

Giving Ourselves Permission to Rest and Find Joy: The Jewish Superpower of Shabbat

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There's a story about a rabbi who was so addicted to golf that he snuck out between the morning and afternoon services on Yom Kippur to play a round. The angels were dismayed. "God, how can a rabbi play golf on Yom Kippur?" "Don't worry," said God, "I'll teach him a lesson." The rabbi steps up to the tee and blasts a drive down the fairway. His ball bounces off a sprinkler head, bounds down the cart path, ricochets off golf cart, reaches the green, and rolls into the cup. A hole in one! "God," say the angels, "how is that a punishment? It was a hole on one!" "Yes," say God, "but who can he tell?"

We all get this joke because we know that this is the place we are supposed to be on Yom Kippur. Not on the golf course, not at work, not out shopping. This is the day when all of us – especially rabbis – should be in synagogue! After all, Yom Kippur is known as *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. It's the big one, the holiest day of the year, the day when God seals our fate for the year to come. What could be more important than that?

But if you ask any of our Hebrew School students what the most important Jewish holiday is, they won't say Yom Kippur. Instead, they will tell you that the most important Jewish holiday is actually Shabbat. And they're right.

How could that be? How could Shabbat, which comes along each Friday like clockwork, outrank Yom Kippur, which happens but once a year? In Judaism, we have a principle that the more common takes precedence over the less common. Shabbat is the more important holiday because it occurs every week.¹ Shabbat was the first holiday, established during that first week of creation, when God rested. It is the only holiday mentioned in the Ten commandments. And, in a true test of importance, the penalties for violating Shabbat are more severe than those for violating Yom Kippur. And this year, we get them both on the same day.

This High Holiday season, I have been talking about Jewish principles that have helped our people endure through difficult times. During Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about two of these Jewish superpowers – community and resilience. Tonight, I want to talk about a third: Shabbat.

Now in the back of your mind some of you may be thinking, she's going to talk about Shabbat? Really? What are we, Orthodox? With all the craziness in the world today — the upcoming election, the situation in Israel, the recent hurricanes — we're going to spend Kol Nidre talking about Shabbat? Yes. It's precisely *because* of the craziness and the stress and the uncertainty of our time that we must talk about Shabbat. In a world seemingly spinning out of control, we need Shabbat more than ever. As Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural

¹ In fact, the number of *aliyot*, the number of blessings we do over the Torah, mirrors this importance. Tomorrow we'll do seven *aliyot*, in honor of Shabbat, while when Yom Kippur falls on a weekday, we only do six *aliyot*.

Zionism, famously said, “More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people.” Dr. Andrea Weiss teaches that Shabbat was integral to our identity going back to the Babylonian exile more than 2600 years ago.² Shabbat has helped Jews survive and thrive as a *people*, and it also can help us survive and thrive as *individuals*.

Yom Kippur, as important as it is, is simply not enough. We can spend this day reflecting on our misdeeds, making amends, and promising to do better, but we know that one day once a year isn’t going to change how we live. There’s just too much time between Yom Kippur and the following Rosh Hashanah – time to slide back into old habits, to forget our promises, to get lost in the busy-ness of daily life. That’s why we need Shabbat. Each week Shabbat returns, offering us an opportunity for rest and renewal and a time for joy. Shabbat has the power to keep us going.

Reform Jews sometimes struggle with embracing Shabbat and other Jewish practices. There’s a common misconception out there – even among Reform Jews ourselves – that we care about social justice but are not very engaged in Jewish practice. I don’t keep kosher, I’m Reform. I don’t wear a tallit or a kippah, I’m Reform. I don’t need to observe Shabbat, I’m Reform. This rejection of traditional Jewish practice is not surprising given the history of Reform Judaism. After all, early Reform Jews wanted to differentiate themselves from traditional Orthodox Judaism. They were eager to throw off what they called in an early statement of principles the “Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress.”³ These religious laws were simply not as important as basic moral laws. That is the world in which many of us grew up, a world where almost by definition Reform Jews rejected traditional practices,

But that statement of principles I quoted was written in 1885. 1885! Just as the world has moved on from corsets, horse drawn carriages and bloodletting, so too have Reform ideas and practice evolved. We no longer reflexively reject traditional practice out of sense that Reform Jews “don’t” do such things. In 2001, Rabbi Doctor Mark Washofsky, chair of the CCAR Responsa Committee and a professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, wrote *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*. This book contains the current Reform thinking about Shabbat observance.

Washofsky writes that “while the idea of *mitzvah*, commandment, is deeply problematic in Reform theology...a life of Jewish authenticity ...is ‘inexorably bound up with Shabbat observance.’ Put differently, no matter how “Reform” our Judaism, it would be Jewishly unthinkable without the *mitzvah* of Shabbat.”⁴ Shabbat is makes Jews Jews.

We could spend a year studying the laws of Shabbat, where they come from, and how they are interpreted, but for the purposes of this sermon we should know Shabbat observance is mentioned in the two givings of the Ten Commandments in the Torah. In Exodus we read : זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ Remember Shabbat and keep it holy.⁵ In Deuteronomy we read, שְׁמֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ Observe Shabbat and keep it holy.⁶ From these two mentions, the rabbis derive two sets of obligations; things we *should do* and

² Weiss, women’s torah commentary. Page 523.

³ The Pittsburgh Platform, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>

⁴ Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, UAHC Press (2001), p. 74.

⁵ Exodus 20:8.

