

‘The Simplest and Sanest Recommendation Any God Has Ever Made’

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We flew from Alaska back to the “lower 48,” as Alaskans like to refer to the rest of the continental United States on a red-eye, overnight flight. We were on a Boeing 757 which meant six across, two aisles of three seats each. Only we are a family of five. Sari and the girls had taken one side of the plane, and Ezra and I were getting settled in on the other, with one empty seat beside us. It was then that I really started to pray. Not so much for safe travels or smooth skies, but that the people who were still boarding the plane had some other seat, any other seat but the empty one next to me. I was hoping for a few hours of sleep on that flight, and I was coveting the extra few inches of room. As each boarding passenger walked passed our row to find their seats, my prayers got even more intense. Thank you God! Oh Lord it’s looking good. *Barukh Hashem*, the seat’s still open and they’re about to close the doors. I know you’ve said these prayers too! But just as the boarding process was about to end, a cheerful lady from Louisiana sat down right next to me. My 6 year old Ezra has the window seat, she’s on the aisle, and I’m in the middle. *Ribbono Shel Olam*—Master of the Universe, are there no perks for working for You? The truth is she was lovely and we immediately struck up a conversation about her new grandchild who she was just visiting in Alaska, and how she hopes her kids will move back to Louisiana, ‘cause there’s no way her husband is moving to Wasilla. Yes, that Wasilla! I saw pictures of the child, I heard stories. And then out of the corner of her eye, she noticed my yarmulke. What do you do for a living, she asked? I knew at that moment that sleep was not going to be happening for me on this flight. I thought about being ambiguous. Like, I could have said that I was a teacher...it’s not a lie, that’s what rabbi means! I also thought about telling her I was an actuary, ‘cause I was pretty sure that would be a conversation stopper. But my *yetzer ha’tov* – my good conscience prevailed, and I said “I’m a rabbi.” To which she replied, “I just love that Bibi Netanyahu, I’d just love to give him a big hug and a kiss for all he puts up with.” Okay...

You see my aisle companion, she's an evangelical Christian. She loves Israel. She loves the Jewish people. And she loved asking me every question that had ever popped into her head about Judaism. The truth is that she impressed me with her ability to deftly and accurately quote scripture from both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. She clearly was totally devoted to her faith and her church. And the truth is, I love to talk with anyone and everyone about Judaism, whether they're Jewish or not. [But for heaven's sake it was 3:00 in the morning at 37,000 feet above the Canadian Rockies.] So after generously answering all of her questions, and realizing that sleep was no longer an option, I politely said, "You know, I've got this question I've always wanted to ask an evangelical Christian. Would you mind if I ask you?" She was, I kid you not, delirious at the prospect. I don't know if she thought this would be her opening, her chance to witness to me, or what? Imagine the prize of converting a rabbi?! What a kiddush they would give her back at her church if she came home with that news! She readjusted herself in the seat and leaned in all ready to enlighten me. But what I asked is not what she expected. I said, "I've always wondered why the evangelical community makes such a big fuss about homosexuality, when there are so many other issues that seem to be frankly much more concerning to God than that one." Her brow furrowed, she shifted in her aisle seat. "Like what?" "Well, I said, like the Sabbath. The Sabbath is mentioned all over the Bible. Old Testament, New Testament. Moses kept it, Jesus kept it. It even made it into God's Top Ten list...Number four: Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. But I don't remember James Dobson or Billy Graham or Jimmy Swaggart, or Oral Roberts ever getting all hot and sweaty preaching the gospel of keeping the Sabbath. Homosexuality is mentioned only once in Leviticus and in a way that really requires elucidation, while Shabbat is mentioned over 100 times in every book of the Torah and beyond. And Shabbat applies to men, women and children alike—heck, even strangers and animals are required to observe Shabbat!" And then I went for the coup d' gras: "For a faith community like yours," I said, "that is so interested in marriage, and wholesome family life, not to mention prayer and fellowship, it would seem that taking up a national pro-Sabbath campaign would help advance all those issues you are so passionate about!" After that little speech, I took a long sip of my apple-cranberry juice and all I could hear was the purr of the engines and the snores of everyone around me who was fast asleep. My evangelical friend was stumped. She told me she never really thought about it like that before. And I'm thinking to myself, how could someone so Biblically literate, who can quote chapter and verse without skipping a beat, who could such a

