

A Day of Rest

Yom Kippur Morning 5778 – September 30, 2017
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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I have a question I would like you to ponder for a moment: what is your favorite Jewish holiday?

Does Passover rank number one for you? Pesach is certainly a special festival: it is so amazing when we gather for Seder with family and friends, eat special foods, sing wonderful songs and tell the story of our people's Exodus from Egypt.

Perhaps some of you prefer another holiday like Simchat Torah when we dance with our Torahs. Or Sukkot, when we gather outside, shake the lulav and Etrog, and behold a full harvest moon. I know that many children choose Chanukah as their favorite Jewish holiday. Could it have something to do with receiving gifts during this festival? And for sure, I do not want to forget the holiday of Purim. Here at Temple Beth Torah our Purim celebrations are top notch, especially when we have a shpiel.

Pesach, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Sukkot, Chanukah and Purim are wonderful holidays. But you might be surprised to know that my NUMBER ONE favorite day of the entire year, the one that I love the most is today, Yom Kippur. It is not because I relish fasting– I don't. Like so many, not eating or drinking for 24 hours is a real challenge. My love for this day is not because I find confessing my sins a joyful experience. It is hard work and at times it feels sad and mournful.

So why do I love this day more than any other of the Jewish year? The answer is: because today, this day, we Jews come closest to fulfilling the model of what it means to be a Jewish community. Look around our sanctuary: isn't it beautiful to see it full of people? Young and old, long time members, new members, and guests -- everyone is welcome in our House of Worship.

Beyond mere numbers, there is a unique spirit animating our day together: the beautiful music offered by Miriam, Amy, Mary and our choir, the exquisite poems that amplify the prayers of our service, the honors that are extended to leaders and volunteers in our congregation. On this day, there is such sincerity as we seek to repair our souls, mend our relationship with God, and to make amends in our relationship with one another.

I love everything about this day – not only this morning but this afternoon which includes our somber service of Yizkor, the story of the reluctant prophet, Jonah, and the triumphant blast of the shofar ending N’ilah.

It may seem crazy to love Yom Kippur but I hope what I am expressing echoes within you as well. We come to this day seeking something more elevated in our lives. Something that will inspire us, uplifts us, and touches the deepest recesses of our soul. We embrace this day of Yom Kippur to rediscover ancient wellsprings of wisdom and values. We seek a reconnection to the faith of our ancestors. We are here because we want our life to have a greater sense of meaning.

Yom Kippur is the representation par excellence of what God wants from us. In Judaism Yom Kippur is known as Shabbat Shabbaton – it is a day like Shabbat only doubly so. It is a full day of not working, not occupying ourselves with mundane tasks, not tending to everyday concerns. Hopefully we will emerge from this holiest of days renewed and inspired.

But here is the central challenge all of us face when this day concludes. The question is: What are we going to do to sustain our uplifted spirit? How are we going to keep in mind the lessons we have learned and the promises about being a better person?

If you want to know the answer to this challenge, ask yourself this simple, straightforward question: What are you planning a week from today? More specifically: What are you going to do next Shabbat?

I realize that probably no one here has given any thought to next week.

But what I am getting at is this: I believe that the quality of our Jewish lives is a reflection of how we keep Shabbat. It is the prism by which we peer into our lives and assess who we are.

Let me share with you a personal story. I grew-up in a family of 4 boys, a mom and a dad. We belonged to a Reform temple and my folks were active volunteers in the congregation. We celebrated Jewish holidays with our extended family. We felt very positively about being Jewish but in my younger years, Shabbat was not important to us. Friday night was like every other night of the week.

But that changed one year after my brothers and I attended a Jewish sleep away camp. Shabbat at camp was a big deal. We dressed in white,

offered the traditional blessings, ate better food than the rest of the week, and sang lots of songs.

One year, we came back and we wanted Shabbat to be special like at camp. My parents were a little taken aback. But they decided to give it a go.

My Mom made a special dinner. The table was set with china. Mom lit candles and sang the blessing in her beautiful voice. Dad lifted the Kiddush cup and heartily chanted the blessing. We all sang the Motzi and devoured a delicious challah.

We did it again the following Friday. And the Friday after that. From that point on, no matter what happened during the week, all four Schulman boys knew that Friday night was different, it was special, it was Kadosh, set aside from the rest of the week.

