

THE SHABBAT EXPERIMENT

I have to begin with a moment of personal sharing – my dear friend, my oldest friend who was like a brother to me – we’ve known each other for four decades, since we were eight – died on Thursday.

These have been very sad days and I will share more of my thoughts about losing someone I loved on *Yom Kippur* before *Yizkor*.

But I do want to share how meaningful it is to be a part of a community like ours.

For the first time in over five years, I did not go up to recite his name at the Torah on Shabbat, and I realize how meaningful that practice has been, and how your support has sustained me throughout this time. That’s why we have a *shul* and why we come to *shul* – so that people can be there for us in times of joy and sadness.



Michael's funeral was yesterday in Philadelphia, and Michael loved humor, so this morning, I'd like to share one of my favorite classic Jewish stories that has a little humor.

The setting – a small one-room hut in the depths of what is now the Ukraine. The characters – a couple and their six children. Oh, and, of course, a rabbi.

The living arrangement is not going well; too much fighting and too much noise; not enough sleeping. Looking for advice, they naturally turn to the rabbi.

The rabbi listens closely, thinks for a few minutes and asks them if they have any chickens; when they reply in the affirmative, he tells them to bring the chickens into their home.

The couple looks incredulously at the rabbi, but since this is back in the day when rabbis were – how shall I say this – listened to a bit more than these days – they move the chickens right into the house.

A week later, they make another appointment with the rabbi to tell him that things are worse, and they ask him to explain his thinking. But he does not reply; instead, asking them if they have a goat. The rabbi tells them to

bring the goat in as well. Things go from bad to worse. The dirt and the stench are intolerable.

They return to the rabbi, confused and distraught. “We brought in the chickens, we brought in the goat, and our home is destroyed!”

The rabbi calmly looked at them over his Talmud and said, “Do you have a cow?” The husband and wife looked at each other in panic. The rabbi nodded and said, “Bring in the cow.”

The couple brought in the cow (can you imagine still listening to your rabbi at this point!) That night was an absolute nightmare, kicking, bleating, mooing, cow patties everywhere!

They race back to the rabbi the next morning and burst into his study. “With all do respect, rabbi, I think you lost your mind! The situation is worse than we could ever imagine. The noise, the smell, we can’t move!”

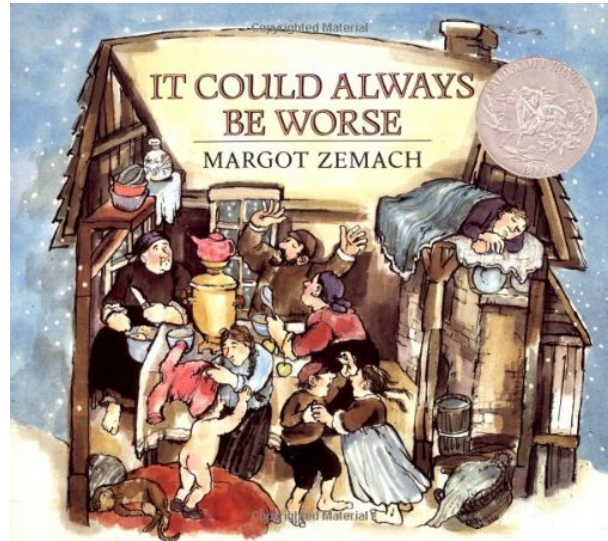
The rabbi strokes his beard for a few moments and says, “take out the chicken and the goat and the cow.” The couple removes the animals from their home, and bask in the spaciousness and quiet of their suddenly palatial home.

In case you missed it, the moral of the story is: always follow the rabbi’s advice.

Just kidding.

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We, like the couple in the story, moved an animal into our home this past year. Not a chicken, or goat, or a cow, but a goldendoodle puppy named Bamba.



Now, you may ask, why would Sharon and I want to take on the responsibility of a puppy now that our kids are getting older and we are experiencing a bit more freedom and calm in our lives?

Why would we want to adopt a puppy when we never owned a pet before, not even a goldfish, and were not even 100% comfortable around dogs?

Well, never underestimate the persuasive power of an 11-year-old boy and encouraging friends!

Sharon and the boys brought Bamba home on a cold night last December. Bamba's adorable two-month old self was overwhelmed by the change in his circumstances, as were we.

And like him, little did we know what it would be like to “walk him” in the dark, the snow, and the frigid temperatures.

Not to mention hiring trainers, finding puppy daycare and a behavioral therapist.



Yes, dogs can have therapists too!

There were many moments when we questioned our decision, but overall, Bamba has become a part of our family.

About six months into this adventure, Sharon, Talya, and Matan were away for Shabbat and Ari had hurt his foot.

