

Emor 5770 - Shabbat After Adon Olam
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

What a wonderful a special week and Shabbat. The Bruins and Celtics just won their first playoff series and the Red Sox and my Mets have been winning, we seem to be having nice weather and wonderful *smahot* – celebrations like Ellie’s Bat-Mitzvah.

Last night, many of us were together for the Gimel Siyyum – our third graders led much of the Friday night service, followed by a lovely Shabbat dinner together where each student received his or her own siddur, personally inscribed his or her parents. While it is always a great honor for me to be with students and their families at such moments, having my own daughter as part of the class made it even more special.

During the week, we held two learning sessions about the Friday night service where I participated – our day school students joined with our religious school students in practicing and learning the service. I explained to the students how vital the Friday night service is – it helps us let go of our work week and focus on resting, relaxation and renewal.

One student raised her hand and asked: “But rabbi, you don’t stop working on Shabbat – you have to come to shul where you work!”

A good point.

I tried to explain how I work hard during the week preparing my sermons and everything I need for Shabbat so that on Shabbat I simply go to shul and present what I have already prepared. In addition, I attend shul not as a job – but as something I do as a committed Jew, as something I love to do.

Her question reminded of last month’s Lexington Rabbinic Panel discussion. I was sharing how powerful my long walks with my father to shul were in my life and how we would walk in any weather to shul. I was asked about Shabbat “But rabbi, isn’t it harder to walk to shul in the rain than to get in your car and drive to shul??”

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Of course, it is easier to drive – but you lose something. I appreciate the traditional prohibitions of Shabbat, as hard as they are to achieve. It’s not easy to give up all of my electronics – the blackberry, the computer, email and it’s certainly a challenge to not use my car. That said, it is such a pleasure.

I am removed from the constant vibrating on my hip as phone calls come in; there are no dings of new emails descending into my computer. I am more focused on myself, this moment and most importantly, those around me.

I am more present.

That is not to say that Shabbat is easy. It is not. A couple of months ago I was teaching an Ikkarim class for parents of young children about Shabbat and shared how challenging Friday night can be with little kids who don't always want to sit down and enjoy a long dinner and talk about their week in a somewhat civilized manner. Shabbat can remain a elusive goal.

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Until Shabbat came along, there was no concept of the week. The week is something beyond nature. You cannot look outside and tell what day of the week it is – something you can do to see what day of the month it is on the lunar calendar – you can tell by looking at the moon.

But Shabbat and the week are beyond nature. They are innovations that changed human history for the better. What a revolution – take a day off, one out of seven. Simple, powerful and radical.

In the first century of the Common Era, non-Jews were drawn toward Judaism in large numbers. While they cited many reasons for their desire to convert, the central one was Shabbat. Having one day off every seven gave meaning to their lives, providing the opportunity to both enjoy life more fully and work more efficiently and competently. It created balance and harmony in their family life. It nourished their souls.

My father, Rabbi Stephen Lerner, who directs the Center for Conversion to Judaism in New York and has brought over a 1,700 people to Judaism, tells me that the situation has not changed two thousand years later. Many converts still cite Shabbat as one of the most attractive aspects of Judaism.

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Although it is clear that Shabbat is of tremendous benefit to us, it is a gift that often gets overlooked. Here in America the welcoming embrace that our people have received has taken its toll on our commitments to our Jewish observance, especially Shabbat. We have lost our deep affinity for and strict dedication to Shabbat.

As Jewish immigrants came to America at the beginning of the last century, they needed to put bread on their tables. Since Saturday was a workday, many of them forsook their commitment to Shabbat observance for their livelihood.

Today, most Jews are not forced to work on Shabbat; the five-day workweek is the norm. We might think that Shabbat observance would be on the rise, but it is not.

In fact, it is down, replaced not with mandatory work, but with another day of shopping or attending movies. It is another day for television and computer games, another day of errands and schlepping. We have traded our treasured Shabbat for more commonplace American culture.

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But Shabbat is making a comeback, at least in the media. From *Real Simple* magazine to *The New York Times*, writers have sung Shabbat's praises. Judith Shulevitz has just written a new book called *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*.

In an article she wrote: "The eclipse of the Sabbath is just one small part of the larger erosion of social time, with its former generally agreed-upon rhythms of labor and repose. 'After hours' has become a strictly personal concept, since the 24-hour convenience store, gas station, pharmacy, supermarket, movie theater, diner, factory and bar all allow us to work, shop, dine and be entertained at any time of day or night. We greet each shift of an activity from weekday to evening or weekend as proof of American cultural superiority; we knock over the barriers between us and the perpetual motion machine that is the marketplace with the glee you might expect of insomniacs who had been chained for too long to their beds.

