

## Rebuilding Our Palace in Time

It's late on Friday afternoon, and people are already scurrying frantically. Everyone knows that, in just a few short hours, the sun will set beyond the horizon, and the very nature of life will change. Precious little time remains to buy the last of the groceries, to pick up flowers for the table, to visit a favorite bakery for the *challah* that's been anticipated all week long. Cars hurry past, their drivers anxious to return home into the arms of awaiting family and friends. Shop doors begin to close and lock, their shades are now drawn. The traffic dissipates until the streets appear intended for pedestrians rather than Volkswagens. The siren blares, its shrill blast reaching every ear in the city, causing one's pulse to momentarily quicken and then leaving only a profound calm in its wake. Shabbat has arrived in Jerusalem.

Seven hours later, and roughly 5,500 miles away, the sun begins to set here in Needham. Trader Joes, Sudbury Farms, and Roche Brothers will all be open for several more hours, and the town's dozens of restaurants are gearing up for the Friday night dinner rush. Central, Highland, and Great Plain Avenues look like parking lots as residents stream home from a long week at the office. The train drops hundreds of commuters back at their cars. On its way out of town, the train's horn wails. Shabbat has arrived in Needham. Well, kind of. The sun has set. There are visible stars in the sky. But is there evidence of the Sabbath's arrival in our homes, in our actions, in our souls?

We ought not beat ourselves up for not quite achieving the Jerusalem experience here. We cannot expect our entire society to create what Abraham Joshua Heschel called a "palace in time," a 24 hour period dedicated to rest, reflection, and renewal. We should, however, be able to count on the fellow members of our Beth Shalom family to encourage, support, and invite one another to take full advantage of this incredible gift that our tradition has bestowed upon us and upon our world.

"Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy," speaks God from atop Mount Sinai. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of Adonai your God."<sup>1</sup>

One would think that this commandment is a divine "gimme." "Take a day off from the usual grind," says God. "Make it something different than the rest of the week...something special." When compared with the others, this seems so simple. "Honor your mother and father" can be hard sometimes. Just ask our four-year-old...or worse yet, ask my parents! "Don't covet other people's stuff?" By the time we realize it's happening, we've already broken the commandment. But "stop working for a day?" Why is that so challenging? For that matter, why is this even important to begin with? Don't murder, don't steal, don't lie...we get the reasoning behind those.

It just so happens that the *mitzvah* of remembering and keeping Shabbat is one of the few in Torah that comes with its own rationale. Two of them, in fact! The first is a

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:8-10

reminder that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh.<sup>2</sup> We, as humans, then continue that process of creation each and every week thereafter, not only sustaining our world, but expanding upon it. And, oh, how we've done just that. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century we can control our environments, manage and direct our surroundings in so many astounding ways. Need food for dinner? I'll just run out to the store...it's all waiting in the aisles for me. Want to visit family? I'll drive there, or better yet, I'll buy a plane ticket on my laptop, from my recliner sofa, while I watch the show my DVR recorded for me while I was out at the gym.

We mimic God's seventh day respite to remind ourselves that, in spite of our awe inspiring creative control and power over our surroundings...we're not God. God could have created endlessly, and perhaps still is. God was asking us to take a break lest we think that our own power to control our world is similarly infinite. For it is not. What a surprise it is for us when we discover a problem we cannot fix, a quandary with no apparent answer, a challenge that we are helpless to overcome. Shabbat is, in part, our people's reminder that our creative abilities have limits, and so do we, and that's OK. Which brings me to the second Torah-rationale for making the seventh day a holy one.

When this commandment is repeated in the book of Deuteronomy, the reasoning is entirely different. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day."<sup>3</sup> This time, we are invited to rest on the seventh day because we're not slaves. We celebrate our freedom by using time in a way that slaves may not...by resting from our toils and temporarily ceasing from our labors.

