

Shabbat to the Third Power

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A spiritual exercise: On my watch, here, I'm going to allow one minute – 60 seconds to pass. I'd like to see how close you can come to feeling the duration of one minute. Please close your eyes. In a moment I'm going to say "Begin." Without counting – when you think one minute has passed, please keep your eyes closed and raise your hand. Ready? Begin.

[after one minute] Some hands went up at 40 seconds – that means nearly 1/3 of a minute was lost. Gone. If we missed 1/3 of every minute – well, we would lose 20 minutes of every hour – 8 hours of every day – more than 2 full days of every week. Gone.

Which is a tough lesson for those of us for whom it seems like there simply aren't enough hours in the week to accomplish everything we need to do. Time is precious, and it often seems like there just isn't enough of it. Our lives are in perpetual motion. Surely you've felt it before.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel made the following allegory:

A great pianist was once asked by an ardent admirer: "How do you handle the notes as well as you do?" The maestro answered: "Feh – The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes – ah! That is where the art resides."¹

As the sun went down this evening, we welcomed both Yom Kippur and Shabbat. Yom Kippur is called in the Torah *shabbat shabbaton*, or "Shabbat squared." Since tonight is also Friday night, we might call this evening "Shabbat cubed." Heschel called it, "the pause between the notes." For Shabbat is the antidote to a life that is accelerating out of control in all different directions. Shabbat is an opportunity to reclaim those lost minutes.

Perhaps you're one of the countless Americans who feel that they are always spending their time tending to the needs of others, never to the needs of ourselves. This includes *schlepping* the children everywhere, from school to afterschool activities, to friends' homes, to the mall. Then you're balancing the responsibilities of work, home, exercise, shopping, school, and aging parents.

Or maybe you're one of the innumerable teens in America who bounce from school to sports to SAT Prep to music lessons to a job to Hebrew School, and then, after a fast-food dinner, begin four hours of homework.

Perhaps you're one of the elementary school-aged kids who are being told to grow up far too quickly by the media, by your teachers, by your peers.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *G-d in Search of Man*, p.249.

Life is speeding up – for adults, for teens, for children. It wasn't always like this, you know. In earlier eras the day was not so subdivided. The ancient Babylonians invented the concept of the "minute," but it turns out that society had little use for it for another millennium or two, until after the industrial revolution arrived. Until that point, "one-handed clocks sufficiently divided up the day."² For us, time moves much more quickly. Imagine life not divided up into minutes! Imagine minutes not divided into half-minutes, or seconds!

But the sad truth is that the speeded-up life does not necessarily mean an improved-upon life. Accelerating life, unfortunately, tends to result in lessening the quality of its moments. Woody Allen once said, "**I took a speed reading course last week, and I read *War & Peace* in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.**" For many of us, that's the syndrome of our accelerated lives. The quantity of our experiences has increased dramatically, but the quality of our experiences has not.

Jewish tradition has given us an off-ramp to the endless fast lane of the stress-filled life. It is Shabbat. As society speeds up, every indicator tells us that this Shabbat gift – this oasis in time – is one we'd better claim quickly.

The simple numbers of the American workplace are very telling. As I share some of them with you, see if you can locate yourself or your family in these statistics:

- In the past 30 years, the average American worker added an additional 199 work-hours to his or her annual schedule.
- 2 out of 3 Americans work more than 40 hours a week; 1 in 12 work more than 60 hours a week.
- 26% of Americans don't take *any* vacation time at all during the year.³
- And 2 out of 3 Americans say they would gladly give up some of their salary for more time at home with their families.⁴

Some might say speed is simply the direction in which the world is moving in the 21st century. But actually that's not the case. The world is moving in one direction. American society is moving in another, decidedly different one:

- Americans work an average of nine full weeks – 350 hours – more per year than European workers do.
- 121 countries guarantee two weeks or more paid vacation each year for every worker; but the U.S. does not require employers to provide any paid annual leave for their workers.

