

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5784
Shabbat Rest
Rabbi Karen Citrin

A long time ago in a shtetl called Chelm, there lived a community of pious Jews. The satirical stories of the *Wise Men of Chelm* offer deep insight, and a good laugh. Here is one of their stories:

Once, the Chelmites decided that they would solve their woes in one night. Never would they be poor again. They decided to capture the moon. Everyone knew that Jewish holidays are marked by the moon. Once the Chelmites had the moon, they could charge a simple, modest fee so their fellow Jews could celebrate the holidays. Nothing exorbitant, but enough to help the town. On a night of the full moon, Gimpel, a leading citizen, and a few of his friends schlepped out a barrel of beet soup, a canvas sack, rope, and wax. Gimpel said, "My dear Chelmites, behold, the moon is shining in the sky above us. Now look into the barrel of borsht." Sure enough they saw the image of the moon floating in the barrel. Gimpel whipped the canvas over the barrel, and his assistants fastened it with rope and sealed it with wax.

A couple of weeks passed, and at the darkest part of the month, just before Rosh Chodesh, the Hebrew new month, Gimpel ordered that the barrel of borsht be brought forth. All of the people gathered around as the canvas was removed from the barrel. At that moment the Chelmites were in shock; the moon was not there! Gimpel ordered that the barrel be turned over, maybe the moon had sunk to the bottom. The borsht and its awesome contents spilled out. But the night remained pitch black, while only the smell of boiled beets hung in the air.

Gimpel explained to the Chelmites that due to their negligence in failing to use preservatives, the moon had melted in the borsht. With a hollow sense of loss in their hearts, the Chelmites wandered around the square, gazing at the cobblestone and small puddles. Some even thought they saw spots of light, the remains of melted pieces of moon.

While we may laugh at the Chelmites wisdom, we can empathize with their yearnings for a better life, and their yearnings to capture the moon. The moon, of course, cannot be captured. She moves in a perpetual cycle of renewal in the sky. Therein lies the beauty of the moon on a clear night. As Jews, we mark the passage of time by the phases of the moon, and we renew the waxing and waning seasons of our lives with each month's new crescent. As much as we might try, we cannot capture, or slow down time.

Today, our new year begins with a new moon on the first day of the month of *Tishrei*. Tonight, on the first day of the new moon of the New Year 5784, we renew and sanctify time again. The very first thing God declared holy in Torah was time. As it is written, "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (*vayikadesh oto*), and ceased from all the work that God had done." (Genesis 2:3) Think about this – human beings created

last of all the animals on the 6th day had Shabbat for their first full day of life. Humanity, even creation itself, exist for the sake of Shabbat.

Tonight, like a lunar eclipse, we experience an eclipse of holy time as Rosh HaShanah coincides with Shabbat. I believe that we need Shabbat, a day of rest and renewal now more than ever. I don't need to tell you how busy our lives are. We live in a world of constant bings and pings. We are overworked and constantly rushing to fit more in. In a twenty-four/seven, always-on world, the concept of turning off seems like an anachronism. Shabbat, the ancient Jewish way to end our week, does not always feel convenient. The world of work and activities keeps spinning, even when the Torah tells us to pause. In today's world, Shabbat is counter cultural, which makes this a counter-cultural sermon.

Shabbat reminds us to step away from our work and let it be. As one scholar teaches, "God rested on the seventh day. God didn't show up to do more. God absented God's self from the office. God did not come and check on creation to make sure it was all working." (Walter Bruegemann in *Here All Along*, Sarah Hurwitz) Very few of us do such important work that we can't pause for a day. Shabbat brings with it humility in its reminders that who we are counts more.