When we consider the possibility of taking an entire 24 hours and forgoing our typical work, our standard ways of being in the world, the natural response for many of us is, "That's just impossible." Torah tells us otherwise. We are free people, in charge of many more aspects of our lives and schedules than we often recognize or admit. And if we truly feel that we are unable to make time once each week that is different – that allows for introspection and interchange with those whom we love – then to what have we enslaved ourselves today? Shabbat is about demonstrating our freedom to separate ourselves from our modern day taskmasters and to simply be in this extraordinary world that surrounds us.

Some of us have established regular and enriching Shabbat routines to do just that. Others of us have never given much thought to what this day of rest might mean to our personal wellbeing and our connection with friends, family, and community. Regardless of where each of us begins this new year, these are some ways that each of us might remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy...

We'll start with the relatively simple and straightforward...

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:11

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 5:15

**#1 – Eat a meal together with family or loved ones.** Now, if your home is anything like ours, you may be thinking, “Rabbi Todd...if Shabbat is all about finding tranquility, renewal, and peace, why on earth would we choose to have a family dinner?” That being said, writer and Time magazine editor, Nancy Gibbs is surely correct when she reminds us that “there is something about a shared meal...[one had] regularly, reliably...that anchors a family... This is where a family builds its identity and culture.”<sup>4</sup> Translation: this is a habit worth practicing. Add the Friday night blessings over candles, wine, and *challah*, and the Shabbat meal is elevated from a time for sharing to an opportunity for making our eating a sacred event. If you have children in your home, take the opportunity to bless them, either with the traditional words of the priestly benediction or with words all your own. On any day of the week, we could look into the eyes of our children and say, “I see you, I celebrate you, and these are my wishes for you in the week ahead,” but how often do we? When done with consistency, this is a parenting moment that truly pays dividends for decades to come. And for those of us who live by ourselves, perhaps Friday evening is an especially good time to invite friends and loved ones into our homes. And if you should find that, for whatever reason, Friday evenings are absolutely impossible for all the members of the household to be together, you’re in luck. Shabbat lasts all the way through sundown on Saturday. Pick another Shabbat meal, make it a habit to eat together, and sanctify your family table at that moment instead.

**Shabbat Tip #2 – Don’t work!** When most of us think about a traditional Jewish Shabbat observance, our minds are drawn to all of the acts which are prohibited on this holy day. In Jewish legal terminology, they are known as the 39 *melachot* – a list of all the actions that the Rabbis understood to constitute labor in their own day such as harvesting, writing, or building a fire. Thus, our Sages forbade these on a day of rest. What might we learn from the spirit of their law? Perhaps the true intention of Shabbat is to consider what one labors at during the rest of the week, and to avoid those actions on this day. Regardless of profession or daily routine, the goal is the same...consider that which is burdensome, onerous, and laborious about your regular week, and put it aside for 24 hours. This too is not so simple, and our ancient Sages understood this. Aware, it would seem, of the bottomless to-do list, they wondered aloud, “[I]s it [really] possible for us to do all our work in six days? No,” they responded, “but we should rest as if all our work were finished.”<sup>5</sup> Take the pile, of papers or of laundry, that exists on Friday afternoon, and put it in a drawer or closet. I promise that it will still be there when Saturday evening arrives.

**Tip #3 – This isn’t the equivalent of a personal day at the spa...Shabbat is built for community.** In the words of early Hebrew essayist and Zionist Ahad Ha’am, “More than the Jewish people has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people.” This shared weekly time has, indeed, been a critical factor in maintaining our communities throughout the centuries. Shabbat invites us to come together in prayer, and this is an ideal year to make our congregation’s Friday evening services part of your regular

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<sup>4</sup> “The Magic of the Family Meal,” Nancy Gibbs, Time Magazine, June 4, 2006

<sup>5</sup> *Midrash M’chilta, Yitro 7*

weekly routine. As we shared with everyone in our community last week, we are shining a new light upon these worship experiences, seeking a blend of engaging and soul-stirring music, time for sharing, and moments for deep reflection on the week gone by. Like family meals, prayer improves with regularity and routine. We train for marathons, hikes, and bike rides...we practice endlessly in preparation for concerts and recitals...we spend countless hours improving our games of choice, but we somehow expect prayer – the process of reaching into our souls to tap into our deepest questions and needs – to come easily and with no warm up. If we fail at first, we are prone to give up. Let's not. We invite you to make our Shabbat worship on Friday evenings, or either of our services on Shabbat mornings, a consistent and dependable part of your week.