Shabbat took root in my soul in my childhood. But over the years, my relationship to Shabbat has gone through many transformations. There was a period in my life when I was Shomer Shabbat; I did not drive nor turn on lights nor ever spend any money. At a different stage of my life when my children were young, my observance of Shabbat included taking them to the zoo and spending money to buy them ice cream. In recent times, my relationship to Shabbat is inconsistent. I love being with the congregation for services. But let's face it, this almost always takes place on Friday night. On most Saturdays, we do not usually have a service, so what I do varies: maybe I will read or take a nap or attend to household matters I don't have time for during the week. Maybe I will go to a movie or go out with Eve or visit a museum or see a friend. There is no consistency to what I do on Shabbat day.

The vast majority of people in this congregation, including me, do not have a regular practice for Shabbat. As a result, we are depriving ourselves of something utterly precious and necessary for living a fully realized Jewish life.

To understand the significance of Shabbat, we have to look at its origin in Torah. In the opening verses of Genesis, we read that God created the heavens and the earth and all that it contained in the first six days.
U'vayom HaShivi'i Shavat Vayinafash; And on the 7th Day God ceased working and God rested.

What does it mean Shavat Yayinafash – and God rested? Does this mean that God was worn out after six days of labor? That God worked so

hard beginning on the first day that on Friday night, God put in for overtime? Was God's exertion so great for those six days that God needed time to kick-back and relax?

To think in these terms is to misinterpret the concepts of work and rest. As Rabbi David Fohrman helpfully explains, "Why would an All-Powerful God need to rest after creating the world? Was He tired? We need to understand that the work God was engaged in had nothing to do with physical exertion. Exertion calls for a kind of rest we call relaxation; lack of exertion helps us become refreshed. But what God was doing during the six days of creation involved a different kind of work, the work we call creativity. God was creating something entirely new. God was transforming the cosmos. God was bringing forth into being something that had not existed before.

In response to all this creative work, God decided to stop creating, to stop tinkering with the Universe. God looked at his handiwork and declared, Hinei Tov Me'od – all this is very good. This proclamation signaled God's willingness to begin relating to it for what it was." ¹

Shabbat is a day of rest. However, rest is more than the absence of work. Rest in the Divine sense, allows us to appreciate the world as it is. It is a way of letting go, of ceasing to endlessly attend to tasks and responsibilities and to enjoy all the gifts and beauty of creation.

To keep Shabbat is to do something profoundly counter to prevailing norms in society. So many of us prize how hard we work. We talk all the time about how busy we are, how hard we work, how many hours we put in during the week. Often our work spills into Saturday.

"We live in a technology-obsessed reality; we carry our entire work world with us wherever we go, right in our pockets. It's not enough to leave the office, (because with our smart phones) the office goes with us to dinner or to a game." ²

I believe that those of us who live in the Bay Area are more deeply affected by technology than other parts of the country. Dan Lyons, the author of a book entitled "Disrupted, My Misadventure in the Start-Up Bubble," writes about how Silicon Valley deems workaholic as a desirable lifestyle choice. "Hustle is the word that tech people use to describe the nerd-commando lifestyle. You hear it everywhere. You can buy hustle-themed T-shirts and coffee mugs with slogans like 'Dream, hustle, profit, repeat.' And 'outgrind, outhustle, outwork everyone.'

Gary Vaynerchuk, a.k.a, Gary Vee who has 1.5 million Twitter followers and a string of best-selling books with titles like 'Crush it' tells his acolytes they should work 18 hours a day. Every day. No vacations, no going on blind dates, no watching TV." His advice, "If you want bling bling, if you want to buy jets? Work. That's how you get it." 3

I don't think Gary Vee believes in Shabbos.

Even if we don't go all out as Gary Vee says, too many of us have accepted "overextension as a way of life. In today's workplace burnout, achieving a simpatico work-life relationship seems practically out of reach. Being tired, ambivalent, stressed, cynical and overextended has become a normal part of a working professional life." 4

Clearly many feel overwhelmed by work. And by work, I do not only mean our occupations for which we get paid. Work also can mean taking care of children and overseeing our home. Work can include tending to a family member who is incapacitated or seriously ill.

