

SLOUCHING TOWARD SHABBAT

The Most Important Holiday of All

1.26.15

I'M FAILING AT Shabbat, which most rabbis say is the most important holiday of them all. On the seventh day of the week—just as God rested on the seventh day of Creation—we're supposed to stop working, which includes: creating anything, shopping, driving, writing (or erasing), doing laundry, using fire, or electronics. The fourth of the Ten Commandments instructs, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

It's not that I'm skipping Shabbat entirely. For the past eight years, I've gone to synagogue services most Friday nights and several Saturday mornings, which are the weekly worship slots for this holiday.

I buy a challah every Friday. My family, when we're all together, duplicates my mother's Shabbat, lighting and blessing the two candles, holding up the cup of wine, and reciting Kiddush, tearing pieces of the braided challah bread.

So I do feel *some* Shabbat differentiation, or separation—the rabbinic interpretation of the word *kadosh*, also meaning holy—which divides the six weekdays from Shabbat.

But this year, because of my holiday expedition, I have to ratchet up my *kadosh*—my separation—to create a firewall from the rest of

the week. So I decide to add one challenging embargo: no looking at email on Saturdays.

For the first six Friday afternoons of my Jewish Year, I go to the “vacation responder” under my Gmail settings and input a message that says I won’t be reading email from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

Friends who receive my automatic message are taken aback. “Wow. You’re really doing this,” one writes. My mother calls and leaves a message: “I had no idea you’d be Shomer Shabbos!” That’s the term for one who observes the Sabbath commandments, and it doesn’t apply to me. I’m not adhering to the directives. Jews are supposed to refrain from any of the thirty-nine kinds of work that were required to build the Tabernacle (the portable temple that carried the Ten Commandments in the desert), including sowing, plowing, baking, flaying, kindling, you get the idea.

But I am trying to disconnect. And it’s harder than I thought. Moreover, it doesn’t by itself make me feel the supposed tranquility and blissful cessation of Shabbat, what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called “a palace in time.” I’ve heard rabbi after rabbi tell me just to keep at it—opt out of work, efficiency, travel, technology, and commerce; see where it leads. “The solution of mankind’s most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization,” Heschel writes in his prescient 1951 book *The Sabbath*, “but in attaining some degree of independence of it.”

But I can’t pull it off. At least so far. I still find myself violating the Fourth Commandment to “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy . . . you shall not do any manner of work.” I still read the *New York Times* on my phone. I catch up on *Homeland* on the exercise bike. I call my sister. I carry a purse. I buy milk.

To be clear, this is not a plea for Shabbat Rehab. As much as I appreciate those who have offered to guide me through an immersive Shabbat, I already know the rule book. I’m just not following it.

I decide to talk through my Shabbat crisis with the writer and scholar Judith Shulevitz, author of the captivating 2010 book *The Sabbath World*, which explores the day of rest from every angle—historical,

theological, and sociological. I made sure to underline the book before my Jewish Year began because so many rabbis stress that Sabbath is the fundamental holiday. But reading about Shulevitz's personal observance-ambivalence doesn't clarify my own. When we meet in person, the author generously acts as my Shabbat therapist.

"For me, I keep the Sabbath in the spirit of knowing what I'm *not* doing, how far I am from the ideal Shabbat," she says over a cup of tea at a café near her home. "Nobody can get there. It's an unachievable utopia. It's this dream of community, oneness, wholeness, rising outside of yourself into this perfect world. In some weird way, Shabbat is about coming to terms with imperfection."

That's a hard thing for a neurotic perfectionist (and realist) to hear. Meaning: at the same time that I wish I had more Shabbat in my life, I know it's hard to put more Shabbat in my life. But I haven't given up entirely.

Shulevitz's book helps, not only because she unpacks the Sabbath's evolution, but also because her initial resistance to the Sabbath's system affirms mine. "I still like the idea of the fully observed Sabbath more than I like observing it," she writes. "I feel guilty about not building better fences around the day, but apparently not guilty enough. Partly, it's because each step up in observance paralyzes me with indecision. Why follow this rule and not that one? . . . My religious commitments remain too abstract to overcome the inconvenience of making them."

