

Shabbat: Day of Delight: Just Do It

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We are the connected, always “on”, 24-7 generation. We expect to be able to find a convenience store open any hour of the night. (After all, isn’t that why they call them convenience stores?!) We are always online, and in touch. Instant messaging, e-mail, faxes, blueberries, (or is it blackberries?), palms, ATMs, online banking, pagers, cell-phones and laptops – words which had you said them just a decade or two ago, no one would have had any idea what you were talking about are now all indispensable. The cumulative impact of these inventions is to create a world in which we can be reached anywhere, anytime. People have come to expect to receive immediate responses. By being always available, we can always work, regardless of where we are.

Many of us do not know how to disconnect, relax and take time off, even when on vacation. I am afraid to ask, but wonder – how many of us check our emails from the office while on vacation? A recent survey of the American Management Association found that almost 60 % of managers planned to stay in touch with their workplaces while away on vacation.

Researchers observe that a downside of this trend is that people may tend to read less as a result, and have less time for personal, private reflective time. It certainly contributes to a more neurotic society.

Joe Robinson, author of the book, “Work to Live: The Guide to Getting a Life” has described our society as, “...a volatile economy driven by 24-7 technology tools and an over-scheduling mania that has made many feel as if free moments are a descent into terminal vagrancy.”

It is hard to say why we are this way. Some analysts attribute our drive and work ethic to the Puritans and Calvinists who first sought refuge here in America. It may be due to our anxiety to produce for fear that since status is so often linked to achievement we won’t advance in our jobs. It could be that our concept of self-worth is tied up with our sense of what we do. Perhaps we may be fulfilling some kind of need to feel we are important and indispensable. Always being in touch may be a symbol of prestige. Or, it could just be that we are driven by the desire to constantly make money.

Not everyone suffers from this malady. There are plenty of ambitious people who do enjoy leisure time and who do take time off of work. They exercise, spend time with their children, and go on vacations. Having achieved a modicum of success and wealth, some make pursuit of leisure and pleasure their primary focus. Yet many of these same people would admit that they still feel that something is missing in their lives. Despite having all the material comforts one could ever want, there is a vacuity and emptiness compounded by a sense of meaninglessness, leading to a lack of purpose and an existence devoid of any spirituality.

Chances for most of us fall into one of these two categories.

One of the benefits of our spending a day like this in shul, in contemplative prayer, and of setting aside these Days of Awe is that we are afforded the opportunity to assess our lives and reflect on these issues. The liturgy compels us to reflect on who we are, and challenges us to consider the course we are taking. In its infinite wisdom, our tradition bequeathed to us these Holy Days to pause and evaluate the direction of our lives.

How fortunate we are, for there is a remedy available to us, regardless of which category you fall into. The same cure works for both those who do not know how to disconnect, as well as for those who are looking for meaning and spirituality.

The antidote I am going to propose is a means of drawing a line, of limiting the intrusion of work into every day of our lives and is also the means for bringing a sense of holiness and the Divine into our lives. It is the Fourth Commandment: “*Zachor et yom hashabbat lekadsho*. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” It is right up there, right over the ark, number 4, on the “Top Ten” list.

The justification given in the torah for keeping the Sabbath is predicated upon two passages and concepts. It is a reminder of the fact that God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. Elsewhere we are commanded to observe the Sabbath day as a reminder of our liberation from slavery in Egypt. These two aspects form the foundation of the basis for observing the Sabbath, and are combined in the kiddush when we recite – *zikaron lemaaseh bereshit*, a remembrance of the act of creation and *zekher litziyat mitzrayim*, a reminder of the exodus of Egypt.

The other significant biblical reference is that it shall be an eternal sign of the covenant, between God and the people of Israel, *beinee u'venei Yisrael, ot hee leolam*.

The institution has helped preserve our identity, for it contains some of the central tenets of Judaism. It actually is considered the holiest day not just of the week, but of the year – which is why there are seven aliyahs on Shabbat, and six on Yom Kippur.

Yet if one were to survey the practices of most American Jews, one would think that right after God decreed the commandment to observe the Sabbath for all times, as an eternal sign of the everlasting covenant between God and the people of Israel, He must have whispered loud enough for all to hear, “Just kidding.”

