

**“Ascending the Hierarchy of Holiness”**  
**Second Day of Rosh Hashanah - September 14, 2007**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

There's an old story about the new rabbi who came to town and preached a sermon about *kashrut*. Afterwards, a well-meaning member of the congregation came up to him and said, “That was a great sermon, rabbi, but you should know that very few members of our congregation keep kosher. Why don't you talk about something else next week?”

The next week came along and the rabbi preached a sermon about the importance of Torah study: the need not to be content with just dropping off one's kids at Hebrew school, but to continue one's study throughout one's life. Afterwards, the same person came up to the rabbi and said, “That was a great sermon, rabbi, but this is not an intellectual crowd. Could you talk about something else next week?”

The next week came and the rabbi preached about the importance of prayer in the life of the Jew. The very same congregant approached him afterward and told him, “That was a great sermon, rabbi, but we're not a davenning crowd. Could you talk about something else?” Whereupon, the rabbi asked, “Do you have any other suggestions about what I could talk about next week?” The man responded, “Why don't you talk about Judaism?”

The other day, I became aware of a misprint in our High Holiday booklet. It was nothing major. It isn't as if we put the wrong date down for Yom Kippur or anything like that. It's about tonight. In the booklet, it states that we'll be gathering for services this evening at 6:15 p.m. That part is correct. It goes on to say that we'll be reciting Minchah, the afternoon service, and Ma'ariv, the evening service. So far, so good. But then it states that we'll be reciting Havdalah. Havdalah is the service we recite that formally marks the completion of a holiday or Shabbat. The fact is, we won't be reciting Havdalah tonight because, well, we don't recite it when a holiday concludes on a Friday night.

But that raises an interesting question, which is “Why?” **Why** don't we recite Havdalah when a holiday ends on a Friday evening? To answer this, we have to look at an entirely different area of Jewish law.



In the days when the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem, Jews were very aware that it was a holy place. Not only were they aware that it was a holy place, they knew that it was a place which contained an entire **hierarchy of holiness** within it. The Mishnah states this explicitly:

Jerusalem is holier than other cities in the land of Israel; the Temple Mount is holier than the rest of the city; [and so on and so forth,] and the Holy of Holies is the most sacred place of all.

(M. Kelim 1:6-9)

Following the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 and the dispersion of the Jews in the year 135, the special holiness of the Temple, the Temple Mount and even of Jerusalem was not something Jews were able to experience on a day-to-day basis. After all, Jews were no longer permitted even to live in Jerusalem, much less to worship at the site where the Temple once stood.

But wherever Jews lived, they erected synagogues, and the rabbis decreed for them that within synagogues as well there was to be a **hierarchy of holiness**. The Mishnah tells us the following:

If people sell a synagogue, with the proceeds they may purchase an Ark.

If they sell an Ark, they may purchase mantles that cover Torah scrolls.

If they sell mantles, they can use the proceeds to buy a Torah scroll.

But, if they sell a Torah scroll, they may not purchase Torah covers;

If they sell Torah covers, they can't use the proceeds to purchase an Ark;

And if they sell an Ark, they may not purchase a synagogue.

(As you can imagine, these are very interesting teachings to reflect upon during a year when our congregation is writing a new torah scroll.)

Rabbi Yehudah adds another restriction, which gives us a hint as to the reason for this hierarchy. "So too," he says, "you may not sell what belongs to the public to an individual, for **by doing so, you diminish its sanctity.**" (Megillah 3:1)

Now, Rabbi Yehudah's specific opinion did not actually become law, but his reasoning applies throughout that *mishnah*: We don't sell something of **higher** holiness to purchase something of **lesser** holiness. As the Talmud puts it elsewhere, *ma 'alin b'kodesh, v'lo moridin*: We always strive to increase sanctity, not to decrease it.

Sacred space is an important dimension of our existence, but, within Judaism, sacred time is even more important. Following the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis became connoisseurs at establishing **hierarchies of holiness in time**. This makes sense. If you think about it, a landless, stateless people has far greater influence over its time than it does over its use of space.

