

The 60-Second Hour

By Baruch Cohon

Patience was never my long suit. I'm not one to spend an afternoon in a store looking for just the right pair of pants for just the right price. If I don't see something I can use in the first five minutes, goodbye. Rather than stand in line in the post office, I call UPS.

One activity, however, I was trained to undertake patiently. Reading. Not a fast reader, I learned to savor a good writer's style. Even if the content didn't turn me on, I always managed to finish a book.

Not any more. Lately I find myself impatient enough that I frequently don't even finish a newspaper story. Last month I surprised myself when I shut a prize-winning writer's novel after a few chapters because I just didn't like the characters or the writing. I didn't wait to discover how the story played out.

I begin to realize that this shrinking attention span is not mine alone. My wife laments that her third grade students seem to be in such a hurry to finish their homework that it frequently makes no sense. Now a third grade book report is hardly a complex assignment. Write something about the story, and say if you liked it – okay? No, she says, some of the kids just write a bunch of words, hardly connected to the little book they just read. They don't take time to think about it at all.

What produces such impatience? Why do we as a society seek such instant results? Just add water. Don't cook, microwave. Don't build it if you can get a pre-fab. Or, if you believe those "major makeover" shows, just call the crew of magicians to revamp your house in half a day while you are at Disneyland.

One motivator is the TV time unit. Write your book report during the 60-second commercial. Finish your war in time for the 11 o'clock news.

Human life span is getting longer, but we are using it as if it would end tomorrow.

What's the result? Do we actually benefit from the time we save? That would be a blessing, wouldn't it! If my impatience gave me another

hour in my day, or another day in my week, to bring some value into the life of my family or my country or even myself – fine. If a premature proclamation of victory saved lives, wonderful. Or if a zip-zip book report meant the kid could go on and read a better book, even that would be good.

But it doesn't seem to work that way. We live a 60-second hour, but the other 59 minutes prove us wrong. Twice we "won" a quick war in Iraq, but the enemies are still armed and still killing us. Just as the kid who dashed off the book report and went to play the video game will find out he didn't really learn anything.

The Psalms of David feature the prayer: "Teach us to number our days" as a way to acquire wisdom. It takes 24 hours to make a day, each hour lasting 60 minutes, not 60 seconds. 60 seconds makes up just one sixtieth of each hour. We need to learn – or re-learn – how to number our minutes. Whatever we are doing with that minute, if it is worth doing it is worth taking another minute to do it right. A job worth doing is worth finishing.