The Zionist philosopher Ahad haAm recognized the crucial role Shabbat has played in preserving Judaism and Jews throughout history. He knew that it was an escape from the brutality, banality, poverty, persecution and oppression that threatened to overwhelm them, and that it was something that united Jews around the world to each other and to their religion. On Shabbat our ancestors acted as if they were royalty. As a result, Ahad haAm took the famous words of the Torah, which we sing every Friday night and Saturday: *V'shamru bnei yisrael et hashabbat* – The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath day”, and cleverly inverted them. He claimed, “Even more than the people of

Israel has kept, (or preserved the Sabbath), the Sabbath has kept and preserved the people of Israel.”

It is that important.

In fact, it is the only day of the week which has a name in Hebrew. That’s right. The word for Sunday is Yom Rishon, Day One. Monday in Hebrew is called Yom Sheni, day 2, and so on. But Saturday is Shabbat.

Throughout the millennia, this one day has had an amazing impact on our people.

Our ancestors created what has come to be called a “sanctuary in time”. It was totally fabricated and arbitrary. A day is fixed by the rising and setting of the sun. The month is determined by the rotation of the moon, and the year is predicated upon the earth’s revolution around the sun and the changing of the seasons. But the week, and especially the Sabbath have no such associations. It is an artificial creation invented by the Hebrew Bible and developed by the Hebrews, as it is not found in other ancient civilizations from the same time period.

Stories are told of Catholics who live in Spain, Portugal, and other Spanish speaking countries around the world who eat a festive meal on Friday nights, light candles, and drink wine. They have no idea why they do it. All they know is that it was a custom passed on to them by their ancestors. But we know it is the last vestige and final remnant of a sign that they are descendants of people who once were Jews. They desperately sought to hang onto their Judaism, and this is all that is left.

Consider the story of Yosef Mendlowitz, imprisoned for ten years in a Soviet jail for the crime of wanting to emigrate to Israel. He was sustained in the gulag by observing Shabbat. Every Friday night he would wear a white undershirt and join with three other Jews to recite the kiddush over a handful of raisins. He credits this simple weekly ritual with preserving his identity and his humanity.

“Our modest fare was envied (by all the other prisoners) because we sat down to eat our meal together with the entire Jewish people who kept the Sabbath holy.”

Despite the difficulties and challenges he faced, he kept the Sabbath for several reasons. First of all, by so doing, he felt connected to the entire Jewish people around the world. Second, he observed the Shabbat because, as he told the other inmates he was commanded to do so by God. And finally, his modest celebration is what kept him and his fellow prisoners free.

Such is the power of this day.

And what about us, we who are free to celebrate? Too many of us Jews can best be described as Seventh Day Abstentists – we abstain from observing the Sabbath and from making it a part of our routine. Friday night dinner is like any other night. Candles are

not lit; the meal is not eaten together as a family. There is no wine or hallah, much less a kiddush or motzi. Dinner might consist of pizza, or it may be a night to go out. Saturday has become a day for errands, running around, going shopping, kids' birthday parties, and of course, soccer games.

Are we really any better off living like this? Can we do anything about it, or is it too late, and too ingrained in our routine? Are our children too old for us to make a change? What we don't realize is that by neglecting Shabbat we lose out on a wonderful opportunity for quality family time. We deprive ourselves of the opportunity to create a spiritual haven and have a connection to our people and heritage. So many people tell me they wish they had more meaning or spirituality in their lives, but do not know where to begin, where to look, or how to find it. Others lament how busy they are, always in perpetual motion, running from here to there. There are those whose homes are devoid of any Jewish content. Some do not even know that they are missing out on something. I am here to tell you today that the Fourth Commandment is a response to all these problems.