person miss what is so overarching a principle in the Judeo-Christian tradition? Suffice it to say, we the conversation kind of came to a conclusion there, and I actually did get a few minutes of shut-eye in the end.

The truth is, I can't think of a more relevant, more timely, more critical message than the liberating gift of Shabbat. Have you noticed that every few years a new generational label is released... There were the baby boomers who were born between 1946-1964—my parents' generation who rejected some traditional values, experienced high incomes and high birth rates; and then we all became concerned about the empty nester generation, and how people whose children had grown up and moved out would find meaning and purpose in life as their own life spans were also increasing; then we became concerned not about the empty nest but the crowded nest as the pattern of adult children coming to live back home due to underemployment and a stiff economy, which of course gave rise to the, sandwich generation, where adults were simultaneously taking care of grown children and aging parents, and today we have Generation *Xhausted*. The trend is that people are spending more time pursuing advanced degrees and careers, which means they are starting to have families much later than in prior decades. While that means that often one's professional peak comes earlier in life—for example *The Economist* recently reported¹ that 40% of CEOs today are in their 40's, with a not insignificant number being in their 30's. The problem is that the most intense working years also happen to be the time when these same couples are starting to have children. And anyone who has had a baby knows that the older you are when you do, the more grueling that sleeplessness and those late night feedings truly are! A relationship support charity (Relate) surveyed people in this generation and found that between the ages of 35-44 people have the fewest friends, because they report having no time to cultivate them, and they're asking for the least amount of time off of work because they perceive that those are the critical years for advancing their careers. And it is during those years when we see more loneliness, more depression, more regret over not getting a handle on a healthy work-life balance than at any other time in life. And those same young parents who want their kids to be in the best preschools so that they'll get into Harvard 18 years later ought to read Kevin Hartnett's ground breaking article in the Washington Post a few weeks

¹ *The Economist*, "Generation Xhausted," August 18, 2012. Page 53

ago.² The research proves, and I quote: “Success [in our kids’ lives] is much more related to the amount of time parents spend with their children than where they send them to school!”

Well here I got news today for Generation Xhausted! There is a cure. And it is one of the oldest and wisest lifestyle routines ever: It is called Shabbat. Prior to Judaism’s emphasis on the Sabbath, no ancient people ever designated a day of rest! This is a uniquely Jewish contribution of civilization. In fact the Greeks disdained the Jews for taking a day off; wasted time that they perceived as unproductive and lazy. But in the hearts of former slaves who had time ripped away from them; who had time controlled by taskmasters and pharaohs, the Sabbath stood for a foundational principle of being human: that no person is meant to be enslaved to anyone or anything...whether the workplace be in ancient Egyptian slave pits or the modern day office. The Sabbath is revolutionary it is political it is economic. Insisting on a Sabbath means that time is not morally neutral. Time has value and meaning and it comes at a price! By the way, work is good says the Torah. Just because we yearn for a Sabbath doesn’t mean we despise work, God forbid. *Sheishet yamim ta’avod ve’asita et kol melachtecha*: Six days a week you must work;³ you must be creative; you must contribute something to larger world...*U’vayom hashevi’I shavat vayinafash*, but on the seventh day you also must step away from it, you’ve got to take a break.⁴ Like many of you I get tremendous satisfaction from work. I love my job; I have a job that is not only interesting and challenging and meaningful, I also feel that it enables me to truly do good in the world. I certainly don’t want to denigrate that or give it up. But like anything, dormancy, cessation, pause is also necessary to appreciate what we’re doing in the world. This phenomenon is present throughout nature. It is a biological necessity, for example, for certain plant species to lie dormant for the winter in order to be able to bear fruit in the spring. No dormancy, no fruit. And if this continues for more than a few seasons, the plant will die.⁵ The same is true for us. What happens to our souls, our relationships, our family life, our marriages, and even the quality of our work when we never rest, or we rest too sporadically? How many of those parts of our lives are drying up or even God-forbid dying when we are constantly on the run for more money, more recognition, more information, more possessions...