And so the rabbis, basing themselves on the foundation established within the Torah, created what Abraham Joshua Heschel has called “cathedrals in time”— holy days on which to retreat from the day-to-day world, the world of business, the world of buying and selling, the world characterized by subjugating nature to serve our needs. They created special, different days: holy days on which work was not to be done and one was to be free to commune with nature, with God, with one’s family and community and with one’s self. Among these holy days are, of course, the seasonal festivals of Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot, the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the Sabbath.

Is there a hierarchy among these holy days? Of course! Sure enough, if we turn to the Mishnah, we find that it gives us the answer in the form of a legal ruling regarding a particular religious practice that should be familiar to all of us, namely, Torah reading.

Now, the Torah is read on many days during the year: on holidays, on Rosh Hashanah, on Shabbat, and on every Monday and Thursday morning, so that we shouldn’t go more than three days without hearing words of Torah. Whenever we read the Torah, we break up the reading into a number of smaller portions, each one called an “*aliyah*” or an “ascent” because each time a different person is invited to come up to recite blessings over the reading. But we break up the readings differently, depending on the day. On ordinary Mondays and Thursdays, we read only three *aliyot*. The Mishnah tells us what we do on special days:

On Rosh Hodesh [-- the first day of a Hebrew month, which has an elevated sanctity over an ordinary weekday] and on Hol HaMoed [— the intermediate days of a festival] we have 4 *aliyot*, no more, and no less. On Yom Tov [in other words,

on Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot or Rosh Hashanah] we have 5 *aliyot*. On Yom Kippur, we have 6 *aliyot* and on Shabbat, we have 7 *aliyot*. (Megillah 4:2)

That law is stated so matter-of-factly that its full significance may go over our heads: Shabbat is privileged over all the other holidays. It's privileged over Rosh Hashanah. **It is even privileged over Yom Kippur.** You might think that Yom Kippur, which only comes once a year, would be deemed holier than Shabbat. After all, it's called ***Shabbat Shabbaton***: the Sabbath of Sabbaths. But, in this respect, at least, it's not. If Yom Kippur falls on a Monday, as it did last year, we only read 6 *aliyot*. Only if it falls on a Shabbat, as it does this year, do we read 7 *aliyot*.

The rabbis didn't have to create such a law. The Torah doesn't tell us how many *aliyot* to have on any given day. The rabbis could easily have ordered the hierarchy so that Yom Kippur came out on top. But they didn't. They didn't because they believed that Shabbat was holier, and they wanted Jewish law to reinforce Shabbat's holiness.

Every few years, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on a Saturday, as it did last year and will again in 2009, we experience that elevation of Shabbat over Rosh Hashanah when we *don't* hear the blowing of the shofar. On Sukkot, too, if the first day coincides with Shabbat, we don't shake the lulav and etrog until the second day. When push comes to shove, as it does when a holiday and Shabbat coincide, Shabbat is deemed holier, and the other holiday gives way.

**Why is this?** Why does Shabbat edge out the holidays on the hierarchy of holiness? The answer is that, within this system of thought and practice we call Judaism, there is almost nothing more important than Shabbat. Saving a life, of course. Saving a life is more important than Shabbat. This we know because you not only may you but you *must* violate Shabbat in order to save a life. But there is no *time* that is holier than Shabbat.

**Why is that?** Why is the duration of time known as Shabbat so important, so special, so holy?

This is actually a deep question. After all, Rosh Hashanah is pretty holy. We focus on doing *teshuvah*, resolving to do things better in the coming year. That's pretty holy work. Yom Kippur, you might say, is even holier because, in striving for forgiveness, we afflict ourselves by fasting. How could it be that Shabbat, which comes so much more frequently, is higher in holiness?

