

# **Take A Break: The Case for Shabbat in an Overwhelming World**

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In the first year or two after we moved to Cleveland, Charlie, Isaac and I were driving on South Woodland. As we were passing from Shaker Heights into Cleveland Heights, I remarked on a particular house. Isaac, just recently into grade school, quickly said, “Mom, we can’t ever live in one of those houses!”

“Why not, Isaac?”, I asked—taking the bait.

“Because, Mom—it is so big. You’d get lost in the house, and I’d have to come find you all the time!”

He’s right. I can get lost going straight. Really. In the era before smart phones, my car was filled with maps and a permanent sense

of dread that I'd never make it to my destination. Having a smart phone with not one, but two GPS apps that offer me accurate directions is literally a game changer.

It's not only the GPS on my phone that amazes me- it's that I can pay my bills, organize my to-do lists, receive constant news updates, and see photos of friends throughout the world in real time that is extraordinary.

Joseph Chamberlain said: "I think that you will all agree that we are living in most interesting times. I never remember myself a time in which our history was so full, in which day by day brought us new objects of interest, and, let me say also, new objects for anxiety." He said this in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As helpful as my phone is, it is also a source of anxiety in these historic times. We are inundated with news and media bringing us, in unequal parts, interesting and disturbing news. We face unbelievable demands on our time, pushing us to move faster and

be more productive. We are valued by who is the busiest and the most tired.

Rabbi Edwin Goldberg writes, “Our culture, in which action equals accomplishment, demands the 24/7 lifestyle...we believe that good things come only from tireless effort and continuous communication.”

Between working parents, school, homework and family and kid’s activities—families are literally racing from one thing to the next, often with dinner squeezed in somewhere—some days in the car in between one activity and the next.

Professionals live in a 24/7 world, in which responses to email or texts are expected in minutes, not hours or days, no matter the day or time. Workdays and workweeks extend far into the night and the weekend, an insatiable desire to check the phone a part of every day life.

Reports of “news exhaustion” or “the political climate” as sources of anxiety are real and cannot be underestimated. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, constant television, emails and more, make our news cycle a constantly renewing event. We never stop hitting “refresh”, gaining up to the minute information about our city, country, and world. We are obsessed with the news, and for quite some time, the news has not been good. I recently read that we take in more information in one day than Shakespeare did in his entire lifetime!

And, of course, it’s not only the amount of information—it’s the nature of the information. Daily the news reports leave us concerned, even despondent, worried about our city, our country, our world. The American Psychological Association created a report on stress in 2017 in which respondents shared what, in our world, stressed them the most. 63 % said the future of our nation;

while 57% were worried about the political climate, and 51% had concerns about violence and crime.

None of this is surprising to us. From the American Psychological Association to Harvard Business Review, discussing our overly busy, over scheduled and overly-informed world and how to manage it is a regular activity. Even the Pew foundation released a study last year, stating that *over 50% reported that they needed more support* to better manage the everyday stresses of their lives. The respondents described feeling physically overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted.

If we had a GPS that helped us give some direction to our lives, it has gotten lost.

Shortly after I was ordained, I received what I thought was a very fun gift, which sits on my desk to this day. I brought it with me on the bimah.

It's my "no" button. I was given this button to help me remember that I have permission to say "no" to doing absolutely everything, and that sometimes, even when I want to do something, I have to say "no". (*Show/ play "no" button*)

The symbol of the "no" button is important. We have to learn to value what in our culture is undervalued—stopping, saying "no"—when everyone else is saying yes. Saying "no" to filling our calendars to over-full; saying no to working 24-7; saying no to constant deluge of information; saying no to the worry.

Pico Iyer, a TED ideas author, writes, "The need for an empty space, a pause, is something we have all felt in our bones; it's the rest in a piece of music that gives it resonance and shape. That's the reason American football players prefer to go into a huddle rather than just race toward the line of scrimmage, the reason a certain kind of writer will include a lot of blank space on a page, so his sentences have room to breathe ..."

Saying “no”—giving ourselves empty space, a pause, a rest between the notes, it has a shape. It is Shabbat.

Shabbat is that spiritual GPS that we desperately need to find our way out of the busy-ness, overwhelming-ness, and crazy-ness.

Shabbat is about creating for ourselves a temporary island in time, in which, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg so beautifully writes, “we can reclaim our humanity and rediscover our center”.

In 1951 Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote one of his most notable books, *The Sabbath*. As if a prophet, he wrote that we needed the Sabbath in order to survive civilization: “Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty” to remain independent of the enslavement of the material world: “Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people.”

Heschel is famous for best understanding that what Shabbat—indeed what Judaism- does—is to make time, not “stuff”, holy. In

the creation story, God first describes not the animals, or the sea— or even human beings as holy, but Shabbat as holy. What is shabbat --a day. Time.

*Time is holy.*

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “A great pianist was once asked by an ardent admirer: ‘How do you handle the notes as well as your do?’ The artist answered: ‘The notes I handle no better than many pianists, but the pauses between the notes – ah! That is where the art resides.’

In great living, as in great music, the art may be in the pauses.