Here's the profound catch to all this bravado about the value of working hard. The truth is that human beings are not capable of working endless hours and being productive. Alex Pang is a Silicon Valley consultant who has written a book entitled, *Rest, Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*. Pang notes, "modern science has now validated...that work provides the means to live, while rest gives meaning to life. In the last couple of decades," he writes, "discoveries in sleep research, psychology, neuroscience, organizational behavior, sports medicine, sociology and other fields have given us a wealth of insight into the unsung but critical role that rest plays in strengthening the brain, enhancing learning, enabling inspiration, and making innovation possible." 5

Alex Pang acknowledges that we live in a society which does not value rest. He is well aware of the stress companies place on their employees. That is why Pang emphasizes that "Rest is not something that the world gives us. It's never been a gift. It's never something you do when you finished everything else. If you want rest, you have to take it. You have to resist the lure of busyness, make time for rest, take it seriously, and protect it from a world that is intent on stealing it." 6

To put Pang's thesis in Jewish terms, if you want an antidote to the stress of our times, avail yourself of the life hack that has been around since the beginning of creation, you can be like God and make Shabbos. Notice that phrase, make Shabbos. You don't observe Shabbat. You make Shabbat.

It takes effort and determination to make Shabbat a day of rest. It is not something that magically happens the moment the sun sets on Friday night. It involves conscious decisions about where you are going to be; who you are going to be with; and what you are going to do from sundown through Saturday night.

Is there a prescription of what Shabbat should be like? I believe it includes being with family and friends; prayer and learning. It also includes time for personal reflection. What Shabbat ultimately means will be interpreted differently by each one of us. Parents will feel pulled in different directions with younger children's play dates and older children's social and sports activities. Teenagers will want to get together with friends for fun activities. Adults will think about attending to tasks to accomplish that they may not have time for in the week.

"Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, 'Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.' On Shabbat we put aside the material world to search for wholeness in the inner world of self, friends, and family." 7

If we need a guide to how to keep Shabbat, here are ten key ideas to keep in mind. They come via a Jewish organization called Reboot. They promote what they call The Sabbath Manifesto. It outlines 10 key elements to making Shabbat meaningful. They are:

1. Avoid Technology
2. Connect with loved ones
3. Nurture your health
4. Get outside
5. Avoid commerce
6. Light candles
7. Drink wine
8. Eat bread
9. Find silence
10. Give back

Use these ten principles for thinking about how you make Shabbat. Maybe next Shabbat you won't achieve all 10 goals. But start with one, and then build from there two and from two to three and so on. Strive to create a Shabbat that is rich and meaningful, nourishing and soul satisfying. This is what God wants from us. To cease from all the crazy things we do from Sunday through Friday and just be in the world, to appreciate all the blessings that fill our days, to give thanks for what's truly important.

Today is my favorite day of the year. It is a holy day, a day so sacred that it is separated from the rest of the year. It is completely devoted to introspection, prayer, confession, and deeds of righteousness. May we experience the power of this day with devotion. May it set us on a course for rightful living for the coming year.

Inevitably, come tomorrow, the world will intrude on us again, engaging us, challenging us, and at times, overwhelming us. May the splendor of Shabbat, the seventh day of rest, restore balance to our lives and enrich our souls

“Let us emerge from this Sabbath of Sabbaths renewed in our quest for wholeness –
Reawakened to the urgent beauty of being present in a God-filled world.
Let us crown the Seventh Day by living it—
By tasting its sweetness,
By feeling its joy,
By opening ourselves to it in awe.”⁸

On this day of Yom Kippur, may each of you be inscribed and sealed for a Good Year. And a week from today, when Shabbat arrives once again, may your heart and soul be filled with the blessing of shalom, of Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of peace.

1. “Understanding the Secret of the Sabbath,” Rabbi David Fohrman, AlephBeta.
2. “The Rest of Your Life,” Arianna Huffington, *New York Times*, December 12, 2016.
3. “In Silicon Valley, 9 to 5 is for Losers,” Dan Lyons, *New York Times*, September 3, 2017.
4. “How to Recognize Burnout Before You’re Burned Out, Kenneth R. Rosen, *New York Times*, September 5, 2017.
5. *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*, Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, page 10.
6. Ibid.
7. *Gates of Shabbat*, edited by Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro, page 94.
8. *Mishkan HaNefesh, Yom Kippur*, page 461.

