proportion is the law; the shed is only the picture.

The pattern is the grammar of any room in which people of good will must allocate a scarce evening. A university faculty will pass a structural change in silence and argue the wording of a circular. A *shul* board will approve a budget line it does not understand and colonize the clock with the kiddush and the chairs. A parents' committee will nod at what the children are actually being taught and spend the hour on the excursion's sandwiches. The item everyone understands becomes the item that uses the time.

Sandwiches can be *chesed*. Parking can be *kavod habriyot*. The trouble is the inverse proportion: the large is treated as already decided by someone more expert, while the small is treated as the evening's *avodah*. Achievement is then real in feeling and thin in substance. A people that cannot bear to sit with what it cannot visualize will always give its best hours to the shed.

IV. Household and Packing

The postcard is the household. Parkinson did not begin with Whitehall because the ministry is more serious than the niece. He began with the lady of leisure because the law is first a law of a day, and only then a law of a department.

A suitcase will fill the hours before a flight. If the flight is in three days, the packing occupies three days: the weighing of garments, the hunting of adapters, the half-hour of doubt about a book that will not be opened, the twenty minutes at the door deciding whether the extra jacket is wisdom or fear. If the flight is in forty minutes, the same human being packs. The clothes are not different. The will is different. The available time has been allowed to become the work.

The *Erev Shabbat* kitchen is the same law without satire. When Friday is treated as an empty vessel, cooking expands to fill Friday. The last hour before candle-lighting is then a crisis that feels like piety. When Friday is claimed, the meal is still a meal. *Shabbat* does not require a day of doubt, anxiety, and toil as its price. The expansion of Friday is not the *mitzvah*. It is the postcard written to the niece of one's own kitchen.

Pittsburgh taught a related honesty. Steel does not expand to fill the shift because someone is anxious. The pour happens, or it does not. Jerusalem teaches the other half: *zman* in *halachah* is the appointed hour in which a deed is possible, after which it is a different deed or none. A household that treats the hours before *Shabbat*, or before a flight, as an unclaimed field will watch the field fill with C and D — extra tasks appointed as subordinates of anxiety. They make work for each other. The conscientious adult then restores, late, the packing that would have been done if the extra tasks had never been born.

This is not a method for a more efficient Friday. The question is whether the person in the kitchen is an agent under a deadline that is also a gift, or a managed object of a process that has no principal except the clock's remaining minutes. The lady of leisure is not a villain. She is what happens when time is abundant and *bechirah* is unexercised. The claim is the point. Not the haste.

V. Chinuch

A child's bedtime will expand to fill the evening if the evening is offered as an open field. Homework will expand to fill the hours between coming home and sleep if those hours have no *shiur*. A parent frightened of resistance will multiply rules rather than offer presence. The rules then make work for each other. The conscientious parent, late, restores the night he would have had if the extra regulations had never been born.

I write this as a full-time father in Jerusalem, not as a person with a method to sell. The house is the first polity the child knows. If time there is always filling itself, the child learns that adulthood is a form of being ruled by process. If a parent claims an hour — homework has an end; bedtime is a time; presence rather than administration — the child learns that a person can be an agent. *Chinuch* is not the production of a well-managed minor. It is the formation of a being capable of *bechirah*.

The Law of Triviality enters the home with particular cruelty. Who this child is becoming, whether Torah is loved, whether the parent's face is turned toward the child — these are hard to visualize as agenda items. The missing sock is available to everyone in the room. Forty-five minutes on the sock. A nod for the soul. The inverse proportion is doing its work.

To multiply subordinates, not rivals, is, in a family, to multiply controls rather than to raise a person who might one day stand equal under the same higher law. A child becoming a *bar daat* is not a threat to a chair. He is the point. Rules that exist to keep the parent's anxiety employed are C and D. They do not raise. Presence is the three minutes of the busy man: work done because the day is already claimed by a principal.

Elul's atmosphere belongs here without turning the month into a parenting season. The King in the field is near. Nearness is the pedagogy. A parent who is available has not cancelled standards. *Bechirah* in a child is maximized inside a deadline — bedtime, *Shabbat*, the school morning — not by multiplying subordinates.

VI. Limud versus Bitul Zman

Rabbi Tarfon's sentence in Avot 2:15 is the Torah's refusal of the container theory of time: the day is short and the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is abundant, and the Master of the house is pressing. The mishnah does not say that work expands. It says that the work is already great and the day is already short. *Bitul zman* is not the failure to keep busy. It is the failure to let the greatness of the work govern the will. A person can be in motion from morning to night and still be among those Tarfon calls lazy. Laziness here is not the empty hammock. It is the refusal of the pressing Master.

Hillel's warning in Avot 2:4 is the other half: do not say, when I have leisure I will study, lest you never have leisure. Leisure, in Hillel's sense, is the fantasy of a day that has not yet filled itself. Parkinson's elderly lady has leisure. She does not have three minutes. Fixed times for Torah are not a productivity hack. They are the refusal to let study become the bicycle shed of a life that is always about to begin.