"The Israelite Sabbath institutionalized an astonishing, hitherto undreamed-of notion: that every single creature has the right to rest, not just the rich and the privileged. Covered under the Fourth Commandment are women, slaves, strangers and, improbably, animals. The verse in Deuteronomy that elaborates on this aspect of the Sabbath repeats, twice, that slaves were not to work, as if to drive home what must have been very hard to understand in the ancient world. The Jews were meant to perceive the Sabbath not only as a way to honor God but also as the central vehicle of their liberation theology, a weekly reminder of their escape from their servitude in Egypt."

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But while Shulevitz and others have described the beauty of Shabbat, we need to think about how to bring these ideas into our lives more fully. I am not sure if we have utilized it enough to create a distinct Shabbat community for our families and ourselves.

Like any meaningful gift, Shabbat demands something from those who receive it. It demands a real commitment to enjoy its benefits. But when we invest ourselves in Shabbat, the rewards are truly enormous.

Shabbat requires observances at home and shul. It begins with candle lighting before sunset on Friday night and a Kabbalat Shabbat service in shul welcoming Shabbat. Friday night is a time to be at home, to share a leisurely dinner, and to spend time together as a family or with friends.

Shabbat morning is a time to come to synagogue, to share as a community, to hear the Torah read, and to participate in *smahot* – happy occasions.

But there is Shabbat after kiddush. How do we maintain Shabbat feeling? To me, Shabbat afternoon is where Shabbat really reaches its glory. It's a time for a Shabbat nap or to read a book. It's when we spend time doing other activities. If normally during the week, we fill our time with T.V., radio, the phone and the computer, Shabbat is a time to play board games, tell stories, spend

time with friends, go for a walk, and to play sports. It is a time to be engaged in Shabbat activities, not the ones that occupy us during the week, but different ones, ones that slow down the pace of our lives and allow us to appreciate each other and the world around us.

On Shabbat afternoon, I love playing basketball or going on a Shabbat walk. There is something so transformative to taking a walk - no other distractions, just enjoying being with others without any goals or tasks.

My family has enjoyed wondrous Shabbat hikes nearby in the woods behind the Bowman School or behind the new Avalon development off Concord Road.

Shabbat concludes Saturday evening as it gets dark, with Havdalah – a beautiful ceremony, where we try to hold onto Shabbat a little bit longer with its special candle, smelling the spices, so that Shabbat’s blessings remains with us throughout the week.

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That is a lot to ask and Shabbat demands it. But the benefits of this adherence to Shabbat are tremendous. Shabbat allows us some time to rest, to commune with God, time to be with family, time to talk, time to unplug from our world that is overly plugged in between computer, cell phones, pagers, blackberries, cable news stations, the radio, we are inundated with too much information. We all need a day, which is a sanctuary in time, an oasis without the endless nonsense that clutters our souls. We all yearn for Shabbat.

In this morning’s Torah reading, we read the calendar of sacred time. In it, we mention all the different festivals throughout the year, but we begin with Shabbat. “*Sheshet yamim tei’aseh m’la’kha v’vayom hash’vee’ee Shabbat shabbaton* – on six days work may be done but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion. You shall do no work; it shall be a Sabbath of Adonai throughout your settlements.” (Lev 23:3)

Complete rest after working, as the Torah commands us, is part of what motivates Shulevitz’s interest in Shabbat.

She writes: “The story told by the Sabbath is that of creation: we rest because God rested on the seventh day. What leads from God to humankind is the notion of *imitatio Dei*: the imitation of God. In other words, we rest in order to honor the divine in us, to remind ourselves that there is more to us than just what we do during the week. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, best known for his tales of the golem, pointed out that the story of Creation was written in such a way that each day, each new creation, is seen as a step toward a completion that occurred on the Sabbath. What was Creation’s climatic culmination? The act of stopping. Why should God have considered it so important to stop? Rabbi Elijah of Vilna put it this way: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so. The implication is clear. We could let the world wind us up and set us to marching, like mechanical dolls that go and go until they fall over, because they don’t have a mechanism that allows them to pause. But that would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.”

So we need a full day of stopping, a 25 hour retreat, a spiritual oasis – a day with ourselves, with God and others. It is a great challenge, but it comes with an incredible payoff. In our fast-moving, increasingly isolated, virtual world, we need to restore Shabbat so it can restore our souls.

As the author of the Shabbat afternoon service wrote so poetically in the Shabbat afternoon service: “A rest of love and generosity, a rest of truth and faith, a rest of peace and contentment, and love and security – *menuha shleyima sh’atah rotzeh bah* – a perfect rest that You, God, desire.” And let us say: Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.