

The Re-Soulment of Shabbat

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וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת

V'shamru vnei Yisrael et haShabbat (Sung by the Cantor)

Tonight is the Shabbat of Shabbatot. Our tradition elevates Yom Kippur and we follow the lead. Many of us who usually focus more on Judaism's morals than its rituals nevertheless follow Yom Kippur's observances. Yet Yom Kippur is only Yom Kippur in connection to Shabbat. It relies on our appreciation of the weekly rhythm. *V'shamru vnei Yisrael et haShabbat...*the words we just heard sung mean: **“The people of Israel shall keep Shabbat...”**

However, I'm not sure if you are like me, but being told that Jews keep Shabbat so therefore do it, never quite worked for me.

I grew up without any distinction between the days of the week and Saturday except, of course, that I didn't have to go to school on Saturday morning so I could watch cartoons.

As Rachel and I experimented with our Shabbat practices, I could not fall back on memory or habit to make it happen. We had to create new expectations and evaluate what we gained by creating regular observances. Along the way, it was too easy to “forget” to do something even if we valued it. It took many years for our desires to become expectations, for expectations to become habits, for habits to become *mitzvot*, and for *mitzvot* to be tested by our kids. “If I come for our Shabbat dinner - which I know we always have, can you drive my band to play at a gig?” “Can Shabbat dinner be done sooner?” “I get that we don't watch TV, but how about Youtube on my phone?”

Even if we are inspired to think what we can gain from a true day of rest, it can be a challenge among non-Orthodox Jews to find a community to celebrate Shabbat with on a regular basis.

We are surrounded by so many in our neighborhoods or circles of friends who are not observing Shabbat either because they are not Jewish or they are Jewish and it not their desire or practice. Saturday is just another day of the weekend.

And yet, many at Mount Zion have found Shabbat rhythms that work. Some will light Shabbat candles no matter what else is done or not done. Some will have challah every Friday night. Some will have their Shabbat dinner with friends or family saying some or all of the blessings. Others will attend services Friday night or Saturday morning or both. Some keep the entire day from Friday night to Saturday night with Shabbat dinner, services, reading and study, relaxed time with friends and family ending with Havdalah. Others will not check email. Some come to a one-hour Torah study at Mount Zion on Shabbat morning and that is their Shabbat observance. Some will go on long walks with the intention of bringing Shabbat rest into their day. *Shabbat need not be an all or nothing proposition.*

The only question is whether your own observance is where you want it to be.

I have been teaching a class for many years now for married and engaged couples called “Creating a Jewish Home.” During our session on Shabbat, couples will fill out a worksheet just for themselves asking what Shabbat practices they want to take on in the next month, and then in a year, and then imagining even further into the future. Our Shabbat practices may change. Will we be intentional about them?

And if you have found practices you want to keep, then try not to let two Shabbatot go by without doing them. And if you do not keep your intentions, say to yourself, “I’ll do it next Shabbat.” Keep your thoughts positive and the changes you desire can become possible.

On Rosh Hashanah, we gave every household a book: “A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home.” If you had a chance to open to the first few pages, there was a small collection of reflections including one from Shimon Peres of blessed memory, and this one from Rabbi Larry Hoffman: “To moderns... Shabbat is an opportunity for meaning, a moment in time to forge connections and to belong. If Jews will not keep Shabbat on the grounds that they are commanded to do so...perhaps they will do so because keeping Shabbat will provide their otherwise disconnected lives with meaning.”

לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרוֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם
laasot et haShabbat, l’dorotam brit olam (Sung by the Cantor)

Cantor Strauss-Klein is singing *V’shamru* which we sing every Shabbat. The text is from Exodus chapter 31 written in the context of the barn raising scene – the Israelites building together the Tabernacle, the *Miskhan*, and learning even in their excitement to keep going, they need to stop and rest one day in seven. The tune is by Shlomo Carlebach which I find so evocative.

Carlebach is considered to be one of the foremost Jewish religious songwriters of the 20th century. I first heard his version of *V’shamru* while my family and I lived in Israel for our first sabbatical. I know that Cantor Strauss-Klein also fell in love with the tune when she lived there for her first year of cantorial school. To celebrate Shabbat in Israel was so easy and as holy as Carlebach’s melody makes us feel. Everything grinds to a halt in Jerusalem with the sound of a siren – can you imagine or if you have heard it, you remember. You are supported in observing Shabbat because it is the norm. Everyone wishes you a Shabbat shalom.

