

Shabbat in its beautiful and simple wisdom guides us in this new year. This first day of 5784 begins on a holiday that comes each and every week. It is as if our new year is telling us to consider the beauty and value of Shabbat. The word Shabbat literally means to cease. To stop what we are doing, to stop producing. Our new year begins in this magical pause: a vision of balance and peace.

We begin with a pause.

That pause has a name in Hebrew: menucha. A single word that conjures up happiness, stillness, and harmony. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, “Menucha is the state wherein humans lie still, the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.”¹ It describes a true pause for our bodies, minds and our souls.

Philosopher Ahad Ha'am taught: “More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.” Shabbat in its essence is the institution that grounds us as a people.

¹ The Sabbath, Heschel, p. 23

It even grounds us in space. Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon, traveled to space on the shuttle Columbia twenty years ago. Ramon felt it important to observe shabbat on this journey as a representative of Jews everywhere. Before the shuttle launch, Ramon sought the counsel of a local rabbi, Zvi Konikov, on how to observe the Sabbath in orbit. Two weeks with multiple sunsets a day certainly complicated sabbath observance.

Even in the midst of an extraordinary experience, with important scientific and technological responsibilities, Ramon found a way to observe shabbat. He prioritized what was most important to him even amidst grueling duties.

Tragically, upon return to earth the entire crew of the Columbia perished. Remembering Ramon on his 20th yahrtzeit this year, paying homage to his faith and values, Rabbi Konikov wrote,

"Ilan taught us a powerful message. No matter how fast we're going, no matter how important our work, we must pause and think about why we're here on Earth."

How true for us as well, especially today, on Rosh Hashanah. No matter how relentless our days, no matter how busy we are, no matter how

important our tasks, we, too, must pause. The Sabbath and the New Year bestow exactly this gift of perspective and reflection.

Cantor Seplowin might remind us that music theory teaches us to value each rest as much as each note. To not count that space detracts from the rhythm of the entire piece. The same is true for public speaking. As my friend and mentor Barbara Tannenbaum teaches, the power of the pause is that it enables us to better hear what comes before and then to focus on what comes after. Neuroscience supports this as well². We listen with the same part of our brains to the pause as we do to the speaking. Like shabbat, a pause is not an absence, it is a presence.

Nature rests through its own sabbaticals. Consider how trees go dormant in the winter, a process necessary for fruit bearing in the spring. If dormancy is prevented, the species will eventually die. This biological model of imposed fallowness occurs in order to nourish and replenish. It is one deeply suggestive of our own necessity to find some kind of rest in order to cultivate our inner lives.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/10/science/silence-sound-hear.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

From Archimedes' "Eureka" in the bath to Newton's apple, history is filled with brilliance conceived in a moment of pause. Think of how many good ideas come to us in the shower. Perhaps that is because it can be the only quiet we find in a day filled with notifications and obligations.

Shabbat is so much more than a day off. It is a system of meaning. It gives us a way to make sense of our strivings. On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the creation of the world. We pause on our entrance to this new year and reflect: look at what we have created in the past year. We examine our mistakes and make adjustments in the year to come. We learn that pausing is productive. Our tradition teaches emphatically and unequivocally that rest is part of the creation story. On the seventh day God rests and contemplates creation. Rest is an essential part of our own creativity as we build the world as we hope it can be.

Shabbat is not about what we cannot do. It is about making what we can do count. Prohibitions are the least of it. Shabbat is about finding tranquility and calmness.

Even the technology that hinders our rest teaches us about this pause.

What do we do when our devices are not working as they should? The first troubleshooting advice is alwaysTurn it off and Unplug it. Shabbat is that reset of our own glitches.

The idea of the sabbath is collective. In the Jewish tradition, Shabbat is not to be made alone if we can help it; it is the connections to friends and family and community that set this day apart as holy. Sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the phrase “collective effervescence.” It is his way to describe joy and connectivity people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Our ancient rabbis discovered this concept centuries before and they called it Oneg. Oneg is more than the babka and cookies we share after services. It describes the specific joy in being together on a day when we have no other place we need to rush off to be.

It is within this sacred construct that we find the space to be our best selves. Shabbat is a day to reclaim our own humanity so that we may fully see that of others.

Forty years ago, two social psychologists ran an experiment on students at Princeton Theological Seminary. The students were told that they had varying degrees of time to reach their destination. Along the way, they passed a person in obvious distress, slumped along a building. The researchers wanted to see who would stop to help.

The only group who stopped were those who were not in any hurry at all. Those who were rushing to their next engagement didn't even didn't see the person or perceive their distress. This study came to the conclusion "ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily life increases."³

When we feel as though we must produce or deliver, the pressure takes a toll on our compassion and empathy.

A friend shared the story of a college president who was running late to a speaking engagement. When he finally arrived on the podium he told the assembled crowd about the tremendous traffic on his way there. He was singly focused on arriving on time to speak. As he made his way through the congestion he saw the problem. A car had broken down. In a vehicle on the shoulder, a woman in distress waved frantically. He was so eager to

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/podcasts/ezra-klein-show-transcript-judith-shulevitz.html>

get to his destination on time, it wasn't until he had passed her that he realized that woman was his wife. The way we hurry through life, from one thing to the next impacts how we are fully able to see one another.

We live in a culture that pushes us to calendar even more activities into our busy lives. When we hold up action and accomplishment as the only goal, we lose out on knowing one another and in delight in simple quiet moments.

We struggle to put down our phones, to not react to social media, return emails, answer texts. I am the worst among us—sometimes we write the sermon we need to hear. Shabbat reminds us to stop being control freaks. 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 in anxiety to make sure it was all working.”⁴ Shabbat brings with it humility in its reminders that what we do is not that important after all. Who we are and how we treat one another counts more. Few of us do such important work that we can't pause for a day.

⁴ Walter Bruegemann as quoted in *Here All Along* by Sara Hurwitz.

For pausing is where we reclaim our humanity. Without it, we run the risk of doing real harm to our neshama, our souls. We can make Shabbat by allowing ourselves to let go of our schedules for one day and instead allowing ourselves quietude and dormancy, to regenerate and continue. A time to stop purchasing and producing, and to embrace being.

I am not offering a guilt trip to get you into our pews each week. Rabbi Neimeiser, Cantor Seplowin and I do hope you'll join us, but on your terms. I write these words because of what I see in our community and in the world. Exhausted parents (including myself) barely finding time for a stale cracker between carpools. Workplaces take over our home lives with the expansion of digital means. Overscheduled and over committed days, weeks and years wear us down. Read any opinion page in the newspaper of your choice and you will see article after article about burnout and loneliness. The struggle is real. Shabbat is an ancient remedy for modern problems.

One wise teacher writes that “Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms.”⁵

Shabbat exists to teach us how we can be our best selves and in so doing build the world as we dream it can be.

This Rosh Hashanah, we begin with Shabbat.

Let us find menucha, a true repose of body and spirit.

Let us find oneg, that collective effervescence.

And let it transform us and the world in this new year.

⁵ Walter Bruegemann, *The Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No To the Culture of Now*