⁶ Deuteronomy 5:12.

things we *should not do* in order to make Shabbat different from the other days of the week. Those observances create what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls an “island in time.”⁷

Given how difficult this past year has been for Jews. I’m going to encourage us all to tap into the Jewish superpower of Shabbat this year and commit to adding two Shabbat observances to our lives in honor of the two times we are commanded to observe Shabbat in the Torah. If you want to join, I’ll invite you to fill out a sheet when you leave services tonight or send one in soon. And while the rabbis were loathe to suggest that we should follow commandments to get a reward, I’m going to break thousands of years of rabbinic tradition and say that I strongly believe that observing Shabbat will make us happier and healthier people.⁸

Let me explain. The commandment we have in Deuteronomy, *shamor* means that we should refrain from some activities we do during the rest of the week. The activities we are supposed to avoid come from an exhaustive list of the work done to build the holy tabernacle. The rabbis reasoned that if the ancient Israelites could refrain from the holy work of building God’s dwelling place, certainly we could take a break as well. In effect, they gave us permission to take time for much-needed rest from things we do all week long.

We need to give ourselves this permission to rest. As I read over your confessions for the past year, I was struck by how hard we are on ourselves. We confessed to putting ourselves down, judging ourselves too harshly, and abandoning ourselves when we needed love and care. Perhaps Shabbat is a time for us to refrain from self-judgement. To remember that God created each of us as we are and to give ourselves a break from that constant refrain of “not enough” that lives in some of our heads.

There are so many ways to truly give ourselves a mental and physical pause on Shabbat. Maybe we don’t spend money. Maybe we will not do housework. Maybe we turn off our phones. What is it that presses on you during the week and how can you use Shabbat to give yourself a necessary pause?

Over the past few years, when people have told me they were overwhelmed, I have made a seemingly simple suggestion: turn off the news on Shabbat. Don’t read the paper, or check social media, or watch a news show. Don’t listen to political podcasts or even talk about what’s going on in the wider world. And while I know it has been hard, I’ve heard from you that it has been helpful. I promise the news will be there when you return. No matter what we give up, refraining on Shabbat can give us a much-needed chance to rest and refresh.

The commandment found in Exodus is to *zachor*, or remember, Shabbat, which is interpreted to mean to take some positive steps to make Shabbat different and special. It doesn’t have to be extravagant. We don’t have to do everything all at once, we just have to *do something!*

When people ask me how to start observing Shabbat, I encourage them to start with Shabbat evening. Light two candles, say a blessing over the wine (or grape juice), bless the bread. Mark the beginning of Shabbat. Then you can expand. Make a nice meal, set out

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath* (1951), chapter one, pp. 12-25.

⁸ This principle comes up many times. Chullin 142a; Kiddushin 39b; Pirkei Avot 1:3; Pirkei Avot 2:1. There are very few times in the Torah when the reward for performing a mitzvah is stated.

beautiful dishes, invite people over, sing songs. We can all do something to make Friday night special and to remind ourselves that Shabbat is different. I've heard from many of you that this ritual to start Shabbat has become something that you look forward to each week and something that anchors you.

But this commandment also encompasses finding joy! Our lives are so busy, and it can be easy to scurry from day to day, checking off tasks on our to-do list. It can be exhausting and overwhelming. Over the past few years, I've heard from many of you about how hard it is to find joy. I've heard how you feel overwhelmed and beaten down. Shabbat gives us permission to make time for pleasure. In fact, the Talmud tells us that the reward for delighting in Shabbat has no bounds.⁹ What gives you joy that you don't have time for? Hiking, reading, playing an instrument? Maybe baking, singing, or taking an afternoon nap. What a gift Shabbat gives us, the chance to make time for something we love each and every week.

Some of us are already taking steps towards observing Shabbat. Some of us might be thinking we'd like to try. I deeply believe that this observance is more sustainable and more fulfilling if we do it together. We need partners to cheer us on and to give us ideas. We need partners because Shabbat is meant to be observed in community.

And we need partners because we are going to make mistakes. We'll have the best intentions and then we won't have time to make a special meal, or we won't be able to resist checking the latest news. That's okay. This day of Yom Kippur reminds us that we aren't perfect, and we don't need to be. We just must make a good faith effort to do the best we can. So, I hope you'll join us in observing Shabbat in the year to come.

A story.

An emperor was a frequent guest in the home of Rabbi Joshua. He ate many meals in the rabbi's house, but the emperor noticed that the food always tasted better on Shabbat. Try as he might to recreate that special taste in his own palace, he couldn't do so. Frustrated, he asked what made the food so special on Shabbat. Rabbi Joshua responded that there was an extra "spice" added to the food. The emperor demanded to be given the spice, but Rabbi Joshua told him the additional ingredient could not be purchased, it was Shabbat itself. The food tasted so special because *the day was special*.¹⁰

How we remember and observe Shabbat – the specific ways we make it different and special – are less important than the fact that we are taking the time to observe. Rabbi Dr. Washofsky writes, "Reform Jews may seek [the] fulfillment [of Shabbat] in different ways, but they will find it only when they commit themselves with the utmost seriousness to the Jewish responsibility to observe...the Sabbath day."¹¹

The world can be a tough place. We need, more than ever, a pause. Time away from the busyness and stress of everyday life. We need, more than ever, joy. Shabbat gives us that time, the pause, the joy, not just once a year but every week. I'm excited to explore the Jewish superpower of Shabbat with you in the year to come.

⁹ Shabbat 118b

¹⁰ This story can be found in many places. I adapted it from a telling by Ellen Tilman, <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/shabbat-spice-why-friday-night-dinner-tastes-so-much-better>.

¹¹ *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, p. 84.