

Shabbat in the 21st Century: THE WHOLE WORLD IS WAITING

I recently heard a prominent Rabbi (1) speaking about his belief that Judaism's biggest gift to the world in the 21st century is the Sabbath. That stuck with me, and in my heart, I know it to be true. If we are to make a difference, we must run towards and not away from the destiny and purpose that lives in our hearts. The Sabbath embraces most if not all of the values and beliefs we hold closest to our hearts - peace, joy, love and self-care. To share that with the world has the possibility of bringing us closer to peace. If that is not a major purpose of religion, what is?

Shabbat is primarily a day of rest and spiritual enrichment. The word "Shabbat" comes from the root Shin-Bet-Tav, meaning, "to cease, to end, or to rest (2)." That being said, my understanding of the original Sabbath was that it was God's intent to rest after the arduous task of creation. So we can assume that during Shabbat we would refrain from doing "generative" tasks, or any task with a purpose, including routine activities of the week. For me, resting in honor of Shabbat means being present in the moment, allowing for time for spiritual study, reflection, meditation, and quiet. This weekly balancing is an essential spiritual renewal that we all need before going out into our lives and starting again each week.

Would your life be better if there was an 8th day to the week? What would you do with that time? Many of the people I have questioned have said they would use the day for a rest day, to unwind, read, walk, sit and think and unwind. Others say they would dedicate it to family. The reality is, we have an 8th day. It is the 7th day! The Sabbath. When I make this suggestion, the chorus, of which I am a part, responds:

But...

- I catch up with errands.
- The kid's sports are on Saturday.
- That is my day to work out at the gym.
- Saturday is the only day I can make a Costco run.
- I have to schlep the kids around.
- I have to catch up on my work, so I do it at home.
- I have to mow the weeds, wash the car, fix the sink, change my oil.
- I have to balance my checking account.
- I don't have time to slow down.
- When else can I do my homework?
- I work on Saturdays to make ends meet.

These are real, valid obstacles. But if one has the intention to observe the Sabbath, only self-restraint and the cooperation of family, friends and colleagues, are needed. Since this has not been characteristic of my life, I have loved the Sabbath, but pined for its beauty and rest. I imagined that *one day* I would live it. Keeping the Sabbath felt like such a lofty goal that I defaulted to the all or nothing of it, and had resigned myself to being practically "unable" to keep the Sabbath.

My mentor and colleague, Rabbi George Gittleman, once shared a comment about Kashrut, as it is a similar “all or nothing” dilemma for many Jews in the modern world. He agreed that the challenge of observance in today’s world is a big one. Unless it is foundational in one’s family and community, it presents a lonely challenge, which usually also defaults to disconnect and resignation. If people go by the “all or nothing” model, then it becomes unattainable. But, if you do one thing to consistently honor the idea of Shabbat, one can become more mindful, intentional and aware, and thus our Shabbat resting (or eating) experience can become holy. Rabbi Gittleman’s encouragement led me to begin on this path, and to believe that Shabbat could have a place in my life, no matter the size of my observance. Best of all, it allows for an opportunity for that space to grow within me and in my life.

I encourage my loved ones and students to start by picking one observance or act that symbolizes the holiness and distinction of the Sabbath for them. Lighting candles, blessing the fruit of the vine, and preparing an abundant and special meal is a good start. Carrying even one intention as ritual moves Shabbat to a new place. Some examples are:

- Notice that it is the Shabbat. Exhale!
- Turn off cell phones, TV and Internet for 24 hours
- Take a silent walk
- Watch the Friday sun set and observe the moment when dusk becomes night
- Watch the Saturday sun rise and observe the moment when dawn becomes morning
- Refrain from any negative talk for 24 hours
- Spend the day with a friend
- Call special loved ones
- Write a thank you letter
- Read the Parsha of the week
- Make amends with someone
- Go out and perform a random act(s) of kindness
- Go to a Shabbat service
- Join a Torah study group
- Spend the day with the family in celebration

Choose something that is meaningful to you. These acts themselves do not make Shabbat, but the intention and actualization of the acts creates a starting point, acknowledges the day, and distinguishes its holiness and power.

Finally, as the Sabbath comes to a close, I am moved to celebrate with Havdallah. As we light a multi-stranded candle, each strand burns proudly and independently, as do different opinions and points of view. These strands culminate in one larger flame, reminding us that we are one. When we sing Eliahu Hanavi, we pray for Elijah, the Prophet of Peace, to announce the coming of the time when global peace reigns and hunger disappears. In opening this door, I am convinced that every small act of Sabbath

brings us closer to that day, reminding us of our oneness and the coming promise of peace in our world. What a powerful way to start the week!

As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (may his memory be for a blessing) sang, "The whole world is waiting, to sing a song of Shabbes, the whole world is waiting to sing a song of Shabbes." Let's give it to them!

1. Rabbi Or Rose, Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College and Director for the Center of Interreligious Leadership Education
2. "Torah 101" is © 2010 by Mechon Mamre

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