

Rosh HaShanah 5782: A Good Year for Seven
Judea Reform Congregation
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Shabbat Shalom.

Raise your hand if you just replied, “Shabbat Shalom.”

Raise your hand if you said, “why did he just say, ‘Shabbat Shalom’ when it’s not yet Shabbat?”

Raise your hand if you didn’t say anything because you’re not in the same room as me; as the rest of the community; you can’t see the others; they can’t see you; and therefore you’re in a far more passive posture of ritual engagement....

Well, if you are among those smart alecks who question my “Shabbat Shalom”... you are correct. Today is not the seventh day of the week; it’s the eve of the third, *yom shlishi*. Nevertheless, this *year* is all about the number seven.

If there is nothing else that we remember from these High Holy Days, let’s remember this: this is a good year to *remember* the number seven. This is a good year to *guard* the number seven.

It’s no secret that we have always been in love with the number 7. Every week we show our love for 7 with Shabbat.

On the 7th Day of Shabbat, we have many rituals, some common and others unique to one’s own practice. Personally, as a rabbi, there is one Sabbath-oriented ritual that I have turned to lately, which *may* not have talmudic origins, but the spiritual nourishment of the experience is so fulfilling that I would assign religious significance to it. That ritual is.... the milkshake.

Recently I indulged in the glorious ritual of a Cookout milkshake¹. I bought it and took it home, but lunchtime was approaching so I had to save it for later. Naturally, I put it in the freezer. Later that day, the time had come. I opened my freezer, but my milkshake was completely frozen. The straw was in-place but totally... noncompliant. I turned to Nicole to lament, maybe even to get some advice.

¹ Flavor: Mint Oreo.

“Look at this,” I said. “My milkshake is totally frozen! What am I gonna do?” She nodded her head with deep empathy. I wasn’t done and said, “if only there were a way for me to get this milkshake to be less frozen!”

She looked at me with a distinct glance... the kind that puts a mirror before you, and gently invites you into self-depreciation. She spoke: “Why don’t you think about it for a few hours. It will just... come to you.” It worked. A miracle! All I had to do was... nothing.

This is an authentic Shabbat story. Literally, the root of the Hebrew word for Shabbat is *shin, bet, tav* (שבת). And it means to stop, to cease. It’s more than a brief pause—that would be a *hafsakah*. *Shin-bet-tav* is a *hard* stop.

The narrative context of the *shin-bet-tav* root enters our story in the very beginning, at the start: *B’reishit*, Genesis, Creation. When I ask most folks about how long Creation takes in the Torah, the usual response is, “7 Days.” But this is not so. *Maaseh v’reishit*, the work of Creation, takes six days, but Creation is not yet complete.

וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מֵלַאמְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מֵכָל־מְלַאמְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

On the seventh day God finished the work that God had been doing, and God ceased on the seventh day from all the work

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־יְוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מֵכָל־מְלַאמְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת

And God blessed the seventh day and called it holy, because on it God- *shavat*- ceased from doing all that work of Creation....

(Gen 2:2-3)

This is the origin myth that gives meaning to that 7th day. The ancient Israelites adopted the concept of a seven-day week from ancient Mesopotamian cultures, the Sumerians and Babylonians. However, evidence suggests that it *was* an Israelite innovation to pull apart that 7th day. So, while in the Torah the Sabbath is a holy gift from God to the universe, in human history we could say the Sabbath is a holy gift from Israel to humanity.

Therefore, if we care about the world—and believe that *Judaism has value in the world*—everything depends on Shabbat, and Shabbat depends on us. No pressure at all though....why? Because this is a good thing.

(Sip from milkshake.) Speaking of transitions....

In Jewish tradition, there are two mitzvot regarding the Sabbath Day, both grounded in the Torah and Rabbinic Judaism: *Shomer*, which some translate as, “observe,” often with a Jewish legal connotation, as in *Shomer Shabbat*. But really, *shomer* means “guard” or “protect.” The second, *Zocher*, remembering the Sabbath.

Together these two *mitzvot*—*guarding* Shabbat and *remembering* Shabbat—demand utmost attention in this profoundly consequential moment in the story of the human condition.

Shomer - protect. Shabbat not only *requires* protection; it also *provides* protection. Our need for safety today takes so many forms. When we say the word “threat” we often think physical, especially in a pandemic. We talk every day about physical protection—masking, vaccination, handwashing. All of which are life-saving mitzvot. Those who sabotage them are complicit in the gravest of sins. This pandemic, however, afflicts us with other threats, ones which lurk more elusively but no less seriously. Namely, spiritual, emotional, psychological wellness.

We all feel it, and now we’re learning about the depth and breadth of its impact. Adam Grant in the NYTimes a few months ago named the pervasive sentiment, identifying our general emotional state with the word “languishing.”² We are *languishing*. We are deprived of a certain type of joy, which Grant identifies as Durkheimian concept of “collective effervescence... the sense of energy and harmony [we] feel when [coming] together in a group around a shared purpose.” Grant’s article hit home because we all feel it—*languishing*. We all miss it, *collective effervescence*.³ However, our state of being has descended far below *languishing*. Grant’s suggestion that what we need is *collective effervescence*, good energy from gathering and working on something together... this will not rescue us from the valleys in which so many of us dwell.

