

## A New Reform Ethic of Shabbat

I open a word document and label it “High Holidays 2024.” How is it time for the fall holidays again?

I check Instagram to see if there’s any inspiration there, or at least something to distract me from a blank document.

I go back to my document and look at the scribbles of thoughts on post-it notes I’ve been collecting over the past few weeks. Are any of my thoughts worthwhile?

I check my email. If I can delete 10 emails that I don’t need, I tell myself, at least I will have accomplished something today.

I write a paragraph. I delete it. I rewrite it. What if the right words never come?

I check my Amazon cart and place an order. At least I can check “buy soap” off my to-do list.

When I sit down to write, so often something in my life—my phone, my watch, my computer, my brain—pings, and pulls me out of my concentration. Or maybe more accurately, I allow myself to be pulled out of concentration.

It is hard to find moments of peace and quiet to sit and be and think and write.

It’s hard because we’re so busy.

It’s also hard because sitting in reflection and contemplation asks us to confront our own doubts, challenges, and aspirations.

This is one of the reasons I love Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and the Days of Awe. The Jewish calendar invites us to sit in reflection and contemplation, to look back on the past year and dream about the year to come. How often do we get to do that?

This is also why I love Shabbat. Shabbat, in its ideal form, is a day of restoration, a day set apart from the regularity of our lives.

Look at the way we mark time on our calendars. One rotation of the earth is a day, one revolution of the moon around the earth is a month, and one revolution of the earth around the sun is a year. Seven days—a week—is an invented period of time. Humans created it thousands of years ago based on a sociological need and theological belief that we shouldn’t spend our whole lives working.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by “Four Exiles and Four Spiritual Revolutions” by Dr. Joel Hoffman; *Honoring Tradition, Embracing Modernity: A Reader for the Union for Reform Judaism’s Introduction to Judaism Course*, pg.

Acknowledging the passing of time is not easy or comfortable. The very act of acknowledging this reminds us that we and our loved ones are mortal. Tim Kreider, in a collection of essays called *We Learn Nothing*, writes about why, even though we have a deep desire to make our lives meaningful, we allow our attention to be pulled away by phones, likes, news updates, and technology. He writes about the fear

beneath our twenty-first century intolerance for waits and downtime and silence. It's as if, if we all had time to stand still and shut up and turn off our machines for one minute, we'd hear time passing and just start screaming. So instead we keep ourselves perpetually stunned with stimuli, thereby missing out on the very thing we're so scared of losing.<sup>2</sup>

Part of what we do on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur is, as Kreider writes, "stand still and shut up and turn off our machines for one minute" so we can hear and feel time passing. In Judaism, we do this as a group, by sitting together in spaces like this one. Shabbat is a weekly invitation to do the same thing.

Remember our creation story, when God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Rosh HaShanah celebrates this initial act of creation and offers us another opportunity to connect with our creation story. Shabbat is the weekly reminder of God's act of creation. Our prayers reflect this reminder.

Every Friday night, Jews around the world raise a glass of wine and recite the words of Kiddush.

In our Friday night Kiddush, we sing that God, with love and delight, gave us Shabbat

זָכְרוֹן לְמַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית

for the remembrance of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Every Shabbat, we have the chance to remember the opening lines of Torah, to be reminded that after God created, God rested. If we are created in the Divine Image, we too require and deserve rest. In the famous words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, on Shabbat, we turn from the "world of creation to the creation of the world."<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on what we create, and what we produce, and what we consume, we turn our focus to the world itself, expressing gratitude for being on this planet at this moment in time.

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<sup>2</sup> *We Learn Nothing* by Tim Kreider, pg. 192-193

<sup>3</sup> Liturgy: Friday Night Kiddush

<sup>4</sup> *The Sabbath* by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, pg. 10

We need Shabbat to help us express this kind of gratitude. We cannot live in the space of complete awe and wonderment 100% of the time, but neither can we afford the absence of this kind of gratitude. Imagine stepping out of the world of production and consumerism to live in the world of creation and gratitude one out of every seven days.

How would that change our lives?