There is a whole philosophical outlook underpinning the concept of Shabbat. The central overriding principle is that it is a day of rest, a day when we do not create, a day when we do not seek to alter the world, nor to subdue, exploit or conquer it; a day when we refrain from competition in order to appreciate what has been created during the week. This is why we refrain from doing work or creating anything new on this day. This is why it is not appropriate to handle money or shop on Saturday. These limitations on our actions enable us to become conscious of the fact that we are not alone, but partners with God in the task of creation, and that we are called upon to try to imitate God, who rested on the seventh day and made it holy. On shabbat, our sages teach us, we become aware of the fact that the world is not dependent upon us or our manipulations to survive. We become a little less self-centered when we link ourselves to the practices of generations that came before us and acknowledge a Higher Being who places demands on us.

More than just a day of rest, it is holy rest, a day of liberation. We affirm that we are not slaves to our work. The Vilna Gaon put it this way. God stopped creating on the seventh day to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so.

Abraham Joshua Heschel saw in the abstention from work a means of achieving freedom, of insuring that we not become enslaved – neither to our occupations, nor to the tools of society. “We have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us...On the Sabbath we live, as it were, independent of technical civilization.”

On Shabbat I do not turn on my computer, check e-mails or voice mail messages, and it is liberating. Writing in the New York Times Magazine in March 2003, Judith Shulevitz advocated for the observance of a day of rest, and more specifically for the Jewish Sabbath in an article entitled, “Bring Back the Sabbath.” She noted, “The story told by the Sabbath is that of creation: we rest because God rested on the seventh day....We rest

in order to honor the divine in us, to remind ourselves that there is more to us than just what we do during the week.”

Many people often focus on the restrictions, limitations and prohibitions associated with Shabbat. It seems daunting, overwhelming, and intimidating. It need not be viewed that way. It is more than just a day of restrictions. My son, Ezra, describes it as “a day for chilling, with rules.” In calling for more widespread celebration of Shabbat among our congregants, I recognize that it will not be observed the same way in every household. Some may choose to stay home and watch TV together on Friday night, after Shabbat services and dinner. Even the great Hebrew poet, Chayim Nahman Bialik, who wrote beautiful poems about the beauty of Shabbat admitted to privately smoking a cigar in his home.

In many respects, Shabbat is a frame of mind, with a language all its own. Amongst Jews who reserved their use of the Hebrew language for prayer or study, they would converse in the *lashon hakodesh*, the holy tongue to enhance the sanctity of the day. Regardless of the language one speaks, there is a whole concept as to what kind of language is acceptable and appropriate on Shabbat and what is not. One is not supposed to raise one’s voice, argue or discuss business as it would pierce and violate the sense of peace and serenity we seek to create on this day. At our Shabbat dinner table, we try to devote part of the talk to include something about the torah portion, some aspect of Jewish ethics, or what is going on in Israel or elsewhere in the Jewish world. Imagine what a day like this can do for your soul, as well as your relationships.

One of the reasons we are not allowed to sit shiva on Shabbat is to bring us into the community on this day when it is so important to be with others. Observing Shabbat is not meant to banish sadness, but to table it for a day so that we may not forget that there is also joy and happiness in the world.

In her beautiful book, “The Fourth Commandment” which reads like a love sonnet about the Sabbath, Francine Klagsburn writes, “Shabbat is not just a day on the calendar. It forms the center of Jewish life and thought. It is not just part of the weekend; it is the essence of the week....Shabbat is about contracting, pulling back for a day from the infinite cacophony, competition, and commotion of the world around us.”

This brings us to another beautiful aspect of Shabbat which is missed by those who ignore it. It is a day for family.

I will never forget when I met with a family many years ago who spoke to me about the problems they were having with their teenage daughter. They were concerned because she and her friends would go out every Friday night to a home where the parents were away, and get drunk. If only, I thought to myself, these parents would have created that special atmosphere of Friday nights spent together, as a family, as it is meant to be – so much hardship could have been avoided.

Some of us may be fortunate enough to have memories of the way in which our parents, grandparents or great grandparents may have celebrated this day. Our Shabbat need not and will not be identical to idyllic nostalgic images, (some of which may even not be real.) Much about that world did not make sense. But just because it may seem absurd not to cut toilet paper on Saturday is no reason not to make kiddush and sit down as a family for a beautiful Friday night dinner. The question before us today is whether or not we will bequeath to our children any Jewish memories. If there are any Jewish values or customs we want to impart to them, one sure way to do so and to enrich our lives is by creating a special atmosphere once a week. It does not just happen. It takes work, preparation, and planning, which is why we refer to it as “*la-asot et hashabbat*, to make the Sabbath.” It is not easy, but it is infinitely worthwhile and fulfilling, and it is never too late to begin.