Rambam, in *Hilchot Talmud Torah*, treats the setting of fixed times as obligation, not as advice to the unusually devout. Every Jewish man is bound to Torah study, he writes, whether poor or rich, healthy or afflicted, young or old; even one who goes begging from door to door must set a time by day and by night. The poor man's day is already full. Rambam does not wait for it to empty. The *shiur* is *bechirah* exercised in advance. A life with no *keviat itim* has accepted Parkinson's parenthetical: hours increase irrespective of any variation in the amount of work, if any, to be done.

Ramchal, in *Mesilat Yesharim*, places *zrizut* — alacrity — after *zehirut*, watchfulness. He describes the human being as heavy by nature, inclined to postpone. The *yetzer* does not always need an argument. It needs delay. *Zrizut* will not let a *mitzvah* wait for a more convenient clock, because that clock will be filled with something else. Ramchal is not writing against rest. He is writing against the moral use of postponement. Parkinson's formula, read from this side of the *mesorah*, describes a soul that has no *zrizut* and much conscientiousness. The work that was the point has been surrounded.

Elul sharpens the same structure without becoming the subject of the essay. The King in the field does not cancel the judgment of Rosh Hashanah. He maximizes free will inside a deadline. Accessibility without a horizon would be the lady of leisure in theological dress. Accessibility with a horizon is *teshuvah*: come now, because the coronation is dated. Parkinson can tell us how fast the weeds grow. He cannot tell us that the Master of the house is pressing. The *talmid* needs both sentences.

VII. Email, Meetings, and the Modern Minute

Officials make work for each other. So do inboxes.

The 1955 circulation of minutes is now a thread. A sends. C and D must be copied, never B as equal. E through H arrive as reply-all. The document visits seven desks. Each desk, meaning well, adds a clarification that requires a further clarification. The conscientious A restores the reply he would have written if the thread had never been born. Factor II has not been updated by software. Software has given it speed.

Meetings are the Law of Triviality under fluorescent light. The item that would require knowledge no one in the room possesses is nodded through. The item every attendee can picture — the invitation, the order of speakers, the shed — occupies the hour. Members sit back with a feeling of achievement. A meeting can be a real *beit vaad*. It becomes Parkinsonian when its existence is justified by the work it makes for itself.

The modern minute is not merely faster. It is more densely populated with C and D. One can be prostrate after a day of doubt, anxiety, and toil without leaving the chair. The busy person's three minutes still exist. They require a principal who knows what the document is for and will write the sentence and send it. Non-domination, in Philip Pettit's sense in *Republicanism* (1997), is the status of not being subject to an arbitrary will — not merely protection from a tyrant's hand. An inbox that can always generate another round, with no person authorized to end it, is a small tyranny without a tyrant. One is never secure against the next minute. That is a dominated condition even when every participant is polite.

Daniel J. Elazar's work on covenant and polity earns a brief place here. A covenantal order constitutes offices to do a work under higher law. Offices that exist to answer one another have slipped the covenant and kept the letterhead. The minute must have a principal.

VIII. Courts and Procedure

Courts are where Parkinson's second factor puts on a robe and calls itself justice.

Procedure is not a villain. A people under law needs forms, records, the right to be heard, the time to answer. The danger is that process becomes the work. Files visit seven desks. Each desk, conscientious, generates a further request. Continuances fill the time available for completion. The original dispute — the ships, in Parkinson's image — shrinks or waits, while the officials of the dispute increase. Delay need not be malice. Delay can be the annual percentage of a system that grows irrespective of any variation in the amount of work, if any, to be done.

Philip Pettit's freedom as non-domination earns its keep here. A person can be unfree without a master who enjoys cruelty. If an institution retains the standing capacity to postpone one's life — property, name, the ability to act — it dominates even when its officers are decent and its continuances lawful. Interference need not occur today. The capacity to interfere tomorrow is enough. A litigant who must organize existence around the next minute of a file has all his time claimed, and none of it his to claim.

Israeli procedure, like procedure elsewhere, can become this without any sitting judge being named as a target. The critique belongs to the structure. When circulation of the file is treated as the doing of justice, the system restores, very late, the decision it would have written if the intermediate minutes had never been born. Yoram Hazony's insistence that a nation is a covenantal order, not a procedure floating free of a people, belongs here as a warning. A state that cannot bring a matter to judgment in a human time has not become more legal. It has become a magnificent navy on land.

None of this is an argument against due process. Due process constrains domination. Infinite process is domination by another name. The difference is whether the procedure has a principal — a judgment under law — or has become its own empire.

IX. Staff and the Fighting Line

Parkinson's Admiralty is the image a person who lives here cannot honestly avoid. Capital ships fell. Officials rose. The Washington Naval Agreement limited ships, not clerks. A state can be at war in its bones and still grow a navy on land.