Creation is not the only reason our Kiddush gives us for Shabbat. We also sing that Shabbat is one of the ways to

זְכוֹר לִיְצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם

To remember the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Now, as a free people, we are able and, our tradition teaches, obligated to observe Shabbat. We couldn't do that in slavery—we couldn't create, produce, consume, or connect with the eyes and ears of our taskmasters on us. Shabbat is the opposite of that. Shabbat is a day when we step away from our enslavements to schedules and shareholder value and the false idols of fame and fortune.

Yaira A. Robinson, a writer and activist, writes about Shabbat as a practice: "Shabbat practice [she says] can be a powerful tool for reorienting us toward a way of being that is centered on connection, balance, and wholeness[...] Shabbat practice teaches enoughness."<sup>6</sup>

Shabbat teaches us that we have enough and that we are enough. We don't have to achieve any more to be loved, to produce any more to be elevated, or to be any more to be seen.

One out of every seven days we turn from the world as it is and celebrate the world as it could be.

A world in which everyone is free to rest, where everyone is clothed and fed and loved. A world in which everyone is free to pursue their passions because the world doesn't need healing. A world in which everyone revels in their enoughness.

So which is it—creation or liberation? To choose is a false dichotomy. The answer is that we need Shabbat for both creation and liberation.

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<sup>5</sup> Liturgy: Friday Night Kiddush

<sup>6</sup> "Love Sustains: How My Everyday Practices Make My Everyday Activism Possible," by Yaira A. Robinson (<https://zeek.forward.com/articles/118456/index.html>)

In the Book of Exodus, after the Israelites have been freed and are beginning to receive the laws that will govern their society, they get a reminder about Shabbat. Moses tells them:

“For in six days the Eternal made Heaven and Earth, and on the seventh day, God ceased from work and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17).

“God was refreshed” is how this verse is usually translated, but I don’t think that translation captures the full innovation of the verse. The original text says “*shavat vayinafash*,” God ceased and was re-souled. We don’t have a good word in English for *vayinafash*. The very fact that we don’t have the words to translate this idea shows how radical it is in western culture.

The rabbis of the Talmud, doing their usual word-play with biblical text, explain that this word *vayinafash* means that we each receive an extra soul on Shabbat.<sup>7</sup>

When was the last time you felt an extra soul in your body on Shabbat?

When was the last time we paid enough attention to our bodies and our spirits to confidently answer that question?

I believe that we invented Shabbat because our bodies and our minds and our souls require it. Shabbat is a radical invention.

I also know that finding this Shabbat state of being is not easy.

One of the biggest obstacles to a Shabbat state of being is our phones. Our phones’ constant presence in our lives and in our palms makes it very hard to step away from them; their beeps and dings so quickly pulls our focus away from the present.

Our phones are not all bad. They connect us in a way that our ancestors couldn’t have imagined. They help us remember birthdays and manage appointments. They allow us to hear the voices and see the faces of our loved ones even when we’re not in the same time zone. Zoom rooms allow us to gather to mourn together even as we may be scattered across continents. There are real benefits to living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and having access to this kind of technology. Technology can be a tool for connection and belonging.

But I have also seen phones as an incredible distraction towards community connection and relationship building.

Think about all the times you have seen someone experience something through the screen of their phone instead of being present in the moment.

Think about the times—and most of us are guilty of this—that we’ve been with a friend and the ping of our phone has been so strong that we’ve picked up the phone to glance at it while our friend was speaking. What does it say to our friend in that moment about how

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<sup>7</sup> Talmud Bavli, Beitzah 16a

we value our friendship? And when we're on the receiving end of that, how does it make us feel?

Think about the times you've seen a group spending time together, but they're all on their phones. You may think this applies only to teenagers, but I see it everywhere, with all ages. Can we be honest with ourselves that teens are sometimes mimicking the behavior they see in adults?

I also know that our phones can be the way that we are flooded with devastating and upsetting news. In addition to its benefits, the internet is also a place where antisemitism and all kinds of ugly hatred lives and flourishes. We deserve to take a break from this kind of news, to connect and celebrate without other people's hatred entering our sacred time.