Since Shabbat is a day for community, it is difficult to celebrate it alone, in the context of a synagogue community. Since so many are alienated from Shabbat, or may not know where to begin, and because of its importance and centrality to Jewish survival, we are launching a major initiative this year called “Make Friday Shabbat.” In conjunction with moving up services to 6:15 pm this year, we are undertaking a major series of educational programs and projects to encourage all of our members to make Shabbat more a part of their regular routine. With workshops, classes and materials, generously funded by the Sisterhood, our goal is to get every single member of this congregation to start to take Shabbat seriously by increasing your level of observance. I can think of no undertaking in the history of our congregation more important than this one.

People often say they are not religious, or that they don’t know what to do -- as if it were some kind of incurable disease. The beauty of this year’s program is we will help you. You don’t know how to say the blessings – We’ll teach you. You don’t know how to light the candles – We’ll teach you. We’ll teach you songs to sing at home and songs to sing in the synagogue. Even if you don’t know what to serve for dinner, or how to set the table, we’ll teach you. If you already know all this, then let me know so we can use you as mentors and role models to teach others. Some of the sessions we will offer will be more in-depth to enrich the understanding for those who already do observe Shabbat. Our spring Scholar in residence will focus on the topic of halakhot and teshuvot of Shabbat. A special family Shabbat retreat is planned for February. There will be something for everyone.

Not too long ago, Symcha and I happened to be away with friends for a weekend at their beach home, which meant that it included Shabbat. Not regularly accustomed to the ins and outs of Sabbath observance, they prepared for our visit with some apprehension and level of anxiety. When it was all over, and after we made Havdalah, and proceeded to go out for dinner and a movie, our friend commented on how relaxing an experience it was. She said, “I felt like I have just come back from being at a spa.”

Never having been to a spa, I nevertheless knew enough to know that this was a good thing – that she meant it was invigorating, surprisingly relaxing and even holy. Our sages said it provides us a sense of what the Messianic era will be like. In fact, they said if

every Jew celebrated two shabbatot in a row (and some even said, just one), the Messiah would come.

Just imagine how transforming an experience it will be if the majority, or even just a large number of our congregants take the challenge and the gift we are offering seriously.

This is a spiritual retreat which you can inhabit every single week, and it is much cheaper than going to NemaCollin or Canyon Ranch.

Pinhas Peli writes in his book, The Jewish Sabbath, “For the real purpose of life is not to conquer nature, but to conquer the self; not to fashion a city out of a forest, but to fashion a soul out of a human being; not to build bridges, but to build human kindness; not to learn to fly like a bird or swim like a fish, but to walk on the earth like a human being; not to erect skyscrapers, but to establish mercy and justice; not to manufacture an ingenious technical civilization, but to be holy in the midst of unholiness. The real tasks are to learn how to remain civilized in the midst of insanity, how to retain a share of our dignity in the midst of the Dachaus and Buchenwalds, how to keep the mark of Cain from obscuring the image of the divine, how to fashion a home of love and peace, how to create children obedient and reverent, how to find the strength to perform the mitzvot, how to bend our will to God’s will.

It is the Sabbath that comes to remind us of all this. Six days a week we compete with the natural world – building, subduing, struggling to overcome. On the Sabbath we take temporary leave from the stressful world, while remaining very much attached to it...This rest does not come when we decide that we are in a state of exhaustion, or when our duties at work permit us to “take off” a few days. It comes completely independent of us, with the sunset of Friday afternoon, as it did in the very beginning, and as it will continually, a “sign forever.”

Let us insure that this eternal sign, something that meant so much to our ancestors and to the survival of the Jewish people not end with our generation. Let us grow together -- as individuals, as a congregation and as a community to insure that our observance of this day will continue to preserve us and be a source of holiness and delight.

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