² *The Washington Post*, “What matters more to my kids’ future: Their school or my time?” September 2, 2012.

³ Exodus 20:9

⁴ Exodus 20:10

⁵ Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*. Bantam, 1999. Page 7

There is a wonderful hassidic tale of a rebbe who saw a young man racing through the street. The rebbe asked “What’s your hurry, why are you running?” The man replied, “I’m running after my good fortune!” To which the rebbe responds, “Foolish man, your good fortune has been chasing you, but you’re running too fast for it to catch up!”⁶ Are your children running after you, trying to catch not only some of your time, but enough of your energy to pay attention to them? Is your spouse yearning for intimacy or just to spend some quality time together without you checking your blackberry or i-phone every five minutes. I am always amazed by couples who go out to dinner, and they’re sitting at their tables and both of them are on their hand held devices. They’re not talking to each other or even looking at each other...Have you seen people like this? Why even go out to dinner? Why be feign being social with another human being if you’d rather stare at that screen than their face? In fact, there is a National Day of Unplugging that is being promoted nationally, and not by religious people but secular folks who are encouraging people to fully disconnect. This year it’s scheduled for March 1-2, 2013. By the way listen to the 10 objectives of this secular Sabbath Manifesto,⁷ a list developed by a group of artists, writers, and filmmakers, not rabbis or cantors:

1. Avoid technology, 2. Connect with loved ones, 3. Nurture your health, 4. Get outside, 5. Avoid Commerce, 6. Light candles, 7. Drink wine, 8. Eat bread, 9. Find silence, and 10. Give back. That list sounds really Jewish to me!

I admit I am addicted to my i-phone and I probably abuse it. But I can guarantee that it is off and out of my hot little hand not once a year, but once a week, on Shabbat for 25 hours. My kids’ i-touches are also turned off on Friday evenings and do not reappear until Saturday night so that we can all be present together at least for one full day. The author Thomas Cahill wrote, “The Sabbath is surely one of the simplest and sanest recommendations any god has ever made.”⁸

But this isn’t only about you...it’s about us. It’s about community. A Sabbath can happen any time. If your day off is Wednesday, you could have Sabbath time then. If you go to your beach house at Bethany or Rehoboth or Ocean City, you could have Sabbath there. If you go to the shvitz for a massage that could be your Sabbath. But there’s only one Shabbes; there’s only one

⁶ Ibid. Page 48

⁷ www.sabbathmanifesto.org

⁸ Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews. How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels.* Doubleday, 1998. Page 144

Shabbat. The beauty of that is that Shabbat brings us together as a community when we can get to know each other, to appreciate each other, to spend time together because during the week we work and go to school all over town; Shabbat is when we can learn and sing and pray together. Shabbat convenes us around dinner tables with others who also reserve that same day of the week for recurring social contact, and it brings us here, to shul for a unique kind of renewal and rejuvenation that happens here each week. In his recent book *The Social Animal*, David Brooks writes that people are pretty lousy at determining what will make them happy. Many Americans claim that if they made an additional \$90,000/year they could fulfill all their dreams. The problem is all the evidence says they're wrong. While the relationship between money and happiness is unclear at best, the relationship between social bonds and happiness is crystal clear. The deeper a person's relationships, the happier they are. Studies show that joining a group that meets only once/month produces the same happiness gain as doubling your income! What if you came to shul just once a month and deepened your social bonds here. Can you imagine the happiness gain?

