



"Honoring Tradition, Celebrating Diversity, and Building a Jewish Future"

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## ***V'shamru B'nei Yisrael:*** **The People of Israel Shall Keep the Shabbat...**

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What do you practice? Do you play an instrument? Shoot hoops? Do you rehearse what you are going to say in important conversations, whether at work or at home? Are you working on your swing? Playing angry birds on BART so that you can impress your friends – or is that perhaps so last year?

We practice in order to get ready for the game, to put on the show, to be ready for the time when it really counts. Have you ever said: “Let’s do it over again. That was just the warm-up?”

Do you have a practice? Do you have a yoga practice? A meditation practice? A Peet’s coffee practice? Do you practice law, or teaching, or medicine or engineering?

When we practice, we practice toward; anticipating the moment when we will apply the skills and orientations that we have cultivated through our rehearsals and training. But when we **have** a practice, the very doing in each moment is the end in itself; while we all are certainly striving to become better at what we do, we use our skills and actively engage in the doing here and now.

So – do you have a Jewish practice? As we enter this New Year, I rise tonight to invite you to enter into a deeper and fuller Jewish practice. Now each one and all of the mitzvot are a practice unto themselves. Each one, done with sincerity and attention, can strengthen our connection and relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people, today and over history; each one, done with sincerity and attention, can bring us closer to and more aware of *ha-Makom*, the Ultimate Ground whose *Shechinah*, Presence, is all around us, but whose Name remains a mystery beyond us; and every mitzvah, done with sincerity and attention, can help us cultivate and deepen the *middot*, the qualities of character that we seek to nurture within the soul.

Fulfilling the mitzvot can be a path to “practicing” compassion and awareness; they come to us as “obligations” so that we can practice doing them and thereby experience the possibility of an internalized practice. On the way, we might learn from another tradition that some of you participate in, which suggests that the path to a lived practice is to “fake it till you make it.” Yet each mitzvah is also a practice unto itself in its fulfillment. The mitzvah is its own reward, as we learn: “שכר מצוה, מצוה מצודה” the reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah” (Mishnah, Avot 4:2).

There are many dimensions of a Jewish spiritual life and not everything that our rich tradition offers need speak to every one of us. But our privilege and inheritance as Reform Jews is that we have access to, and freedom to take on as much of, our vast spiritual heritage as we choose; we can *מחדש את הישן ומקדש את החדש* we can renew the old, as well as enhancing and transforming it with new patterns and forms.

There are, by long tradition, 613 mitzvot—and any of them can be the doorway to deepening your Jewish practice. But I would like to begin tonight with just one: Shabbat. A popular Hebrew saying declares: “More than the Jewish people have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jewish people.” I would like to invite you to consider how you might begin or deepen your own and your family’s Shabbat practice.”

Do you have a Shabbat practice? Did your Shabbat observance begin and end with your child’s tenure at our BENS pre-school? Do you light candles and have dinner together but only when schedules permit? Do you have a set of things that you are careful not to do over the course of Shabbat? Do you have an affirmative set of activities that you set out to do on Shabbat? Do you attend Torah study or one of our services? Now and then?

Yes, I do know that the dominant Shabbat morning ritual for many in our community revolves around the soccer schedule. As Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin said some years ago, “The God of soccer is a very jealous God.” Yes, the demands and claims upon you are many. Even if we do not work in the corporate sweat-shop culture as described in the recent New York Times article about life at Amazon, how many of you are anxious right now about the workweek and your tasks? Our new connectedness is continually eroding the boundaries of private and public, home and office; two hundred years after the beginning of the industrial revolution, the e-revolution threatens many of the last century’s gains in limiting the workday and total hours worked in a week. How many of you have checked your e-mail or the web since I started speaking? (If you’re checking the US Open final, please don’t tell me; its taping at home.) And even if we are able to put work aside, isn’t Saturday reserved for going to Costco, getting the car smog checked, finally putting up the bookshelves and the myriad other small tasks that otherwise can’t seem to get done?

Often, people tell me that they love the idea of observing Shabbat more fully, but, “Rabbi, let’s get real. It’s just out of the question.” So, yeah, let’s be honest with each other. What happens when you want to schedule something and you look in your calendar? It’s easy for us to say to ourselves or each other: “Oh. I have to be at work. There is a meeting I’ve got to be at.” And everything else flows around this important time, like water flowing around a rock in the stream. Now it’s true; time is finite – there isn’t enough to get everything done. Yet we organize our lives and our calendars around what we value and make most important; and lo and behold, all the rest fits around those slots which are “not negotiable” in our schedules. I invite you to make your own soul-care and your connection to *k’dushah*, the sacred – that which is of utmost importance – a focus of your week.