"Inconvenience" is one of my hurdles. It's inconvenient to live by rules that feel antiquated: not cooking, not calling, not riding, not carrying, not "working"—to the point of tearing toilet paper squares in advance to avoid any such effort on Saturdays.

I once attended a Jewish conference where making hot tea was prohibited, even if the water was on a burner that had been turned on before Shabbat, because the tea bag leaves would be "transformed" by the hot water in a way that constituted cooking.

The various bans have evolved over the centuries. With each chapter of modernity and technological advance, rabbinic decisors (fancy word for deciders of law) have adjudicated what is permissible or

barred. Yet, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg maintains that the holiday is not about injunctions. “The Sabbath is actively to achieve *menuchah* (rest) through self-expression, transformation, and renewal,” he writes in his book *The Jewish Way*. “On this day, humans are freed and commanded to explore themselves and their relationships until they attain the fullness of being.”

Ah: it’s that “fullness of being” thing I’m missing.

And yet I’m not missing it; I don’t feel empty.

Does one need to feel the *lack* of Shabbat to *seek* it? I’m not missing spirituality; I’m missing tranquility. There’s a difference.

“There is no better point of entry to the religious experience than the Sabbath,” Shulevitz writes, “for all its apparent ordinariness. *Because* of its ordinariness. The extraordinariness of the Sabbath lies in its being commonplace.”

I love that notion—that the mundanity of Shabbat is its magic. But if my Shabbat is not yet “commonplace,” as Shulevitz puts it, getting to its “ordinariness” seems to require extraordinary effort. I’m daunted by the upheaval it demands.

What *does* enthrall me is the notion of quietude. Reading hard-bound books. Being unreachable. Closing every screen.

My family doesn’t lack for interaction; we’re close and chatty, despite our technology dependence. But I wish that, years ago, when our kids were small, my husband and I had delineated a formal period of undistracted togetherness.

And friends often remind me that I could use a weekly dose of stillness. I’m not the most stressed person I know, but no one would call me Zen; my mind races with a buzzing list. It’s difficult to power down.

“If you’re in the habit, it becomes natural,” Shulevitz counters. “Sometimes out of that, you have the subjective, transformative experience and sometimes you go through the moves. I don’t think the feeling comes first. I think the doing comes first.”

Do it and you will feel it. That’s another theme of this year. Fast and you will feel others’ pain. Dunk in the mikveh and you will feel cleansed. Sit in a sukkah and you will feel fragility. Dance with the

Torah and you will feel close to it. Light the menorah and you will feel community.

That approach is underscored by Rabbi Lauren Berkun, the director of Rabbinic and Synagogue Programs at the Shalom Hartman Institute North America. “When Moses is presenting the Torah to the people on Mount Sinai, the Israelites say ‘*Na’aseh V’nishmah*’—‘We will do and we will listen,’” she reminds me on the phone. “The commentators remark on the strange order: We will first *do* and *then* listen? In Judaism there’s a certain amount of a leap of action. First, you do.” In other words, add Shabbat boundaries and the rest will follow.

“Immerse yourself in this way of walking in the world,” Berkun suggests. “Then you’ll understand the meaning. It’s often the reverse of how liberal, Western Jews operate when they essentially say, ‘First convince me this is meaningful, and then I’ll do it.’”

She’s right. So many of us take a skeptical posture: “Tell me why I should care about this today.” Okay, I should just speak for myself: *I’m* skeptical. But this project represents a continuous effort to get past misgiving. I have to plow through the doubts or I won’t do anything.

Berkun’s own Shabbat conversion confirms that it’s never too late. After a secular childhood, she did not become observant until college, and then found it revelatory. “I remember that feeling of total liberation, of walking out of my dorm room without even a key in my pocket and just feeling free,” she says (I forgot to ask her how she got back into her dorm). “Even though I was keeping all these picayune laws, the experience of doing that was this feeling of emancipation.”