I will not invent an IDF headcount. I have no classified claim, and no public table here that would survive a *talmid's* demand for a named source. The principle requires a ratio: clerks to the thing administered. The fighting line is the ships. The staff is the Admiralty. When the line is strained and the staff is comfortable, the polity is in the 1928 condition even if its rhetoric is 1914. When offices multiply subordinates rather than rivals, Factor I is at work. When they make work for each other, Factor II is at work. Parkinson's botanist would want a table. The citizen needs the question.

A democracy that loves its soldiers in speeches and multiplies the desks that manage them is not unique to this country. Living in Jerusalem does not grant a prophetic statistic. It grants a refusal to speak as a commentator on "the Israelis," as if the problem were a national character defect visible from abroad. The problem is the law Parkinson named. The effective units being administered may shrink. The formula does not ask permission.

Elazar's covenantal federalism, if it is more than a citation, means that offices are trustees of a *brit*, not organisms whose health is measured by growth. Hazony's nation as a particular order under law means that the polity exists to do a people's work, not to become an audience for its own administration. Pittsburgh grit is the mill's knowledge that output is not the number of people standing near the furnace. Jerusalem *emunah* is the knowledge that the work is commanded by G-d, and that a commanded work can be missed in the very act of being very busy about it. A citizen under covenant is not only a botanist. In Elul's atmosphere, he may still choose.

X. Optional Civic Illustration — Not the Thesis

The following is an optional civic illustration, not the argument of the essay, and not counsel for a campaign.

Israeli public life in 2026 offers a clean instance of the 1955 commonplace without a single invented number. After elections, Basic Law: The Government sets clocks: a period for the President to receive coalition recommendations, and a mandate period in which a member of Knesset attempts to form a government, with a possible extension. Those clocks exist to bound domination. They also become, in Parkinson's sense, the time available for completion. Negotiations that could close when the principals know their minds occupy the whole mandate. Agreements appear in the last night because that is when the container is about to close. This is not always cynicism. It is often conscientiousness plus Factor II: many rooms making work for each other until the deadline does what the principals would not.

The illustration does not tell a voter what to do in October. It names a law the voter already lives: a clock meant as a fence can become a field that fills. The King in the field is the opposite picture. Rosh Hashanah does not exist so that *teshuvah* can be postponed until the last night. It exists so that *bechirah* can be used now.

XI. Synthesis

The moral problem is not laziness. Parkinson's A is not asleep. He wants to do the work. He refuses a rival, appoints C and D, restores the original reply, and goes home late to Ealing. If you meet him on the platform you will see a tired public servant. The botanist was being droll. The *talmid* should be more precise. The weed is a life in which motion has been mistaken for *avodah*.

Avodah is service that has a principal. In the household the principal is the *mitzvah* and the people it binds. In *limud* it is the text and G-d, who commands it. In a court it is judgment under law. In a staff it is the thing administered. In a soul, in Elul's weather, it is the King who is in the field and who will nonetheless judge. Where there is no principal, process rules — domination even when it is polite, legal, and exhausted. Pettit's non-domination includes this: not being ruled by a process that has no principal. A person ruled by an inbox, a committee, a file, or a mandate-clock that will always fill is not free in the republican sense, even if no official intends harm.

The Torah's counter-law is not "work less." It is *zrizut* inside a short day. Tarfon: the work is great and the Master is pressing. Hillel: do not wait for leisure. Rambam: fix times while the day is already full. Ramchal: do not let postponement do the *yetzer's* work. The postcard of three minutes is a will already claimed. The postcard of a whole day is *bitul zman* in motion.

Parkinson told the truth about growth. He declined, as botanist, to eradicate. A covenantal person does not have that luxury in his own hours: the kitchen, the child's night, the *daf*, the unanswered minute he could close without C and D. Seventeen Elul is not a demand that the Admiralty repent by Friday. It is a demand that the field not be wasted while the King is in it. The clock will fill. That much Parkinson settled. The question left to *bechirah* is with what, and for G-d.

Sources named in the text. C. Northcote Parkinson, "Parkinson's Law," *The Economist*, 19 November 1955 (<https://www.economist.com/news/1955/11/19/parkinsons-law>); *Parkinson's Law, or The Pursuit of Progress* (Houghton Mifflin, 1957; John Murray, 1958), chapter "High Finance, or the Point of Vanishing Interest." Mishnah Avot 2:4 (Hillel); Avot 2:15 (R. Tarfon). Rambam, *Hilchot Talmud Torah*. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesilat Yescharim*, on *zrizut*. Hayom Yom / Chabad Elul literature: the King in the field (Alter Rebbe). Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (1997). Daniel J. Elazar on covenant and federalism. Yoram Hazony on the nation as a covenantal particular order.

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