One answer is that Shabbat is, after all, the first of all holy days mentioned in the Bible. (The Hebrew phrase is, “*Rishon hu l’mikraei kodesh.*”) And in that description of the very first Shabbat in the book of Genesis, we’re told that God himself blessed and sanctified the Sabbath, and then rested. In other words, God actually observed Shabbat and continues to observe it. Nowhere does the Torah suggest that God fasted on Yom Kippur or blew the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, or built a sukkah and dwelt in it. Perhaps, then, the day has a higher level of sanctity because on Shabbat we’re imitating God.

Shabbat could be the holiest of days because, unlike the holidays, Shabbat is mentioned in the Ten Commandments. After all, nowhere in the Ten Commandments does it say, “Thou shalt fast on the Day of Atonement!” or “Thou shalt eat Matzah on Pesach!” The commandments to observe the holidays are found in the Torah, but not in the Ten Commandments which, as we know, has a somewhat elevated stature. Perhaps that’s why Shabbat is distinct.

I’d like to offer a third possibility.

Perhaps the very frequency of Shabbat is the answer. The holidays come but once a year and Shabbat comes every week. As the saying goes in the Talmud, “*Tadir v’lo tadir, tadir kodem.*” “If a more frequent occurrence coincides with a less frequent one, the more frequent one takes precedence.”

Let me propose an analogy: For those of us who have little kids, let me ask a very simple question: What is the most special time you have all year with your child? Is it celebrating his or her birthday? Or is it tucking your child into bed at night?

This may bring us closer to understanding what’s going on here.

To the extent that a significant goal of observing Shabbat is to maintain our relationships—with God, with ourselves, with our families and with our community, there’s something very profound, and very correct, about our tradition elevating the importance of doing so not just once a year, but once a week. Just as with any relationship, it isn’t enough to “check-in” once a year. If through Shabbat we are striving to replenish our bodies and restore our souls by focusing on what really matters, then we can’t put that off until the following September. It’s too vital for that.

Harvey Cox, a professor of religion at Harvard who spoke here in Needham at our ecumenical Thanksgiving service several years ago, highlights another aspect of Shabbat:

Shabbat is the Jewish answer to the profound question all religions face about the relationship between doing and being, between what Indian mystics call *prana* (spirit and energy) and *sat* (perfect being). The seventh day is holy [to God] and one keeps it holy not by doing things for God or even for one's fellow human beings. **One keeps it holy by [simply being].**

Michael Kogan puts it this way: Shabbat reminds us that “‘being’ is both deeper and higher than ‘doing,’ that sometimes we have to stop doing what we [are doing] in order to start being who we are.” (Michael S. Kogan, p. 105).

This focus on “being” on Shabbat does not mean that we do nothing at all on Shabbat. I remember, when my kids were young, reading to them a marvelous passage in one of those *Little House on the Prairie* books, about a Puritan Sabbath, during which the children had to sit quiet and still, soberly, for hours at a time, surrounded by stern adults. Shabbat is nothing like that. It includes festive meals, coming to synagogue, singing, unhurried prayer, study, discussions, talking walks, even napping.

When we look at the laws of Shabbat observance, it is striking that one significant area concerns speech: we are to make a special effort not to lose our tempers, not to yell or berate, to criticize or to scold. And certainly not to humiliate or demean, but to speak kindly and supportively to one another.

Every beat of our hearts is followed by a pause. Every inhalation is followed by an exhalation. So too, we must periodically back away from all the acquiring, aggrandizing, even all the creating, that we do most of the time, and commune: commune with ourselves, commune with our family and friends, and commune with God.

This is not easy. Perhaps that is why so much effort has been invested by the Jewish tradition in creating guidelines to prevent distraction by other forms of activity incompatible with Shabbat.

I like to think of Shabbat as a 25 hour cruise. Everything has to be put on board by candle lighting time on Friday afternoon. All the food you're going to eat has to be cooked by then. All the clothes you're going to wear have to be ironed by then. Everything has to be made ready, and then, all you need to do on Shabbat itself is ***be on board*** and partake.