The concept of limitations being freeing sounds right to me. If you can’t do certain things, you do less. If you can’t be efficient, you slow down. If I couldn’t text or telephone a friend, I might see her in person. If I couldn’t get in a cab, I’d walk. If I couldn’t write, I’d read.

It’s certainly easy for me to embrace Shabbat’s mitzvah of hospitality; I love hosting Friday night dinners, hearing my friends bless, in unison, the challah that I bought at Fairway Market (so-so) or Silver Moon bakery (better). Somehow this small act, by itself, affirms that

we're in a separate vessel together, following the Sabbath Strait. And I'm glad there is a map to follow.

But I'm not comfortable at other people's Shabbat tables, where the Hebrew is recited at breakneck speed and the songs are new. My unsophistication is embarrassing. When I started this expedition, several observant Jews generously invited my family over to share their Friday dinners. But for now, I'm more at ease in my modestly literate Sabbath habit, which—on closer look—already does include sacred moments at my synagogue:

The 6 p.m. service shimmers like a beacon at the end of each week—a welcome respite. I am stirred by the sight of multiple generations crowding around two flames on the bimah after lighting the Sabbath candles. I review the week in depth during silent prayer. I listen to the ballad “Hashkiveinu” with the lyric “Guard us from all harmful things,” and feel protected. I close my eyes during the *Shema*—the most sacred avowal of commitment to God. I finally know Kaddish, the mourner’s prayer, by heart. I pray for the sick, and focus, as I never used to, on the weekly tally of struggle and loss: my friend Julie’s unending cancer treatments, Milt’s weakening liver. I take a “gratitude inventory” when we sing the *shehecheyanu* blessing, which thanks God—communally—for bringing us to this moment. I want this mindfulness in my life. I’d go so far as to say I’ve come to need it. As Shulevitz writes, “We all look for a Sabbath, whether or not that’s what we call it.”

Berkun encourages me to just begin keeping the Sabbath, even if the rest of my family doesn’t come along with me. “It is possible to be a lone soldier,” she says. “Whether the people around you are doing it as well is secondary.” But it isn’t secondary to me; I need allies to change my life so dramatically. As each week goes by, I find it hard to go offline solo. I feel compelled to accomplish things. Maria Popova wrote on her popular *Brain Pickings* blog: “Most of us spend our days in what Kierkegaard believed to be our greatest source of unhappiness—a refusal to recognize that *busy is a decision* and that presence is infinitely more rewarding than productivity.” Presence over productivity. Decide not to be busy. I should, but I’m squirming.

Shulevitz told me she still wrestles with her Shabbat practice, invoking theologian Franz Rosenzweig's reply when asked whether he put on tefillin—the prayer phylacteries: "Not yet."

"I'm still in the 'not yet,'" she says.

Me, too.

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer ON SHABBAT

I had an epiphany about Shabbat recently. Theologians and Jewish law scholars love Shabbat for its mystique (think "a cathedral in time") and for its arcane rules. I've observed Shabbat strictly all my life, and I, too, have been seduced by these framings. But a recent Shabbat spent on the beach on Tel Aviv (in walking distance, natch) changed things for me. The image that sticks in my mind is of a secular-ish Mizrachi family, feasting in bathing suits on a traditional buffet—served from a cooler—of shnitzel, jachnun, borekas, and other delicacies sourced from the history of the Jewish dispersion and now serving as the Israeli Shabbat food canon. Beach Shabbat is the unique contribution of Israeli Jewry to the Jewish liturgical year, and it is transformative: it reminds us that Shabbat is, first and foremost, the weekly vacation day for a frenzied people so often weighed down by the burdens of history, a respite from creation for the processes of individual and collective recreation. Beach Shabbat is a success story for secular Zionism—its capacity to claim sacred ritual in unexpected places. And, if the proliferation of kippot on the beach is any indication, Beach Shabbat offers something of value to traditionally observant Jews as well. We are a people that did not merely cross the Sea to become who we are; we also recline beside it to fulfill who we need to be.