

Rosh Hashanah 5784  
Finding Rest Amidst Chaos

Once upon a time, there was a woman who thought she had it all. She built up a successful career that allowed her to do meaningful work. She had a loving husband who supported her every move. She had sweet children whom she loved dearly and did everything she could to spend time with them, to be there for every major event, to show her love for them with actions and words. She had a great circle of friends who supported her and she supported them in return. She loved her life. She loved her family. She loved her career. And she was exhausted.

You see, the woman was trying so hard to hold everything together and keep all the plates spinning, she wore herself out completely. And then, one more plate was added to her circus, and she just could not keep them going. She collapsed in a tired heap. She cried. She told her husband, “I just can’t do it all!” She was beyond fatigued. It was too much for any one person to handle, try as she might.

I’m sure many of you are wondering: who is this mysterious woman? Is it me? Is it someone in this room? Is it a fictional story intended as a cautionary tale? In truth, it’s based off a tv character from the show, “And Just Like That,” the mediocre spin-off of the popular series, “Sex and the City.” But in reality, it could easily be me, or you, or any singular person sitting in this room today.

We have all been in the same place as the woman I described. We have woken up, already overwhelmed with the day ahead. We have laid awake at night, item after item rolling around through our heads, keeping us from sleep, creating anxiety about what needs to be accomplished. Did I make that doctor appointment? How much time is left until the project is completed? Will I have a free moment to run that errand? Who needs me the most tomorrow? Did all of my to-dos get to-done?

Many of us lead stressful, busy lives. We have careers and jobs and school that take up much of our time. Even when a job is fulfilling and meaningful, they tend to spill over into our day with an invasiveness that makes it nearly impossible to strike a balance in life. Even the pieces of our lives meant to provide us with joy, our families and sometimes friends, have a tendency to absorb so much of our time, and not always in the best sense.

I thought about this a great deal over the summer, in particular after reading a somewhat disturbing social media post on a private rabbinic Facebook group. One of my colleagues anonymously asked a seemingly innocuous question. They simply stated, “How many hours do you work a week?”

For those who took the time to count and respond, the answers spanned between 50-80 hours a week, with most answering in the 65-70 hour range. The reality of those cold, hard numbers made my stomach drop. I considered what my response would have been and sadly, it was the same.

This is not a sustainable number of hours for *anyone* to work, not rabbis, not lawyers, not teachers, not health care professionals, not administrators, not tech people, not retail workers, not hard laborers, not anyone! We are not meant to eat, breathe, and sleep our jobs; life is meant to be lived and enjoyed. Even more so, we do not feel well and function well if we do not get enough rest. By working this many hours, we are assuring that even our most basic needs are not being met. And, if someone has additional responsibilities at home, such as caring for others, it feels impossible to find adequate rest.

Obviously, our physical bodies require rest every day. We were not built to work for hours on end without a break. We need sleep each day, but we also need to separate ourselves from work, both physically and mentally.

In fact, this morning we read from the creation story which explicitly outlines the need for rest. God began to create the world by separating light from dark, then sky from water, and land appeared next. Soon plants bloomed, bearing fruit to eat and leaves to provide shade from the sun, which came next, and the moon. The seas began to swarm with creatures big and small, scales flashing in the sunlight, smooth fins cutting through the water. Great furry beasts roamed the dry land next, sharp claws digging into the earth, wings flying through the sky, roars and squawks and grunts echoing through the hills. Then the final creation, the most complex, the most intricate and delicate vessel, the human being.

After the intensity and exhaustion of creating THE ENTIRE WORLD, God needed a respite. We read in Genesis, “On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken: [God] ceased on the seventh day from doing any of the work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy- having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done” (Genesis 2:2-3).

That rest became Shabbat, the day we celebrate every single week. Scholar after scholar, sage after sage, teacher after teacher have written about Shabbat, its significance in our lives as Jews, but even more so as humans. We are commanded to both remember *and* observe Shabbat each week. As Reform Jews, our observance tends to look differently than our friends in other branches of Judaism. While many of us continue to drive, cook, work, and utilize electronics during this holy day, we still take time to create our own Shabbat. For some, Shabbat means taking a break from social media. For others, it means attending services or Torah study, or both. For others, it means taking time to be with family, with friends, with community.

