

Rosh Hashanah 5777: Ritual Resolutions

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Temple Beth Or, Raleigh, North Carolina, October 3rd, 2016

Dear Rabbi,

Shanah tovah! I am writing to you because I am afraid I have not been a very good Jew this year. Somehow, every time I planned to come to services or a temple event, life got in the way. I just started a new job which has been stressful and far more time-consuming than I expected. My children all made the high level soccer teams they tried out for, and to top it off, we just moved my parents down from New Jersey so we can take better care of them. I really wanted to come--something just always came up! Here's the thing: I definitely love being Jewish. Spending time with other Jews always reminds me how important my Jewish identity is to me. We have such a rich connection to history, our TBO community is so wonderful, and I know the prayers we sing during services always relax me. So rabbi, what can I, a 21st century Reform Jew living in America, do to be a better Jew in the new year?

Sincerely,

Rosh Hashanah Resolution Maker

Before you ask, no, I did not actually receive this letter. And no, I don't believe in 'good Jews' and 'bad Jews.' My role as a rabbi is not to judge Jewishness. My role is to guide and facilitate Jewish journeys. Each expression of Judaism is authentic and valid. At the same time, over the past year, I have repeatedly heard the sentiments of this letter expressed.

We are proud to be Jews. That is a truth. We are living busy and hectic lives. That too is a truth. And in seeking to make meaning out of our busy and hectic lives, we judge ourselves for our level of participation in Jewish life.

With all of these truths, a tension emerges: we do not have time, energy, or capacity enough to fully participate in all of the aspects of our lives that can bring us meaning. As a result, we judge ourselves harshly when held to an impossible standard. We end up feeling inadequate and uncomfortable and at a loss for what to do.

You are all here today. While each of us has our own--and perhaps multiple--reasons for being here, there is something in our being that pulls us toward Judaism on a day that, in the world around us, is just like any other day. But for us, as Jews, it is sacred and set apart.

In a hectic world with many competing interests, there is comfort in ritual. The act of repeating a practice has the power to transform us and the

way we interact with the world. We can create for ourselves consistency in an inconsistent world.

The sentiments of the letter I opened with expressed a connection and commitment to Jewish identity. Identity does not magically appear; it must be cultivated. We cultivate identity both in our smallest actions and in our largest. We engage in Jewish life and Jewish practice because we believe it is valuable and it is both an intrinsic and an explicit part of who we are.

All of these reasons describe where we find the motivation to expand our Jewish living. Once we agree about its importance, there is another key component: practice.

This summer, I had the outstanding opportunity to spend two weeks at 6 Points Sports Academy in Greensboro. I started each morning with the softball major. After stretching and running, the coach required one more warm-up: planks. The first day, we held the plank for 25 seconds. Each day, we increased that amount by a few seconds. At the end of second session, we started the morning by holding a plank for 50 seconds. If that were the ask on the first day, I know for sure that I would not have been able to do it. But the frequent repetition of a small action built upon itself. Just like batting

practice makes stronger ball players, so too does Jewish practice make stronger, more engaged Jews.

Imagine with me what this could look like, if we started small and built up our Jewish practice. Of all the Jewish holidays, Shabbat occurs most frequently, and it lends itself to many interpretations of Jewish living. Thus, I am going to use the frame of Shabbat as we explore little acts that we might do in order to add meaning and consistency to our life in the new year.

Another reason for looking towards Shabbat is that, in ten days, we will observe what many call the holiest day of the year. The Torah has another name for Yom Kippur: Shabbat Hashabbaton. In Heblish, that fine combination of English and Hebrew, we would call it the Shabbat of all Shabbats. As an expression, this teaches us that in order to understand the sacredness and holiness of Yom Kippur, we must also comprehend and experience the holiness and sacredness of Shabbat.

In the words of V'shamru, which we sing joyously on Friday nights, we find the phrase *la'asot et Hashabbat*. *La'asot* means to act. To make. To do. In some ways, like the song by Alanis Morissette, this is a little ironic. We are talking about ways to *la'asot* Shabbat when Shabbat is intended to be a day of rest. But doing something; something small, something repeatedly,

something regularly, something intentionally becomes a different kind of doing. A kind of doing that brings wholeness and meaning.

Amidst the chaos and busy-ness of 21st century American Jewish life, I want to offer three different kinds of opportunity we have to infuse our lives with greater Jewish meaning and practice: add a Jewish intention to a ritual you are currently doing, adopt a ritual already associated with Shabbat, and create a ritual associated with the idea of Shabbat.

One: add Jewish intention to a ritual you are currently doing,

A few weeks ago, I walked into one of our religious school classrooms, and the teacher asked the students how they celebrate Shabbat.

“You could take a nap,” one student offered.

“Ooo I know,” said another, “don’t use your phone.”

“Spend time with family or go to services,” proposed a third.

“You are right. Those could all be great ways to celebrate Shabbat. But what practices do you actually *do* to celebrate Shabbat?”

The room fell silent.

One student raised his hand.

“Well, it’s not for Shabbat, but my family goes out to dinner every Friday to celebrate the end of the school and work week.”

What if it were for Shabbat? Nothing would necessarily need to change except an intention to make it about Shabbat. For a family who usually eats dinner at home every night, going out to dinner as a family on Friday night can be a Shabbat practice. Many of us have rituals we already perform. What would it take to make them Jewish?

Maybe your family always eats breakfast together on Saturday--that breakfast can become Pancake Shabbat. Or perhaps you can add a single Shabbat song so that you are cognizant of what day it is.