² Jay Griffiths, *A Sideways Look at Time* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), p.3. The quote is from Thomas Hardy, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

³ These first three statistics are taken from *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America*, John de Graaf, ed., San Francisco: 2003), and quoted in Dorothy C. Bass, "Sabbath Practices," www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

⁴ Harvard University study, 2000, cited in "Main Street Heartbeat" (website), www.mainstreetheartbeat.org

- And at least 126 countries around the world require employers to provide a mandatory day of rest each week. The U.S. – despite how “religious” our country is said to be – does not guarantee our workers this 24 hour break.⁵

But none of that comes as a surprise, because most of us deny ourselves such a break! In fact, the evidence tells us that as success increases... so does stress.

Our community at Shir Tikva is no stranger to this; I’m as guilty of burning the candle at both ends as anybody. We live in a part of the world that is noted for its “work hard and play hard” ethic, and its competitive nature. We celebrate in these parts our competitive schools, our competitive careers, our competitive cars, our competitive children. Yom Kippur, however, is a time for looking at those tendencies and asking, are we happier because of those things? Are our lives healthier? Do our souls have more peace because of the success we’ve found?

Consider our addiction to technology: We have wired ourselves to our work lives more than ever. Many of us check our email before showering in the morning; monitor it continuously during the day; check it one more time after dinner; and, okay, one more time before going to sleep at night. **How many of us took the laptop or the blackberry on vacation this summer** – so that even while we are on a break, part of us is still back at the office? We are constantly plugged in, far more than ever before.

The evidence all around us tells us: The more we consume, the more we are in danger of being consumed. Fortunately, there is an antidote to this cycle of compulsion and consumption. Rabbi Heschel has written:

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things in space, becomes our sole concern.⁶

And that realm of time, of course, is called Shabbat.

Don’t get me wrong. A healthy attitude towards work is a virtue. The first-century Roman philosopher Seneca, the patron saint of every workaholic since, used Shabbat as an opportunity to paint Jews as shiftless and lazy, wasting “almost a seventh of their life in inactivity.” But for us, *avodah* – the modern Hebrew word for “work” – is also the word for “worship” and “service”, as in service to G-d. Genesis speaks of the virtue of *l’ovdah u’l’shomrah*⁷ – working and preserving the Land. For the early Zionists, it was the fullest expression of their religion.

But work only achieves this holy dimension when, like art, it is put in a frame. Shabbat is the week’s frame. What happens, after all, to a work of art if there’s no frame? You don’t

⁵ *The Work, Family, and Equity Index: How Does the United States Measure Up?*, Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, Jeffrey Hayes; Institute for Health and Social Policy; www.mcgill.ca/ihsp

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), p.3

⁷ Genesis 2:15

know where the art ends and the rest of the world begins! Without the frame of Shabbat, how do we know where our work-lives end and the rest of our identity—and our souls—begin?

We should remember that Shabbat is primarily about liberation. In Deuteronomy, Shabbat is described in this way:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתֶּךָ

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is Shabbat... You shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your animals, or the stranger in your settlements... Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, and G-d freed you from there... thus, Shabbat.⁸

Liberation from the totalitarianism of work and career! In Shabbat, we hear the Torah's promise that everyone – including the rich and the poor; including animals and slaves; including the earth and the land; including you and me – everyone has an inalienable right to rest, to recuperate, to recharge spiritual batteries, to be. Shabbat is about liberation.



I would offer a three-fold prescription for every Jew to re-enter Shabbat.

First: We need to reclaim the Orthodox idea of *muktza*. *Muktza*, in our tradition, is the umbrella term for “everything I don’t do on Shabbat.” In traditional Judaism, that includes no making fires, no using electricity, no driving vehicles. And as a 21st Century Jew, I would never tell anyone to throw out any aspect of our tradition.

But we who do not engage with tradition that way still need to rediscover *Muktza*. It means asking ourselves – what parts of our workweek should we not touch for twenty-four hours? Maybe you’ll say: I will turn off email and the computer for one day. Maybe you’ll determine: I will not spend any money. Or, I won’t catch up on paying bills that day. I recently learned of the tradition of making a “Shabbos box.”⁹ It is a special box in some homes in which they place all sorts of items that, as a family, they have determined they are not going to use over Shabbat. Picture it: checkbooks, palm pilots, algebra books... Consider for a moment: What would you put in your Shabbos box?