Once we make it a priority, carving out the space-time as non-negotiable, such that other things flow around it, Shabbat becomes about celebrating the infinity of time – or at least living, for a short while, as if we have unlimited time. It is a response to the measuredness and rationing of attention, awareness and time which characterizes so much of how we live. In answer to our

own need and the frequent demands for multitasking, Shabbat can be the time of complete non-tasking at all.

The Torah instructs:

שְׁמוֹר אֶת-יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, לְקַדְּשׁוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד, וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ. וַיּוֹם, הַשְּׁבִיעִי-  
-שַׁבָּת, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלָאכָה

*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Eternal your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Eternal your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Eternal your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Eternal your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*

There are two dimensions to a Jewish Shabbat practice – what we don’t do and what we affirmatively do. The halachic tradition enumerates 39 forbidden categories of labor, most of which relate to ancient agricultural practices, each of which in turn has generated countless restrictions; normative rabbinic practice often creates a wide margin for safety lest one inadvertently transgress the true law. We do not have to embrace a halakhic observance or apologize for not living in such a fashion to appreciate that any meaningful practice must include personal commitment and discipline.

For us, as liberal Jews, the evolution of our personal and communal Shabbat practice can begin with asking: how are we encumbered and burdened during the week? What oppresses us and in what ways are we complicit in our own alienation?

For many in our over technologized world, Shabbat observance might begin with putting our screens down. What would declaring an e-Shabbat involve for you? On Nov. 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President – and through the wonders of technology and human ingenuity, the telegraph and the Pony Express, the news arrived right here in California on November 14, just *one week* later. I love technology; I’m tweeting my best lines tonight as I go and posting the video on Snapchat too! But our endless thirst for the newest, the freshest, and the most connected, as well as our fear that if we are not constantly linked-in we are going to be left out and left behind, creates anxiety, distraction and restlessness. Shabbat is a time for soul-rest. When your kids tell you that they cannot possibly be cut-off for such a period of time from the most pressing developments in their frantic world, gently ask them how they survived a Camp Kee Tov overnight or another camp where devices were not allowed. Humanity – and the Jewish people – managed for thousands of years without a single cell phone or screen and I bet that we can make it through dinner – or even longer – without one too.

Take a moment and ask yourself: what are the burdens I carry that I would I like to set aside each week on Shabbat? There are many different strategies for making the Shabbat day different, special and freeing ourselves from what burdens us. I asked a few of you about your personal Shabbat goals and observance. One told me: “Shabbat is the day I don’t wear my watch or carry my phone.” Another person told me (via e-mail obviously) that her resolve is not to open

her e-mail. One congregant wrote:” I don't open mail -- especially anything related to work, bills or payments etc. I try not to even look through the mail without opening it.” And another member told me: “I don't work for my job. We aspire not to use electronic devices unless it's a family activity (e.g. watching a movie together). We usually manage to avoid shopping and mundane errands on Shabbat.”

He went on to say:

*Recently, I have been learning not to force joy on the family. As my child has become a teenager, there's been more resistance and I've slowly been learning to not try to get everyone to rest according to my plan. We just do what we want and everyone has a good time and enjoys the day.*

Shabbat is much more than a negative; it is not just the absence of the competition, work and distractions of the rest of the week. Shabbat is an affirmative celebration of connection, transcendence and creation. Thus, in Exodus, the Torah also commands the observance of Shabbat, but using different words and with a different reason:

זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתְךָ: וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּתוֹ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ...כִּי יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶיִם עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ

*Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath. For in six days the ETERNAL made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day.*

In his book *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously declared:

*The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.*

Shabbat can be an affirmation in which we experience moving through the world and our lives differently. For Jews who were poor and struggling, living hand to mouth and not always secure about their safety and place, Shabbat was a weekly oasis when, despite all the burdens of their lives, each person was dignified and honored, and lived as if the messianic days were already present. On Shabbat, we turn aside from the urgent and distracting to focus on the important and the enduring.

How do we as Reform Jews create a Shabbat practice which honors who we are and the lives we live and is rooted in the wisdom and teachings of our heritage? In an early rabbinic work, Midrash Tanchumah, we learn: “**Shabbat was given for joy, holiness and rest.**”

These three headings – *kedushah*, holiness, *menucha*, rest and *oneg*, joy – can be the basis for the construction of an affirmative Reform Jewish Shabbat practice.

Where do you find *oneg*, joy? In our fantasies, our grandmother or great-grandmother who grew up in the Old Country has been cooking all day. We come home and find the table set and chicken soup and gefilte fish waiting us on the stove; this is the Shabbos that Oliver Sacks *alav ha-shalom*, described in an essay a few weeks before his death. I don't know about you, but my grandmothers lived in another country, my mother always had a full-time job and my life is catered by Trader Joe's and the Monterrey Market. Yet for the 34 years of our marriage – and for the more twenty years that we had our son in the house – we have had Shabbat as a family every Friday night. Our Shabbat evening ritual anchored our family and our relationship. We use the good china every week; we share in songs and blessings; tired as we often may be, our Shabbat observance is a source of renewal and reconnection. You can take the challah out of the freezer, it's OK.