For each of us, the hope and prayer are that Shabbat creates true rest. That we get a break from the everyday hustle and bustle, time to separate ourselves from the intensity of the work and school week. Shabbat is identified as holy, as sacred, as something special and worthwhile. In his well-known and beloved book, “The Sabbath,” Abraham Joshua Heschel explains the significance of Shabbat and why it is such an imperative part of our lives:

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It 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 (p. 10).<sup>1</sup>

As Heschel so beautifully states, Shabbat commands that we forgo the heaviness of the work week and the challenges of the world to merely exist. In doing so, we create holiness, holiness that allows us to reconnect with the world around us. To reconnect, to remember why we are alive, to celebrate that life with joy and gladness. Shabbat is truly a radical notion and perhaps the greatest give Judaism has given the world.

For many, we cannot allow ourselves the opportunity to enjoy Shabbat, or other moments as rest, even ones we have established. The challenge with creating moments of rest lies within our inability as humans to leave a task undone, to take a moment to disconnect. For many of us, we are ingrained with a need to keep working, to keep the momentum up, to accomplish all there is to accomplish. We sometimes see ourselves and others as weak for not holding strong, for not behaving as though they are a work horse.

And yet, that is *not* our task. In all of our sacred Torah, there is not a single verse that says, “You shall labor from dawn until dusk, 24/7, 365 days a year.” While there are many jobs that require constant work, the onus is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Heschel, A. J. (2005). *The Sabbath*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

on a single person, but rather, we are meant to share the load and create more balance for ourselves, both as individuals and as a community.

Balance is the key to making our lives more fulfilled, more sustainable, more livable. Finding that balance may be one of the greatest challenges we encounter. However, by understanding why balance is so crucial, we may be better able to obtain it.

One source that helped me to understand the importance of balance came from a not so unexpected, yet lovely place. For the past 21 years, the Jewels of Elul blog-turned-daily-email created by musician Craig Taubman has filled my inbox with words of wisdom and inspiration. This project began as a way to bring new insights to people during the month of Elul as a way to prepare for the High Holy Days. Each year, the Jewels take on a new theme and new authors. These writers range from archbishops to self-help authors, from rabbis to college students, from politicians to parents.

This year's theme of "Finding Balance" feels particularly poignant. One of the introductions came from Rabbi David Wolpe, a rabbi emeritus and visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School. He wrote:

We are not built to be "completists" - as the Rabbis say, each of us leaves this world without half of our wishes fulfilled. We simply will never do everything we could or hope to, and acceptance is part of balance...Each morning we ask ourselves in the daily prayers, "What are we? What is our life?" Those questions begin to restore us to ourselves, to the important spheres of our life, to embrace what matters and what endures. There is no perfect equilibrium; we rebalance every day.

Rabbi Wolpe reminds us, part of finding balance is accepting that we cannot do everything. And, neither are we expected to do it all. We created that expectation of ourselves, but it is impossible and unrealistic. For now, the difficulty will be embracing the understanding that truly living means taking things in stride, giving ourselves the patience and ability to say no, and to take it upon ourselves to rest, relax, and rejuvenate.

In truth, this was a difficult sermon for me to write. I struggled with the concept and theme of my remarks from the beginning. Why? Because finding balance in my own life is something that creates a significant challenge for me. It's practically a foreign concept. I often work myself to the proverbial bone. I prioritize work events over family time, I occasionally forget important dates and special moments. I spent last night leading services rather than celebrating my oldest daughter's birthday! Well, that one is more understandable, and I hope, forgivable...

As we begin another New Year, a time gifted to us so that we can once again renew ourselves and commitments to the others, we take a moment to consider how we want to change in the year to come. So, as it is Shabbat, I invite us all to just exist in this holy time for just a few seconds. Just breathe. Just be here.

::10 second break::

We have created Shabbat. We have created holiness. We have rested, even briefly. We have the opportunity to create Shabbat every week. We can light the candles, enjoy some fruit of the vine, bless the challah, all while not looking at our phones. We can establish Shabbat in our homes and in our lives, all while fulfilling the mitzvah of keeping and remembering Shabbat. And, we can do it every single week.

But beyond Shabbat, we can work towards building true rest in our lives, We can set boundaries and limits to how much we can take on. We can prioritize the lives of those most special to us. Instead of waiting for joyful moments to occur, we can create them by making sure there is space for them. In doing so, we assure that we are truly living.

Journalist and essayist Ahad Ha'am once wrote, "More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." May we continue to sustain ourselves, our families, and our community by allowing us to rest, to explore, to live and love fully, to find the holy balance that is so necessary. And then, we will have a sweet, joyful, blessed year to come, and many more to follow.

*Shana Tova u'Metukah*, may you all have a sweet, restful New Year.