

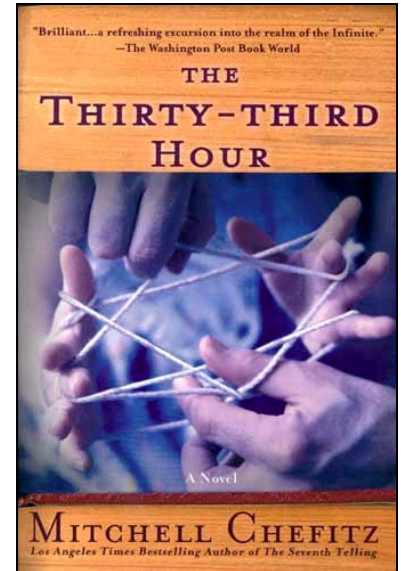
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Thirty-Third Hour

by Mitchell Chefitz

St. Martin's Press

ISBN: 0-312-30323-8 (paperback)



Introduction to *The Thirty-Third Hour*

The Thirty-Third Hour opens at midnight Saturday, in the study of Rabbi Arthur Greenberg, the leader of the largest synagogue in Miami. The Rabbi has until 9 a.m. Monday morning, thirty-three hours, to investigate a sex ethics charge brought against one of his colleagues by a member of the congregation, Brenda, an attractive widow and the mother of an autistic son.

That colleague, Moshe Katan, an associate from Arthur's seminary days, has been leading an experimental family education program at the synagogue, bringing together parents and children to explore the stories of the Bible in new and challenging ways. Now, piled on Arthur's desk are the video and audio recordings of these sessions and Brenda's journal, which he has to review in a desperate attempt to avoid a disastrous scandal. The reader becomes judge and jury as Arthur seeks to find out what happened and, in the process, undergoes a spiritual transformation himself.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. A statement from the Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish law: As for any man who becomes angry, if that person is a sage, his wisdom departs from him.

Consider the bonfire story told in Chapter 19 (p. 251):

"I have a story I don't know completely," he said. "Will you help me with it?" He must have received nods of agreement, for he continued, "Good. It begins with a wise man, a very wise man, renowned for his wisdom. Now something made him angry, and that's my problem. I don't know what it was that made him angry. The rest of it I can see, but not that. Whatever it was, it was an anger beyond any anger I have ever known, a terrifying anger. If you were in the

presence of such an anger, you might have been consumed like this." He threw into the fire a handful of something that burst and crackled.

What might that anger be? We find a possible answer in Chapter 1 (p. 19):

"Rabbis don't drive Porsches," he said aloud, slamming the door shut on his anger.

Why might Arthur be so angry?

2. Maimonides, the great philosopher / theologian of the 12th century, writes of anger and pride in the same paragraph. Is there any anger that doesn't emanate from pride?

Concerning pride we find the following in Chapter 17 (p. 227):

"So, if we want to get out of a tight place, we can't be puffed up with pride or self-importance.

"The opening to get out of a tight place is very narrow, both in space and in time. It may be open only for a moment."

"Berlin," Michelle Kantor said. She was off camera, but Arthur recognized her voice. "My father had brothers in Berlin. They could have gotten out, but they were bankers. My father used to say they wanted to take the bank with them. They wouldn't leave without it. So they stayed. They died. My father left. He left the bank behind."

If you are willing to risk it, consider the damage, the rifts, the anger pride might have caused in your community, your families, your lives.

3. Different models for a lifetime: In Chapter 1 (p. 21) we have this from Moshe Katan:

". . . A scuba dive is like a little lifetime. You go down with a full tank of air, thrash about the reef looking for fish. Then in mid-dive you settle down. The fish come out to look at you. When you have only a few hundred pounds of air left, you slow down, stop moving to conserve air and prolong the dive. You settle on a few square inches of coral. During those last minutes you see more wonders in that small world than you did in the entire dive. Then you drift off to the ladder, a pair of angel fish with you, and climb up to the higher world. The captain greets you and asks how the dive was."

In Chapter 8 (p. 119) Stephanie and Sidney present a different model, as recorded by Brenda in a journal entry:

Stephanie says it takes forty years to get born. We don't get born all at once. The body is a vehicle for the soul, but it takes that vehicle a long time to pull the soul down into it. The soul exists before life, and it is pulled into life gradually.

Are these models useful to you? Do you have one of your own?

4. The story of the artisan king in Chapter 2 (p. 42) is extrapolated from a Lurianic concept of creation. Isaac Luria was a Jewish mystic of the 16th century. In this model, God (the King) waits patiently for creation to mend itself and does not interfere.

"The king considered what he should do. To sweep up the shards and throw them away was unthinkable. To touch them, to rearrange them, to try somehow to reassemble them was also unthinkable. He feared should he so much as touch one of them, the delicate balance that sustained the light would be destroyed. All that would be left would be pieces of broken glass. "So the king kept his distance and continued yearning toward the pieces of his creation, the pieces which contained his light, and over time he noticed that, with a will of their own, the pieces slowly moved toward each other and established bonds.

"The king was patient, his yearning constant. As each piece joined another, his joy increased."

How do you understand God's relationship to history? Does God intervene in daily events? If so, how might the story be rewritten?

5. In Chapter 3 (p. 56) we learn some teachings of the Hasidic spiritual master, the Baal Shem Tov, concerning prayer.

"It's not just enough to pronounce a word. You have to fill it with light. The Baal Shem Tov goes on and says every word has levels within levels. It has aspects of the physical world. It reflects on matters of the soul. And it reveals something of the divine. When you illuminate the *tayvah*, the word of prayer, the letters and the meanings all bind together, and this draws the attention of God. So what you do when you pray is to include your soul in each and every aspect of the word, and then all of the worlds are united in ecstasy. Your prayer becomes ecstatic."

Consider choosing a prayer precious to you and try it in such a fashion. Can you "include your soul in each and every aspect of the word?" If so, does your prayer become ecstatic?

6. In Chapter 3 (p. 60) Moshe Katan shares this with Arthur:

"You know, someday our children will consider us barbarians because we eat our tuna rare."

What else are we doing today that might be considered barbaric in the future?

7. We learn in Chapter 10 (p. 145) that the Hebrew word *eesh* (man) is also a name for an angel, any unidentified person in the Bible who comes to make a connection between people, or between a person and an event is, in rabbinic tradition, considered an angel.

Moshe paused, apparently uncertain how to continue. "A difficult question," he said. "Has there ever been an *eesh* in your life, a stranger who made a connection for you, who pushed you into a situation where your life changed as a result? This is a hard question. It's for the adults to share, if they like."

This is a hard question. It's for the adults to share, if they like.

8. What's in a name? The Tower of Babel; Abram and Sarai; Arthur and Artie . . . Consider the role of names in *The Thirty-Third Hour*? What's in your own name? What would you write on your own name tag if you were a participant in the exercise described in Chapter 22?

9. Symbolism: Water, water everywhere. *The Thirty-Third Hour* is overflowing with references to water. Ritual baths, lakes, oceans, a shower. . . Bodies of water. How many mentions of water can you recall? What might the various bodies of water symbolize?

Symbolism as social commentary: Did you recall this one in Chapter 10 (p. 157)?

"They had a narrow house in Venice, just off the beach, on a pedestrian street. Two stories and a deck above from which, between taller houses, one could glimpse the ocean."

Or this mention in Chapter 20 (p. 264)?

"In Venice, California, where she could see the ocean between the buildings."

About the Author

Mitchell Chefitz, the founder and director of The Havurah of South Florida, lives in Pinecrest, Florida.