That's not easy for many of us. We're so used to being busy that it's hard for us to value time that is deliberately ***not busy***—especially as frequently as once a week.

And yet, Judaism does. This is yet another reminder that choosing to be Jewish, choosing to live a Jewish life in America today is **a countercultural choice**. As Anita Diamant—the author of *The Red Tent*, among other works—has written, one must actively resist certain cultural messages with which we are constantly being bombarded. As she puts it, “for chronically overscheduled people, sitting still for an hour, much less an afternoon, can be a real challenge. However, [this is precisely the reason] that many people view Shabbat prohibitions less as sacrifices than as opportunities to reorient an overly hectic life around the need for rest, relaxation, and time with family and close friends.” (p. 24)

Somehow, the rabbis knew that it isn’t enough for us to pause in this way once a year or twice a year, or even three times a year. It’s necessary to pause once a week, to acknowledge that we are but resident aliens on this earth, and to re-charge our spiritual batteries.

In order to distinguish holidays and Shabbatot as days of heightened holiness, the rabbis instituted two familiar prayers. To begin a holiday or a Shabbat, we recite a sanctification prayer called the Kiddush, in which we acknowledge and declare that the day is holy.

And when a holy day is over, we acknowledge that we are coming down from a day of heightened holiness by reciting a prayer called Havdalah, or “separation,” through which we bid farewell to and separate ourselves from the Sabbath or the holiday. Havdalah, as it were, cushions the descent.

But this brings us back to the question with which I began my remarks this morning: What do we do on a day like today when the Festival ends as the Sabbath is beginning?

The answer flows from the fact that, as we’ve seen, Shabbat represents a higher level of holiness than the holiday. Because Shabbat is even holier than Rosh Hashanah, we will not be *descending* in holiness this afternoon. Instead, we will be making an *aliyah*, we will be *ascending*. And so, even though Rosh HaShanah, as important as it is, is coming to a close then, it would be inappropriate to recite a Havdalah blessing. Therefore, we don’t.

My purpose today is to invite all of us on board, to invite all of us to partake of holy time each and every week. In this hurried, harried, and hassled world in which we live, we need Shabbat more than ever. I invite you to consider bringing her—for the Shabbat is generally personified as a Queen or a Bride—into your life. Now, some of us may be asking, “How can I do that? How can I alter the course of

my life so suddenly, so abruptly?” How can I stop taking my kids to soccer games on Shabbat morning? How can I stop going to soccer games, how can I stop shopping or doing laundry or other chores on Shabbat?

Well, it may not be easy. My advice would be to take it one step at a time and not to try to do too much. You don’t have to accomplish everything at once. That’s not to say that you should just put your feet up on the coffee table and forget about Shabbat. It’s just to say that change may come slowly. What I can tell you is that, in my experience, I’ve never known anyone to regret having embraced Shabbat. I’ve known people who wish that they’d started observing Shabbat sooner, but no one who wishes that they’d waited a few more years to try.

Rather than turn this sermon into a recipe book, I’m going to put up on our synagogue’s website my ten or more recommendations for embracing Shabbat. I will leave you today with only one.

My recommendation—and this is a wonderful first step—is to start by trying to use the word “Shabbat” to refer to Friday night and Saturday. This can have a miraculous effect. It can begin to permeate your consciousness. In a sense, even if you’re not “observing” Shabbat, you will be “remembering” it—and that’s an accomplishment.

Let’s all try. Let’s all try, each in our own way and at our own pace, to bring Shabbat into our lives, if not each week, then as frequently as we can. Let’s be *maalin bakodesh*, let’s elevate the holiness in our lives. It’s there for us to partake. Let’s all seek, on Shabbat, to **be** as well as we **do** the rest of the week.

Let me wish everyone not only a *Shana Tovah*, a good and a sweet year, but also, since it’s coming in just a few short hours, a *Shabbat* of peace, rest and renewal: *Shabbat Shalom!*