With those things put away, we become free to do what we want on this precious day. Perhaps for you Shabbat is a time for writing, or making art or music. Maybe it is a time for sleeping, or cooking, or reading. Perhaps it is a time for being outdoors. But what a wondrous tradition we share that insists that we reflect on the things in our lives that give us the most joy, and find ways to integrate them into our lives.

Second: We need to designate Shabbat as a unique time shared with family and friends. Shabbat is a time for being with the people we love the most, doing the things we love the most.

⁸ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

⁹ In Noam Zion and Shawn Fields-Meyer, *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home*, Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2004, p.23.

The workaholic parent needs to be able to say, “Shabbat time is my family time. It is a day when I will not deny myself the people whom I love.”

Look at how different Shabbat is from the Puritans’ Sabbath (*l’havdil*). For them, Sundays were a day of icy austerity, of sermons that put the Fear of G-d into you, of self-denial. As Jews, we use the day to sing songs with one another, to cook more elaborate food than usual and to share it with the people we most want to be with. It is no coincidence that in traditional Judaism – when you couldn’t turn on the TV, or the lights, and you drank a few *L’chaims* – that it became a Mitzvah for spouses to make love on Shabbat.

Third: Light Shabbos candles. No matter what other aspects of the Shabbat ritual you do, make that moment sacred. Perhaps you’ve noticed that many women, lighting the candles, have a custom of drawing inward three times before reciting the blessing. It’s a very common custom – why do you think we do that? I’ve heard it said that the tradition is an act of drawing in the spiritual light of Shabbat. It is one thing to let go of the work week that is departing. It is quite another to allow the light of Shabbat to illumine our souls once again. Light Shabbos candles – every week, no matter what other commitments you and your family have made – and see how it transforms life with blessing.

Three aspects: Rejecting the *muktza*-items that make the rest of the week work, family and friends sharing Shabbat together; and blessing the light. With these, life seems far more manageable, far healthier, and it even becomes more adventurous. Oh yes, by all means – come to shul on Shabbat. If you haven’t been here in a long time, know that our goal is – when we leave the service here on Friday night and Saturday morning – that we leave here with a real sense of uplift. We’ll gladly take you straight from the office, or school, and it doesn’t matter to us if you’re still wearing what you’ve had on. But see it as part of the bigger picture of rest and renewal that makes Shabbat such an essential piece of Jewish spiritual wisdom.



The ultimate message of Yom Kippur is to set aside time for taking stock of our souls. Tonight we reset our default positions, and remind ourselves again about why we do all that we do. We live busy lives. But Shabbat is our opportunity to say: I will not let that work define who I am; rather, I will put my meaning on it!

There’s a story that’s told about a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed attendant came to him and said, “You, sir, may have anything you choose – any food, any pleasure, any kind of entertainment to your heart’s content.”

The man was delighted, of course, and for days he sampled every delicacy and experience of which he had dreamed on earth. But one day he grew bored with all of it, and called the attendant back. He said, “I’m tired of all this. I need something *to do*. What kind of work can you find for me here?”

The attendant sadly shook his head and replied, “I’m sorry, sir. That’s the one thing I’m afraid we can’t offer you here.”

The man replied, “Great. That’s just great. No work for me to do. I might as well be in hell.”

To which the attendant said softly, “Where did you think you were?”¹⁰

That story is our story. For too many of us, being denied the opportunity to work more would be torture. Not being able to push one’s self further, to make the next deadline, to reach the next promotion, to seal the next deal would be... hellish.

But it turns out that heaven – *gan eden* – is right here, where it has been all along. More than any generation in history, we need that day of the soul. As Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf has said, **“Shabbat is a taste of eternity. Without it we may be lost. In its rediscovery we may yet be found.”**

Gut yontiff. And Shabbat Shalom.

¹⁰ Margaret Stevens, in Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, eds., *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991, p.162.