So, now if you would, remember a Shabbat moment or experience any time in your life that makes you smile. What was it that worked and felt so good? If you can’t find a memory quickly, what do you desire in order to put aside the pressures of the week? Can you imagine making what you remember or desire happen on Shabbat in some way?

Listen to the translation of the second phrase of the *V’shamru* we just heard: ...*laasot et haShabbat, l’dorotam brit olam*. **observing Shabbat throughout the ages as a covenant for all time.**

It is remarkable that a revolutionary practice three millennia ago, taking one day off in seven, has persisted. “A covenant for all time.” It was a firm believer in the cultural value of Judaism,

not its religious value, who coined one of the most helpful quotations about Shabbat. Ahad Ha'am said only a century ago: "More than the Jewish People have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." When Ahad Ha'am said "the Sabbath has kept the Jews", he was arguing that non-Orthodox Jews should find value in recognizing Shabbat, even in a minimal way, so that we would retain Jewish identity.¹ Shabbat observance is a key to our future and the passing of our traditions from person to person, community to community, parent to child. It is a beautiful thing. That is why we have made it a focus for this year at Mount Zion.

ביני ובין בני ישראל אֵת הוּא לְעָלָם
Beini u'vein b'nei Yisrael ot hi l'olam (Sung by the Cantor)

It is a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel.

Once two Jews were bragging about their respective rebbes. "See here," one said. "it happened once that my rebbe was driving along in his wagon when a terrible storm appeared. What did he do? He stretched out his hands in prayer. Behold! On the left there was darkness and rain and on the right there was darkness and rain. But, in the middle where the wagon drove, the sky was clear and the sun was shining."

"That you call a miracle?!" demanded the other Chasid. "It happened once the my rebbe was driving in his wagon on a Friday afternoon and he saw that the sun was going down. He knew that the Sabbath would begin before he could reach the shtetl. He knew that he would be desecrating the Sabbath if he was still riding on his wagon when it began. So he stretched out his hands in prayer. And behold! A miracle! On the right there was Shabbat and on the left there was Shabbat. But, in the middle where the rebbe's wagon drove, it was still Friday!"² A miracle!

I imagine that the rebbe in that story was played by Gene Wilder, may his memory be a blessing. If you know the scene from the movie *Frisco Kid*, Wilder plays the rabbi who does not ride on Shabbat. It is late on Saturday afternoon. The sun is low in the sky and everyone else is anxious to go, so he bends down and lo and behold the sun had set!

This sense of humor - even for those who want clear boundaries - shows that we can be easy on ourselves. We may have the best of intentions, but life does not always work out the way we plan. Sometimes we need to be creative and flexible in our observances. A sense of humor and forgiveness can be helpful in making Shabbat happen. At times, our work will make it hard to have a home cooked meal or well set table, so you will order food in and improvise. At times you will forget to get a challah, so you will say *motzi* over other bread. When we have young kids around, we may get together with friends or other family on Shabbat day instead of Friday night. We can be kind to ourselves and we can also aspire to make Shabbat special. Both are possible.

¹ Rabbi Eliyahu Fink in a recent essay.

² Adapted by Seymour Rossel "The Essential Jewish Stories", p. 327 from Ausubel, Treasure, p. 131.

כִּי־שֶׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ
ki shei-shet ya-mim asa Adonai et ha-sha-mayim v'et ha-aretz. (Sung by the Cantor)

For in six days Adonai made heaven and earth,

This phrase connects us directly to our myth of creation: in six days the world was created and on the seventh, God rested. It is one of the two reasons the Torah gives for observing Shabbat. The other is a message of justice, that we were slaves in Egypt, so therefore we should give a break, a true rest, to all who work for us for one day out of seven. Our two candles on Shabbat remind us of these two reasons. The creation reason is a message of awe. We should literally get outside in nature and look at the heavens and earth, and in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “turn [on Shabbat] from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

Our myth of creation as told in Genesis in six days is not meant to be taken literally. It developed during the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE and gives us a beautiful message of purpose and partnership. Life can be good and we are responsible for this world in partnership with God. There is something mysterious about life no matter how much science teaches us. Religion offers us the why – why we are created while science tells us the how – how we are created.