For the mystics, Shabbat represented the temporary but real return home from exile, the restoration of wholeness, the experience of unity. For this reason and because Shabbat is a time for joy, our tradition considers Shabbat to be the ideal time for intimacy – an opportunity, when we are blessed, to dissolve time and space, to experience deep connectedness – albeit for fleeting moments – by erasing otherness in a shared unity. Make a Shabbat date, it's a mitzvah – for conversation, for connection, for intimacy. Make it a practice and turn it into a tradition.

What brings you deep joy? Is it cooking a meal without being rushed? Folding the laundry with care? Puttering in the garden? Going for a bike ride or hike? Taking the time to read a book? How can you make these things part of your commitment to your own spiritual Shabbat practice?

What is *menucha*, soul-rest for you? For many of you, I know, soul-rest is bound up with body-rest and you need more sleep. But *menucha*, Shabbat rest, means also a rest from the burdens you are carrying – putting them down does not mean that you are walking away; at the end of Shabbat, the first thing we do is kindle a fire so that we can see what awaits us in the week ahead. What can you affirmatively do that will enhance rest and renewal for your soul?

The third category of Shabbat remembrance is *k'dusha*, holiness. Shabbat is, by its nature, *kadosh*, sacred, set apart. What will add to or enhance your experience of Shabbat as a time of sacredness, as a time of receptivity for encountering the transcendent?

Now, you may be thinking...but actually, Wednesday is our family dinner and movie night – can't I just get all these benefits then? Well the idea of Shabbat was a core part of organized labor's early struggle to achieve a six-day work week and, certainly, and doing any of these things at any point can only be beneficial. But we don't have a family dinner without screens only because studies show that those who eat together have better health outcomes; our Shabbat practice is also a spiritual path, linking and opening ourselves to Torah, teaching and community; connecting us, as individuals, as families, to a four thousand year tradition, to a wider community, to that which is greater, outside of us and enduring, even as we tend and nurture the spiritual life within.

Speaking of community, I would be remiss if I didn't extend an invitation to join us here. We're here every Friday and Saturday, and our motto is: "We are always happy to see you." If you haven't shared the joy of Shabbat on Friday evenings, please come; you and your kids are always welcome. Special services and programs occur monthly; please check the Builder and the

e-update. We are here every Shabbat morning – early minyan, Torah study and our sanctuary service: come as you are, before, after or between yoga, soccer, and other stops, because “We are always glad to see you.”

In the course of the coming year, we will be offering resources for you to learn about, commit to and deepen your personal Shabbat practice. Our congregational Shabbaton is a great forum to try out what a deeper Shabbat practice might be like; *Learning about and Celebrating Shabbat* is the theme of our Shabbaton this year.

To help you think about what Shabbat might look like for you, I have prepared a take home, personal Shabbat matrix. There are three circles: one each for Shabbat *menucha*, rest; *oneg*, joy; *kedusha*, holiness. Your homework task is to spend a little time with a pencil, and write into each circle the appropriate words or activities, putting a plus or minus next to each one.. Look at your list and, place those commitments, the “yes I wills” and “no I won’ts” which are most important, in the center. Compare with the people who are affected by your decisions on this matter and you by theirs; can you make a covenant with yourself and each other towards a new or renewed Shabbat practice?

For some of you, personal observance might be not checking e-mail from work but having the time to hangout with friends on Facebook; for others, its being OK with the dishes in the sink and instead reading a book. Take a moment to ask yourself: in order to create sacred space-time on Shabbat, what might my practice include?

Continuing this spiritual-thought experiment: if you do follow through on doing – or not doing – these things in your own life, what would happen? Can you live with that?

If you write up your personal or family covenant and share it with me, we will check in at Chanukah, Pesach and before next Rosh Hashanah to see how it’s going and how our synagogue community might help you sustain or deepen your observance.

Shabbat itself is an enduring sign of the Covenant between God and the Jewish people: “וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶת-הַשַּׁבָּת, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרֹתָם, בְּרִית עִוְלָם. The community of Israel shall keep the Shabbat, fulfilling the Shabbat throughout their generations” (Exodus 31:16).