Maybe Shabbat means soccer tournaments or gymnastics meets or dance competitions. How about adding some Jewish music in the car on your way there? Or adding a prayer of thanks that you are able to move your body in a way that allows you to participate in those activities?

Maybe you have a glass of wine every Friday to relax from the week; what if you added a simple blessing over the wine to that routine?

By adding a small intention; by remembering and then acknowledging, a non-Shabbat practice can become a Shabbat practice. Are there rituals or routines that you already do on Friday night or Saturday? Is there a way to

add a Shabbat pause, an intentional Jewish component, into our hectic 21st century lives?

Reframing an existing practice is way to seek out meaning. The second and third options are, without a doubt, more challenging. Rather than jumping right into creating a brand new practice, let us start with adding Jewish rituals that are already a part of our shared heritage. Remember: start small. Over time and through repetition, intentional actions build.

In *L'cha Dodi*, another piece of our Friday night liturgy, we find reference to two biblical quotes about Shabbat: *shamor v'zachor bidibur echad*. In Exodus, we are instructed to *zachor* Shabbat; remember Shabbat. And in Deuteronomy, we are told to *shamor* Shabbat. *Shamor* can be translated to mean protect. The same Hebrew letters form the word *shomer*, or guard. Anyone who has attended Jewish summer camp knows that counselors on duty late into the evenings are on *shmira*.

We have a responsibility to be aware of and protect Jewish time. The positive commandment of *zachor*, that we are to remember, might lead to our observation of rituals such as candles, kiddush, and motzi on Friday night--things that mark Jewish time. Remembering Shabbat might also lead to attending services either Friday night or Saturday morning. If knowledge

of Hebrew is stopping you, say the prayer in English! If you don't have challah, any bread will do!

At the same time, the commandment to *shamor* or protect, also includes prohibitions: no driving, no cooking, no writing, no spending money. Would we be able to refrain from one or more of these for a whole day? Or maybe, designating a couple of hours where we commit to abiding by the prohibition would be more achievable?

Our tradition includes a number of other Shabbat practices that some of us might want to try out this New Year. In addition to the three blessings we are familiar with on Friday nights, there is a blessing for washing of the hands. It comes after Kiddush and before motzi. The practice originated from a need for purification before offering a sacrifice. Today, perhaps it can be viewed as washing away the struggles and difficulties and strains of the week. Once we wash hands, some who do choose to remain silent until after we have completed motzi and tasted a bite of challah. The reason behind this practice is to avoid any hold up; the meal is intended to begin immediately after hand washing, and conversation might prevent the expediency of it. A different interpretation could be taking that moment to pause and relish the moment of quiet. Maybe this is a new practice you want to try out.

On Saturday in the late afternoon, we have the opportunity to participate in another Shabbat practice known as *s'edat shlishit*. *S'edat Shlishit* means “third meal” and it comes from a time when the typical practice was to eat two meals per day. Shabbat was different and, just like the Israelites received two portions of manna on Shabbat, Jews would partake in a third meal on Saturday afternoon. The meal is frequently accompanied by singing, studying, and discussion. The goal is to gather, to eat [as Jews tend to do at gatherings], and to enjoy the afternoon. What could it look like to celebrate Shabbat with a *s'edat shlishit*?

I have a bumper sticker from the Israel Religious Action Center that reads *yesh yoteir miderech echad l'hiot yehudi*, there is more than one way to be a Jew. Since this is the case, let's add another type of practice to consider adopting in the New Year.

If we think about Shabbat more generally as a palace in time, a piece of the week different from other days, we can find additional ways to practice our Judaism.

We can approach Shabbat like we would approach the active rest day in a physical training plan. Shabbat exists as a time to nourish our spirit,

body, and mind, actively, yet differently from the other days of training.

Additionally, if we look towards the spirit of the laws instead of the letter of the law, endless possibilities for creating Shabbat moments emerge.

Maybe Shabbat means setting aside one hour of the day in which your phone stays in your room and you actively disengage from it. Maybe Shabbat means not wearing a watch. In so doing, you offer yourself the opportunity to be free from time and deadlines. You can be present in the moment as the day unfolds. Maybe Shabbat means getting up without an alarm. Maybe Shabbat means cooking a special meal for dinner not because it's practical, but because you like cooking and don't frequently get the chance. Maybe Shabbat can include napping, meditating, exercising, reading a good book, catching up with a friend.

How can you make Shabbat different from the rest of the week?

We sit here on *Rosh Hashanah*, the start of a brand new year. We dedicate time towards evaluating the last year and thinking about what we'd like to change going forward. Every single person here--myself included--could have been more Jewishly engaged. We each have the capacity to incorporate additional meaningful Jewish practice into our lives.

Without a doubt, it will look different from person to person, and it will take some work and effort. But I want to suggest that we use this day, this new year, to commit to trying something new--something small--when it comes to Jewish practice. Through engagement, we can work to make meaning, feel connection, and add value to our lives.

Dear Rosh Hashanah Resolution Maker,

Shanah tovah! It is so great to hear from you! You sound incredibly busy and I am so grateful that you took the time to e-mail me. I believe that there are many opportunities within Jewish life to make small changes, try out rituals, interpret our tradition, and add meaning and value to our lives. You might start by adding a Jewish intention to something you already do ritually. You could also consider adopting a new practice: either one that interprets Jewish law for yourself and preserves the spirit of the law or one that Jews have been practicing for centuries. I am here to support you in your efforts!

With whichever action you choose, remember that practice is the key. Let me know what you decide to try out in this New Year!

Sincerely,
Your Rabbi