Surely one of the enduring contributions which Judaism made to the art of living was the Shabbat, the ‘pauses between the notes.’

And it is to the Shabbat that we must look if we are to restore to our lives the sense of serenity and sanctity which Shabbat offers in such joyous abundance.”

In a midrash in the 18th century, the Vilna Gaon taught that God stopped creating to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only once we stop creating. In this way, we can start remembering and enjoying why it was worth creating in the first place. (Steinhardt foundation, 2010)

Major corporations and companies are beginning to understand that the need to “stop” is necessary. They are suggesting, and giving permission for, “tech sabbaths” in which employees turn off their devices for a given amount of time. Stepping away, they find, gives them a chance to reflect on their work, to engage in deep conversation, to de-stress, and therefore become more productive.

Overly busy lives have changed, in some way, our ability to value unstructured, quiet time. However, nowhere was this more obvious to me than at summer camp. This summer, while serving as faculty at camp, I witnessed this firsthand. Shabbat afternoon at camp is

loosely structured. They cannot go in areas with counselors, but other than that, it's pretty relaxed.

The campers couldn't figure out what to do with this unstructured time. Without "screens", a tight schedule, or someone telling them what to do next, they felt lost. It took a while for them to figure out how to "do nothing"—how to exist with unstructured activity. How to have "space between the notes." While I saw this most easily at camp, I know that unstructured time increases our creativity, our sense of resiliency, and releases stress and anxiety.

Claiming Shabbat as holy time has a few hurdles to overcome. For contemporary, liberal Jews, Shabbat doesn't necessarily have a great reputation. It can be associated with "have-to's", with requirements that can feel like even more "noise" in a too-busy, too overloaded world.

"Shabbat" can be a scary word. Michael Steinhardt, chairman of the prominent Steinhardt Foundation, writes, "For many Jews, it

conjures religiosity and prohibition: swaying in synagogue, shutting the phone, avoiding work, money, computers, pens, even erasers. If Shabbat is the core of Judaism, one might conclude that ours is a religion of ascetism incompatible with modern life.”

“Shabbat” can bring a tingle of anxiety, of feeling inadequate, and disconnect. Not knowing the blessings, rituals, prayers—leads to an immediate assumption that Shabbat is beyond one’s scope and capability, and that there is only one way to do it “right”.

Therefore, shabbat can’t belong in “my home”, or “to me”. By extension, I fear that Shabbat no longer “belongs” to the average American Jew.

*I believe, more than ever, we need a personal, meaningful Shabbat.*

Shabbat is our “no” button—a spiritual GPS that can help us reset our GPS to “home”. *And, I believe shabbat can be reclaimed by each of us meaningfully, personally, and effectively.*

I once worked with a couple who were both in the medical professions. To make shabbat work in their home, they committed to always lighting shabbat candles, reciting kiddush, offering the blessing over the challah; saying Motzi. They promised each other they would say these blessings on Friday, no matter their schedules. On some Fridays they said the blessings at 3pm, as one arrived home and the other left for a night shift. On other Fridays, they shared in the blessings at midnight. It didn't matter. Every week, they made sure they enjoyed that 5 minute ritual, together. They loved the intentionality of it, the holiness of it, the "do-ability of it". Those 5 minutes, they reported, were so special. This is how they made time holy.

I also know a family who know that they will rarely have time to cook, but they wanted to mark Friday night as Shabbat in some realistic way. They decided to use their china, and eat in the dining room, as well as to share in the "table blessings" for Shabbat. Their

children may be rushing off to whatever, but the different setting and the china help them to recognize that the night is special. They report that there is more joy. This is how they made time holy.

A friend once told me that coming to pray at synagogue, every Friday, gave her respite. She said, “Because I’m in a group, I know I won’t look at my phone for at least an hour. I know I don’t have the discipline to ever turn my phone off on my own! Also, I just need the music, the prayers, the community. Sometimes, I literally feel like it helps me breathe.” This is how she made time holy.

Ari Zoldan, CEO of quantum media group, turns off his tech for the entirety of Shabbat. He writes, “This day of rest is a weekly opportunity to connect with my inner self. For 25 hours, I can zone in on what's really important without getting distracted. Today's world is a whirlpool, and my day of rest is an oasis of calm.” This is how he made time holy.

In each instance, they found a “no” button. They said “no”, to the busy-ness and the demands of the world.

Pushing against an overwhelming society, they found a way to make time holy.

How will you make time holy? *In the coming month, we will be providing resources online, in paper, and during Shabbat, to make time holy.*

Will Shabbat be shabbat dinner at home, with candles and kiddush? Will you come to services? Will you share in a casual shabbat dinner? Will it be a 5 minute ritual on Friday night, with a Shabbat candle-lighting and wine blessing?

What I know for sure is this-- When you take a break from all the noise, you will become recharged, and more affective in all aspects of your life. Time will again become meaningful, rather than a race through your calendar or an endless sifting of information. Shabbat gives us the opportunity to stop, sit back, and celebrate, ponder

and dream. I pray this year we will reclaim our GPS; that we will find our “no” button and we will find our pause between the notes.