In our efforts to craft a spiritual, uplifting, connecting, meaningful perfectly realized practice and observance, we can err by bringing the same exacting standards and high expectations that we are constantly measuring ourselves against to our Shabbat, thereby draining it of joy and making our observance just one more burden. Shabbat, though, is a time of acceptance; of discovering joy in the present moment. On Shabbat, each person, irrespective of life stage, however poor of means or spirit, is considered to be royalty, embraced and accepted as they are in this moment; and we admire and celebrate the beauty of the world too, accepting it as it is, even in its brokenness. For the hours of Shabbat, we construct and inhabit an alternative reality, living as if we and the world were already completely realized: all exile, alienation, pain and injustice resolved, and through it drawing strength to return to the world as it is.

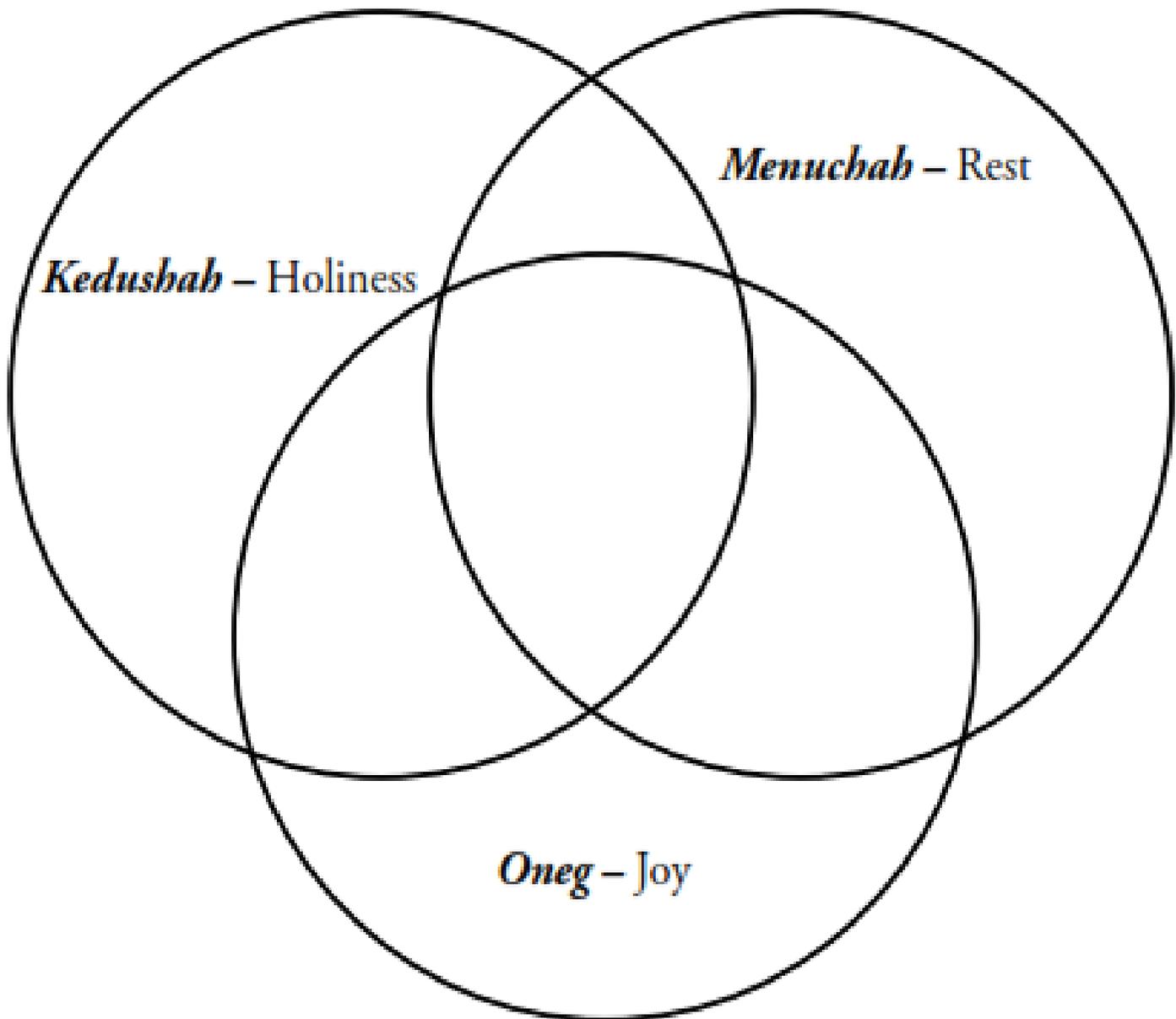
The gift of Shabbat, the highlight of each week, arrives again and again, enabling us continually to relearn and to put in our practice the poet’s teaching:

*Will you seek afar off?*

*You surely come back at last, in things best known to you, finding the best, or as good as the best—*

*Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but in this place—not for another hour, but this hour.<sup>1</sup>*

***Kein yehi ratzon.***



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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman. "Carol of Occupations" *Leaves of Grass*.