Each year Gallop does a survey on “work-life and wellness.” They examine and track the relationship between employee engagement and overall wellness. Year after year, Gallop noticed that work engagement and wellness have gone hand in hand. The more engaged and needed one feels at work, the better one feels in life. They have complemented one another. We could read this as proof of “collective effervescence.” However, this year something unprecedented happened. This year, for the first time, the opposite has taken place. What’s happening is our workers are pitching in *more* because of common bond and purpose, but it’s hurting their wellness. What began as an immediate, team-building crisis is now chronic and wearing down bodies and spirits. In other words, as the pandemic is making us sick, we are working ourselves sicker.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html?smid=url-share>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html?smid=url-share>

According to a study from the Kaiser Family Foundation when we compare the number of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorders from the year before the pandemic to a year later in the middle of it, we see a four-fold increase. That's consistent with studies and reporting from the CDC, from the National Institute of Mental Health, NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness); consistent with what we hear from health professionals who are fending off burnout.

It comes as no surprise that this hits certain populations harder than others: essential workers, communities of color, healthcare professionals, parents with young kids, single moms or dads, and those with psychiatric conditions.

And then there are the countless numbers of COVID-mourners. On average, for every one COVID-death there are 9 family members in mourning⁴; so-called secondary victims of COVID-19. You know our stories. On a societal level, we're learning more and more about COVID-19 Bereavement. A recent paper by researchers at Memorial Sloan-Kettering reveals how COVID bereavement poses high risks for serious physical illness, substance use, major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and now prolonged grief disorder, a newly recognized illness in the DSM-5.⁵

How are we guarding and protecting those who are more-than-languishing? This pandemic is an enemy of the Sabbath, and our culture has not come to its defense.

I'm not suggesting that if we simply adopt Shabbat, we solve all our problems. Life is no frozen milkshake that will rest itself into perfect form. But the gift of the Shabbat—of resting, allowing our bodies and spirits respite, of feeling the warmth of *togetherness*, for a semblance of “collective effervescence”—surely, this Sabbath concept belongs on the same safety list, following vaccines, masks, physical distance, etc. *Shabbat is a shield of mass protection.*

Why would we forsake such a gift? Unintentionally we are forsaking the Sabbath concept. Out of love and compassion we ask, “what can I *do*”? But ceaseless “doing” is a part of the problem. We are human beings, not human *doings*. *Shomer Shabbat*, means guarding our spirits from unrelenting doings. The Jewish people are guardians of the Sabbath, of rest and restoration.

To be sure, as liberal Jews this does not mean orthodox interpretation, the letters of the law. It does require personal and communal engagement. What does it mean to protect one day, to put it aside for all that is holy? What does it mean to ask—and *answer*—what goes in? What doesn't

⁴ National Academy of Sciences, <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17695>

⁵ Annals of Internal Medicine, <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M20-2526>

make the cut? Our tradition gives us an old toolbox. Some tools still work—some rituals and customs for quality time, learning, singing, praying...relaxing. Breathing.

Our tradition also gives us a legacy of innovation, the reminder to make old traditions new. To personalize this age-old mandate, adapt it for our real lives. That is what intentional Reform Judaism demands.

This is all easy to forget. Which is why we are commanded not just to guard Shabbat but to *remember it. Zocher Shabbat*. Remembering has many parts to it.

First, it means quite literally, *remember lishbot*- to stop. The work's not going anywhere, it will be there on the other side. Remember...that it's Shabbat now, whatever that looks like. Maybe it's always lighting candles, sharing appreciations. Maybe it's stopping your fingers from swiping into your work email. Maybe, for you, it's cooking for family and friends; or if you use your phone on Shabbat, spending your text threads with family and friends. But for one day, just one day out of six, stop and remember: *this one's different*. Why?

Because of second part of remembrance. *Remember that you are not a slave*. Remember our story. Remember we were slaves in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt). Pharaoh gave us no days off. Remember those who now have no days off; those for whom taking a day off means no food, no medicine, no home, no books for kids, etc. Remember the opposite of Shabbat.

If we only remember one thing from these High Holy Days may we remember this: it's a good year to remember the number seven. This year, 5782, is the 7th year. This year is called a *Shmita* year. *Shmita* means “rest” or “release.” The Torah instructs that every 7th year is a Sabbatical year for the land, for the earth; for creation; a year of complete rest.⁶ The late Rabbi Gunther Plaut called it, a “year of the Shabbat idea.” For thousands of years, we have sustained the promise of the Shabbat idea.

This is the season of promises, of commitments. In Hebrew, the word for “promise” or “commit” is *nishba*, at the core of which are the letters *shin*, *bet*, and *ayin* (שבע): *spelling the number 7*, *sheva*. When I *nishba* (נישבע), I take an oath, I literally “commit to the number 7”: To protecting all that is sacred but so vulnerable: *nishbanu*, we commit.

- To ourselves, to our souls, our friends, our families, our colleagues, neighbors, strangers, immigrants, refugees: *nishbanu*, we commit.
- To our delicate natural world in such dire need of healing: *nishbanu*, we commit.
- To those who are robbed of freedom, in all ways, yearning for some real form of Shabbat, *we nishbanu, we commit to the number 7*.

⁶ Lev. 25

If *we, of all people*, do not commit to the number 7... who will?

In the end...there are 7 – 7 words in the final line of the ancient priestly benediction, which we say each week at the Shabbat dinner table:

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yasem l'cha shalom:

May the Divine Presence uplift us and give us Shalom—wholeness, the completion of Creation.

May we—not as human *doings* but as human *beings*—fall in love, once again, with the sacred gift of rest and renewal.

And may we commit to stewarding the number 7, with the Shabbat that is the only way to Shalom.

Amen.

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