Phones and technology aren't inherently good or bad—they just are. It's up to us to use them in ways that feel meaningful.

Educators and parents in my circle have been reading and talking about Jonathan Haidt's new book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Haidt writes a lot about teens, but I don't think his exploration or his conclusions are limited to teenagers. As I read the book, I was struck by how much of the research he cited and the problems he addressed felt related to the work of building Jewish communities.

Haidt uses the phrases "the real world" and "the virtual world." The real world, according to Haidt:

Is Embodied—we have faces and bodies and body language

Is Synchronous—we communicate in real-time, taking turns talking and listening

Involves One-to-one or one-to-several interactions—there is one primary interaction happening at a time

Within a community with a high bar for entry and exit—people are motivated to remain connected to the group<sup>8</sup>

The virtual world, the world within our phones, is very often the opposite of this.

Jewish communities can and should be the very definition of "the real world."

Towards the end of his book, Haidt writes that "People who live only in networks [that is, shallow transactional groups without strong bonds] rather than communities, are less likely to thrive."<sup>9</sup> Shabbat and Jewish community in general is the very best of "the real world." Shabbat and Jewish community also demand our active engagement. So often today, we expect entertainment and distraction to come our way. Shabbat and Jewish community are something we must create, and one outcome of cultivating Shabbat and Jewish community is gaining a deeper sense of belonging and enoughness to sustain us from week to week.

<sup>8</sup> *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* by Jonathan Haidt, pg. 9

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 203

Shabbat, and Judaism's invitation to live our lives according to a meaningful calendar, is perhaps the most radical invention of Judaism.

What we need today is a new reform ethic of Shabbat.

*What makes it new?*

It is new because in the past, many of us have thought of Shabbat restrictions as a list of do-nots: do not work, do not use electricity, do not drive. Today, we have the opportunity to think about what we need Shabbat to be: a day to pause, to rest, to connect differently.

It is new because the world has changed rapidly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must respond to this rapidly changing world by reevaluating the way we relate to Shabbat and therefore the way we engage with technology.

*What makes it Reform?*

As Reform Jews, we believe that it is possible to be both modern and Jewish. We are, of course, not the only ones who believe this, but it is core to our identity as Reform Jews.

Reform Judaism has always prioritized knowledge and education as a fundamental part of making a choice.

What works for one person won't automatically work for another person; what one Reform community prioritizes won't automatically be what another community prioritizes.

So we have to ask questions like:

- When does my phone help me connect and engage with others?
- When does my phone limit my connection and engagement with others?
- How will I, and how will our community, mark Shabbat?
- How will I, and how will our community, face our mortality?
- When do we feel like we have and are enough? How do we access that feeling regularly? How do we practice enoughness?

I don't know the answers, but I know that we need to be asking these questions. *What makes it an ethic?*

An ethic is something we strive for, a set of guiding and aspirational principles.

I like the term 'Shabbat practice'—because I believe Shabbat is something we practice. We will not have a perfect Shabbat state of being 52 out of 52 Shabbats; it just isn't possible.

But it is possible to be striving towards that Shabbat state of being, with an ethic of Shabbat practice informed by conscious choice.

One of the most beautiful gifts of Shabbat is that if we mark it each week, we cannot be immune to the passage of our time. Jewish tradition gives us the gift of not allowing time to pass us by. Jewish tradition gives us the gift of enoughness, of knowing that we are enough exactly as we are.

This is part of what we are doing here on Rosh HaShanah as the calendar turns from 5784 to 5785: marking time and hallowing it sacred.

This is part of what we will do next week on Yom Kippur, when we reflect and repent and contemplate our own mortality. Jewish tradition calls Yom Kippur *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the great Sabbath.

As we gather at the start of the new year, we say goodbye to the year that was and open the door to the year to come. We are marking the turning of the year together right now. In this new year, how will we mark the passage of time? When we gather together, God-willing, in this place at this time next year, what will our future selves say about how we used our time and our lives in 5785?