

Shabbat in Strange Times

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There's an expression in Yiddish, "*nisht ahin, nisht aher*," which I was taught meant "neither a hen nor a rabbit." I have since learned that it is more appropriately translated as "neither thither nor hither," that is, "neither here nor there," betwixt and between.

That is how some people have described feeling this week—we've been working, but at home. The kids have been out of school, but it's not vacation. There's a feeling of great threat and anxiety, yet we are urged not to exaggerate the statistical risk. Is this a temporary interruption of our lives, or should we try to adjust to this state as a new normal?

In a situation like ours, when we come to the weekend, is it any different from the days that have come before?

My retired friends have told me that even without the straight jacket of a work week, they do choose to differentiate between weekdays and weekends, and that adding that element of structure enriches their lives.

For traditional Jews, there is no question of every day being the same. When Friday rolls around, it is Shabbat, a taste of the world to come. It is Shabbat, whether you are at home or on vacation, in good times and in bad. It is interesting to me, the language we use. We "make" Shabbat. We ask, "Have you made

Shabbat?” Though we describe it in our prayers as a natural cycle of the universe, we also recognize that it exists based on our behavior.

Many years ago, when I was a rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College in New York, I lived in a terrible apartment near Union Square in Manhattan. This was decades before it became the lovely farmer’s market it is today. When I lived there, nothing legal was sold, and occasionally, late at night, we could hear blood-curdling screams without being able to tell where they came from. My apartment, which lacked almost any natural light, was exceedingly depressing, so it was only the discipline of my family’s Shabbat observance during my childhood that motivated me on Friday afternoon to pull out the tablecloth and the dishes, set up the candles, and make Shabbat. But I have to admit, by the time I did all of that, I was in a different place, almost as if I had received that proverbial extra Shabbat soul.

It is easy right now to focus on all the things that we can’t do and to find the enforced disruption of our regular activities a draconian punishment. We didn’t choose self-isolation, and it deprives us of things that are important to our lives. But seasons of ceasing were once part of human life, and we may find our enforced sabbatical gives us a different vantage point on the world around us. And I wonder whether it is exactly in this strange time, when one day blends into the next, that the rhythm of Shabbat has the most to offer us.

Those who work at home all the time tell me that once the first excitement of being able to go to work in pajamas and having only a five-second commute

passes, they have to find ways to create a division between work and home, even if they are in their own living room. I'd say that may apply right now.

If we can we set this day apart—making Shabbat special time—then we may be able to make it holy and, in doing so, combat some of the anxiety and stress that are with us right now.

Our weekly Torah portion, Vayakhel, begins with the commandment to observe the Shabbat. That seems strange, since we have already received this instruction twice: first, as part of the Ten Commandments, and before that, as guidance to the Israelites in the wilderness. The traditional explanation is that because the building of the *Mishkan* was holy work, one might have argued that the rules of Shabbat didn't apply. Perhaps that's where we are today, wondering whether we still need Shabbat if we don't have clearly defined work days. And for me, the answer is yes. We must find ways to make this day *Kadosh*, Holy, set apart, different from other days. Even in our limited circumstances, can we do something different than we have done all week? Is there something we don't ordinarily do—or something special we can do—that connects us with our Judaism and its potential to lift us up and soothe us? In normal times, my Confirmation students tell me it is too hard not to do homework on Saturday because they need that time to get everything accomplished, but perhaps now they can take a day off. For some, making this Shabbat change may be found in traditional observance; for example, is this the time to add an improvised Havdalah to your repertoire? For others, you will define your own unique way of making Shabbat a day of refreshment and peace.

Ahad Ha'am, who loved Jewish tradition but was not a traditionally observant Jew, still reached this conclusion: More than Jews have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jews. So, may the Shabbat help to keep us during this difficult time.