On Shabbat, this purpose comes from the poetic imaginings of creation. I do not believe you can truly be in awe of life and nature and not somehow feel responsible. One of the implications of our myth of creation is beautiful and necessary: we must be committed to reversing – as much as humanly possible - the impact of climate change. Even as we enjoy nature on Shabbat, we can think about what we can do the rest of the week to keep this planet safe. As a reminder of this connection, we will be making a small change in our liturgy at Mount Zion starting these High Holy Days. We will restore traditional language in the second prayer of the T'filah, our standing prayer, to intimate this connection between God and nature, adding the words *Morid haTal*, “You ...rain dew upon us.” Nature and our understanding of creation, our prayers and our actions, are all linked.

וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפֵשׂ
u'va-yom ha'shvi-l sha-vat va-yi-na-fash (Sung by the Cantor).

...and on the seventh day God ceased from work and was refreshed.

Heschel teaches: “Time is like a wasteland. It has grandeur but no beauty. Its strange, frightful power is always feared but rarely cheered. Then we arrive at the seventh day, and Shabbat is endowed with a felicity which enraptures the soul, which glides into our thoughts with a healing sympathy. It is a day on which hours do not oust one another. It is a day that can soothe all sadness away.”

Vayinafash. God was refreshed. The word nefesh – soul – is the root. *Vayinafash*. Literally God was resouled or, according to our tradition, God imbued creation with a realm of spirituality, or according to Arthur Waskow, it should be translated as “God said, ‘Whew!’”

For us to say “Whew” is about letting go. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wrote this helpful prayer to be said Friday night before lighting the candles:

All my jobs, tasks and work,
whether they are done or not,
I hereby declare they are done.
I reject their claim on me.
I deny their existence.
For six days I have tried
with all my energy to complete my world.
Now, Erev Shabbat,
I realize that another week has come and gone
but that I have not finished.
It's not perfect
but I worked hard and did a pretty good job.

As we let go of our week, a statement of Reform Jewish principles suggests we imagine Shabbat not in what we do not do, but in what we do do: “Shabbat calls us to bring the highest moral values to our daily labor and to culminate the workweek with קְדוּשָׁה (*kedushah*), holiness, מְנוּחָה (*menuchah*), rest and עֵנֶג (*oneg*), joy.”

What will it be for you? It is never, never too late to start something or add a new layer to one's practice. It is never too small a change to make a difference. I won't rehearse all the science about why resting is needed for our health or all the social science about the need for society to slow down in our fast-paced technological age.

Making any moment during Shabbat a cathedral in time is to connect to the realm of the holy, *kedushah*. Any Shabbat rest, *menuchah*, which is much deeper than having a Shabbat nap, allows for relationships, renewal, recreation, *re-creation*. Eating good foods such as the desserts after our services which we have come to call *oneg* can be a great joy. Each of us may have different practices that bring us to holiness, rest, and joy.

My greatest *oneg*, joy of Shabbat is connected to what Rachel and I created quite literally, our children. As Rachel and I made choices about what we would do for our Shabbat practice, we included the traditional parents' blessing. No matter what was going on, the emotions, the dramas of the week, sometimes the arguments, never was there a Shabbat where we didn't look into our kids' eyes preparing to bless them where it didn't all melt away. It still never ceases to amaze me, in awe, that our kids, all three so different from each other, every Shabbat yearned for that moment, that connection, that affirmation that there is love and blessing in this world. Even if they were ready to leave as soon as dinner was over, that moment was an island in time, when our eyes locked and we said the three-thousand-year-old words. The words were superfluous; they enacted something holy.

When Eiden called from college for his blessing on his first Friday away, I knew that there is nothing more powerful, more connective, and more sweet.

It takes effort. It won't happen without intention. It takes will power in a world where we keep making everything easier.

As we find our own way to give Shabbat a chance, connecting to creation and to holiness, rest, and joy, please turn to page 44 to sing Carlbach's ethereal melody for keeping Shabbat. Shabbat Shabbatot Shalom.

וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם : יוֹ בְּיָנִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֹת הוּא לְעֹלָם כִּי־שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם
הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנְפָשׁ :

A couple Shabbat resources:

- <http://www.reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/shabbat>
- <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat/>