**Tip #4 is related – Make time for learning on Shabbat...preferably with others.**

Yes, reading the Saturday paper is learning...yes, it's very good...no, it's not entirely what our tradition had in mind. Join us for our incredibly spirited Shabbat morning Torah study group at 9:00 AM – no experience necessary and bagels provided! Or, make time with a friend, a loved one, a regular learning group to delve into matters of import...the ethical, the societal, the relational -- teachings from within our tradition and from the best minds in these contemporary fields. Let your learning on Shabbat inform the person you want to become in the week that follows.

**Tip #5 –...I recognize that these are getting more difficult as we go...Unplug yourself.**

It has been said that Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has a “Shabbos box” for his family wherein, on Friday afternoons, they deposit all the items they just don't need during the next 24 hours.<sup>6</sup> If we created such a box in our own homes, perhaps it could store all of our smart phones, our TV remotes, any device that connects us to e-mail, and the list goes on and on. Nobody loves these toys more than I. And, thus, I know how painful it can be to part with them, even for 24 hours. But the reward is great when we turn our attention from the screen to the serene. I feel a sense of shame when my child is trying to speak to me and I reach for my i-Phone to send just one more text...just one more e-mail. We all deserve a break from that once a week. Remember that Shabbat is about celebrating our freedom? Let's prove to ourselves, and more importantly to our loved ones, that we are not slaves to these products and to the addictive stimuli they provide. They, like our work, will still be waiting for us when Shabbat has ended.

**Tip #6 – Experiment with other traditional Shabbat practices, and make them your own.**

I'll never forget the first time I stayed the weekend with a friend who was “Shabbat observant” in the strictest terms. By Saturday afternoon I was crawling out of my skin. I just wanted to watch some TV or make a phone call or get on the internet...I was experiencing withdrawal. See Tip #5. Yet, when Michele and I lived in Israel for a year we found ourselves with the freedom to experiment...to avoid getting in a car or a bus on Shabbat. It turns out that we were able to experience the world, to be aware of it, in profound new ways when it wasn't whizzing by us at 45 miles per hour. We didn't spend money on Shabbat. Sounds like a pain, right? But it provided us with an entire

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<sup>6</sup> Reclaiming Judaism as a Spiritual Practice, Rabbi Goldi Milgram, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2004, p. 166

day every week when we didn't have to go to any of the places that require us to spend money...no errands! Picnics in the park are free. So are friends' homes and strolls around town.

**Tip #7 – Pick any or all of the above, and include these amongst your resolutions for 5771.**

Our tradition teaches that six days we shall work, but on the seventh day we shall all rest and be refreshed.<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew for being “refreshed” is *vayinafash* from the root *nefesh*, meaning “soul.” It would seem that our shoes are not the only parts of us that need to be “re-souled” from time to time. These High Holy Days call upon us to take an accounting of our souls...a *cheshbon hanefesh*. It is clear, however, that our tradition did not intend for this process to only happen once a year. Shabbat, the most important of all Jewish holy days, is a much-needed weekly opportunity to do so as well.

A siren blares in Jerusalem, Shabbat has arrived. The shofar sounds in these halls, rousing each of us from our spiritual slumber...Rosh Hashanah has arrived...and with it an opportunity -- an invitation to purposefully divide this coming year into meaningful weeks, each building towards a redemptive temporal gift, a day upon which to rest and to remake our very souls. May we each find ways to answer this sacred call.

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 23:12