Last year, Sari and I had all the sixth graders from the Har Shalom religious school to our house for Shabbat dinner. Before we sat down at the table we showed them where the bathroom was located and asked them not to turn the light off when they finished. One of the kids asked to me—and remember 6th graders are a bit precocious: “Does God really care if we flip a light switch on or off?” My answer was, “Probably not. But I care.” In the fast paced, busy, technology saturated world we live in, Jewish tradition teaches that Shabbat is so countercultural, that we have to take active steps to cultivate it, to create it, to set a distinctive mood from the rest of the week, and to protect it. Now it's definitely true that different Jews interpret that in widely different ways, but what is universally true is that Shabbat will not just magically appear for you. You need to bring it in; you need to set the tone. For us that means a beautifully set Shabbat table with challot, and wine, friends gathered together, candles lit, blessings said over our children, and a time free of any intrusion, be it phone, TV, computer, or those wicked little cell phones. It means that our family activity on Shabbat morning is to come here, to sing, to pray, to study, and to schmooze with other families who we look forward to seeing each week. It means going home after a wonderful lunch here (thank you Sisterhood) to play board games to play outside to read with our kids; if I'm lucky it means a nap somewhere in there, and it means on Saturday night gathering around a braided candle, a box of spices, and a cup of wine to bid a

precious day farewell until next week. It means anticipating the arrival of Shabbat throughout the week—figuring out who to invite to dinner, what to cook, and when to shop so that when Friday night arrives and we start singing *Shalom Aleikhem*, everything is done. Everything is peaceful. Everything is there to be enjoyed and to enhance the experience. It means that my kids have to occasionally have to say no to events scheduled on Saturdays and that their various sports leagues are selected because they offer Sunday games and weekday practices. But you know what, the likelihood of my kids becoming professional athletes is so infinitesimally small, so my money's on their future as Jews. The truth is if I could only bequeath to my children one Jewish ritual, one religious observance that I could guarantee they would keep even if they didn't keep others, it would be Shabbat. Because I know how much it means to me and to our family. Shabbat is not about being constricted or boxed in by laws or regulations or unbending precepts. The only people who say that about Shabbat are people who don't celebrate it. Shabbat is a gift; if there is anything uncompromising about it, it is that I refuse to give it up. It is too precious to my marriage, to my parenting, and to my neshama, my soul. I can't, and I won't live without it. But that's not because I feel enslaved to it; it's because it makes so much sense. It's because it's the best thing that ever happened to me as a Jew, and as a human being.

There is a story⁹ that is told about a South American tribe that went on a long march day after day when all of a sudden they would stop walking, sit down to rest for a while and then make camp for a couple of days before going any farther. They explained that they needed time to rest so that their souls could catch up with them. If you feel that your soul would benefit from catching up with you, I hope you will try in this New Year to incorporate some Shabbat into your life. Start gradually...it took me a couple of years of evolution to become shomer Shabbat. Light candles with your loved ones on Friday evening. Bring flowers to your spouse. Be a romantic on Shabbes...yes it's a mitzvah! Seriously, Shabbat is a time for love making. There are literally hundreds of varieties of fabulous kosher wines: from Israel, from Chile, from France, Argentina, Australia, Italy, Spain—get a good bottle for Shabbes—NO MANISCHEWITZ please! Make that meal better than every other meal of the week. Insist that people shut down their electronic devices at least during the meal, and really talk to each other. Invite some other people to join you around the table. Try coming to shul every once and a

⁹ Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*. Bantam, 1999. Page 70

while, and feel your happiness quotient rise as you become more deeply connected here. Let your soul catch up with the rest of your being. If I told you that turning off a little five ounce plastic device could very well save your marriage, help you to be a better parent, enable you to cultivate and deepen your faith and community connections, who would say no. So I'm telling you. This year make a commitment to Shabbat. It will change your life, and it will transform our shul. I am Rabbi Adam Raskin: husband, father, Jew, free person, and I approve this message!