While we can't slow down time, we can learn to slow ourselves down. We need Shabbat. We need rest. Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, founder of the Restful Company, writes extensively about the power and health benefits of rest in his book entitled, *Rest – Why you get more done when you work less* (2018). He advocates how rest not only makes us more productive and more creative, but also makes our lives richer and more fulfilling. He writes, "Rest is, first of all, a philosophical effort at reintegrating our bifurcated selves." He challenges the notion that rest is just about not working. Rather, he says, rest should be deliberate. "Rest helps restore our mental and physical well-being, gives us energy, focus, and resilience. Downtime is when we're most likely to have ideas, inspiration, and creative breakthroughs."

It turns out that Shabbat may be the Jews' greatest gift to humanity. Christian author J. Dana Trent, offers, "Regardless of stage of life or level of interest in religious practice, sabbath is accessible to Jews each week. It is a gift that can be opened or rejected." Rooted in the Israelites' history of enslavement, she continues, "For Jews, sabbath is the gift of time God granted to a shackled people who did not own their own time. The most rebellious thing enslaved persons can do with their time is to use it for awe – not production." (*For Sabbath's Sake*, 2017)

This evening, I would like to offer three ways that we can enhance our Shabbat rest, *menucha* in Hebrew. The first is to reignite the magic. Call to mind the senses, the aromas of Shabbat. The challah, our favorite foods, the glow of the candles, special clothes, the *oneg* (which we often associate with cookies, but the word really means joy). The music. The closeness with family and friends. The feeling that this is different, holy time. That is the mystery and the magic. I fondly recall Shabbat dinners with classmates and friends in Jerusalem, around a table of delicious food, that lingered

late into the night. The magic is so palpable that we are sad to see it go, so we breathe in the Havdallah spice to revive our souls and try to take a little Shabbat sweetness with us into our week.

Shabbat is like the Disney World of time. The Magic Kingdom. The most magical place on earth. In his classic book *The Sabbath* (1951), Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls Shabbat a “palace in time.” He writes, “The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere... The Sabbath is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

And herein lies the challenge. This magic, this holiness in time, doesn’t just happen. We have to create it and welcome it. We have to pause and notice it, otherwise Shabbat will pass us by. We have to ignite the spark. It doesn’t have to be elaborate, it just needs to be special, a simple change from the ordinary. Preschool kids get this intuitively. As early as Tuesday one of our Shalom Corner students will ask me with anticipation and excitement, “Is it Shabbat?!”

For adults, creating the Shabbat magic requires a little planning ahead. To pick up some challah. To try to end the workday a little early. And if that is not possible it is okay. Some years ago, a frazzled mother wrote a piece called, “Shirley, just bring home a pizza [for Shabbat].” (In *40 Things You Can Do to Save the Jewish People*, Joel Lurie Grishaver) You don’t have to do it alone. Participate in *Shabbat Babayit*, an initiative at Temple Beth David that bring people together to celebrate Shabbat in each other’s homes. Shabbat is the magical atmosphere that you create. This magic helps us to slow down and appreciate time and one another.

The second way that we can enhance Shabbat rest is to consider the *mitzvot* of Shabbat, the inherit Jewish structure of time that guides our days and weeks. Of the 10 Commandments, Shabbat is #4. The Torah says, “*shamor v’zachor*,” keep and remember the Sabbath. (Exodus 20:8, Deuteronomy 5:12) While the Torah says don’t work, the Talmud (Tractate Shabbat) spells out 39 categories of work that we should avoid. Most relate to work of the land, but we could extrapolate to today, such as avoiding screens, especially work-related screens. Try a Shabbat unplugged from our phones. Imagine the subsequent feeling of ease. There are also the positive commandments, not just the “do nots.” Light candles, say blessings around the table, pray, study Torah in the broadest sense to further your own learning. This framework of mitzvot can help us *deliberatively* carve out time for rest.

And it is often easier to do *mitzvot*, to celebrate Shabbat with others, in community. If it is hard to resist the pull of our own busy and harried lives, try coming together for focused time for reflection, to raise up voices together in song, and to reinforce shared values and beliefs. Get a Shabbat buddy. Keeping and remembering Shabbat is a team effort. And this is a gift to especially cultivate in the post-Covid years of forced isolation. We begin most Shabbat services at temple with the words from the Psalms,

“Hinei ma tov uma naim shevet achim gam yachad – How good and pleasant it is to be together.” (Psalm 133:1)

But don't just take it from your rabbi. In a new blog post created last year by our religious practices committee, one temple member Alyson Miller shared why she comes to services (excerpt):

“My life, like I'm sure so many others, is very busy. Between jobs, children, responsibilities, overload of emails, life is busy! Sometimes, when early evening on Fridays come, all I want to do is lay on the couch. Sometimes, there's more to get done or other places to be. Unlike in Israel, places don't shut down and events don't stop; there are still sports games happening or events to attend. But sometimes, I desire the opportunity to “end the week,” to take the opportunity to take a deep breath and be present in the moment of Shabbat.

Shabbat, after all, is just that, to be able to slow down and shut down. And let's face it, sometimes we need to force ourselves to do that!

When I come to temple on Friday nights, I'm put in a different head-space and with a different mind-set. I actually don't really settle in until the Shabbat candles are lit and the blessing is said. This is when I take my first deep sigh and tell myself, “It's time to end the week.” I remind myself that the world is much bigger than my personal world, and I appreciate the reminder to get out of my own head.

I come as well, in all honesty, because it's a short service. It's just over an hour. It's an ‘easy-lift’ for something that really feels so good to my soul.”

A third way to enhance Shabbat in our lives is to embrace your personal need for rest, renewal, and recovery. Rest might look different for each of us. Walking, running, reading, napping, a massage, listening to music, playing music, watching a movie, playing a game, delighting in nature, being alone, meditating and musing. What does rest look like for *you*?

Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith, an internal medicine physician writes about seven types of rest – physical, mental, emotional, social, sensory, creative, and spiritual. In advocating to make rest a priority, she speaks of three “Rs” – renew your energy, restore your sanity, recover your life. (*Sacred Rest*, 2017) Rest is not a break from life but a source of life. The Kabbalists were right that Shabbat feeds both body and the soul. This is basic self-care and more; Shabbat is revival, gratitude, identity and belonging.

What *could* your Shabbat rest look like? While I still dream of the ideal 24-hour break, I find more success in thinking about “Shabbat moments,” sacred glimpses of relaxing, special time. An hour, an evening, an afternoon, maybe stretching those moments into a day. Like many rabbis, I strive for Shabbat moments on Mondays. Certainly a Reform Shabbat practice embraces flexibility and fluidity.

Sometimes rabbis give the sermons they want to hear. I need Shabbat and I invite you to take the Shabbat challenge with me this year. Read any opinion page and you will see article after article about burnout and fatigue. The struggle is real. Shabbat is an

ancient remedy for modern problems. I encourage you to find moments of Shabbat magical holiness, moments of Shabbat *mitzvah* and remembrance, and moments of Shabbat rest. When we do this, we not only repair ourselves; we also repair our world. Shabbat is where we combat loneliness and find community. Shabbat is where ritual meets ethics. When we pause from our work, we model the moral values of fair labor, and needed care and rest for our planet.

I leave you with this counter-cultural prayer from Sam Hamilton-Poore's *Earth Gospel*:

Grant me grace this day
to rest and remember
that there is nothing I have to do,
nothing I have to buy or sell,
nothing I have to produce or consume
in order to become who I already am:
your beloved creation.
 May your overworked creation
 and those who cannot yet rest today
 come to know the liberation of your sabbath.

The Chelmites were right about one thing, we all want to capture the moon. We all want to slow time down and claim it for our own. Tonight, let us resolve to pause, to sanctify time, to find moments to rest and breathe. May it be so as the New Moon of 5784 rises in the sky.

Anthem - Let's Be Still by The Head and the Heart