So, I was in charge of walking him.

It was Shabbat morning before *shul* and Bamba and I headed out. We walked together – two species in sync. He found places to take care of his needs and we explored – he, mostly with his nose and ears and me, mostly with my ears and eyes.

The sun was bright, we were taking our time, and I had a chance to look around and actually notice the homes in my neighborhood.

I had no phone, there was no distracting buzzing, no seductive screen. Bamba stopped and looked up at me. I bent over and gave him a good rub and a hug; he nuzzled into me.

I took in a deep breath – grateful for the gift of this time, the experience of being outside, Bamba's presence in my life and the sense of peacefulness that descended upon me.

We headed home with purpose and ease.

I don't mean to exaggerate, and there have been plenty of stressful moments with Bamba, but on that Shabbat morning something clicked for me.

The walk through the neighborhood reminded me of my walks to *shul* growing up – sometimes with a friend like Michael and sometimes with my father or mother.

Those walks provided the space to have deeper conversations, to really connect on a different level.

Each week as Shabbat descends, I put away my phone, light candles, go to *shul*, breathe deeply, sing *Kabbalat Shabbat*, enjoy eating a



meal slowly, without distractions. I have time for conversation, to read a book, to play a board game. It is a time for connecting. And that special time continues the next morning with a prayer service where we can hear the Torah, come together for meaningful life cycle events, and enjoy lunch together.

A nap.

All right, the nap does not always happen, but you get the idea!

Shabbat afternoon basketball or wiffle ball or a run. Friends, schmoozing, connecting. The constant burdens and rush of life are paused. The notion of time radically altered.

Of all the commandments and Jewish traditions, I think that Shabbat is the most powerful. The one that can help us the most.

It is the one we need the most.

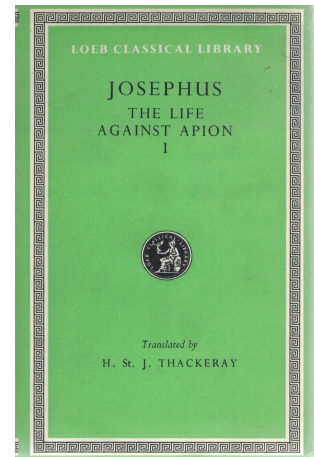
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So, where does it come from? How was Shabbat born? There are different theories. Even the word “Shabbat” is shrouded in mystery; one idea is its being related *shab/pattum* in Akkadian, which referred to an ancient Babylonian idea that the fifteenth of the month was a day “of quieting god’s heart.”

Another theory points to another Akkadian word *sebutum*, meaning the seventh day.

Yet others look to seven being the heavenly bodies that could be seen with the naked eye: the Sun, the Moon, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Mercury and Mars.

My favorite cute explanation is from Josephus, the Jewish historian “who ridiculed the opinion of his antagonist, Apion, a Graeco-Egyptian grammarian living in Rome, who said that after the Exodus from Egypt, ‘when the Jews travelled a six days’ journey, they had *buboes* [i.e., an inflammation] (in their groin); and that on this account it was that they rested on the seventh day...for that malady of *buboes* in their groin was named Sabbatosia by the Egyptians.” (Against Apion, II/ 3, Whiston).



Other civilizations, like the Indo-European, loved to create sacred space; see the magnificent cathedrals of Europe. But Judaism tried something different – to create sanctity in time, a “cathedral in time,” as Heschel called it.

Perhaps Judaism's greatest innovation was to elevate time over space, to allow us to transform moments by changing the nature of how we experience time.

While we may not know the exact evolution of Shabbat, we do know that ancient Israelite civilization was the first to have a day of rest and to legislate it in such a transformative manner.

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I often ask my seventh grade students: in how many days was the world created? They answer six or seven. Both answers have support. God creates the world in the course of six days according to the Torah. But since God rested on the seventh day, rest, ceasing was created on the seventh.

The second chapter of Genesis opens with: "*Vayakhulu hashamayim v'ha-aretz v'chol tzeva'am* – the heaven and the Earth and all they contain were complete." This word "*Vayakhulu*" – they were completed; the root is *kalah* - the root *khaf, lamed, heh* is central to Shabbat. God ceased from working.

Rashi notices some redundancy in the next verse which states "*Y'yikhal Elohim* – God ceased and *Va'yishbot*, God rested. Rashi explains

that the world was not fully formed until the notion of rest was created.

God, in essence, had to create rest.

Rest or ceasing is so important it was given its own day of creation, the culminating act.

Thus, rest is the completion of creation. It is what makes the world more whole, it's what makes the world livable. It's when we can stop to appreciate what we have worked so hard to accomplish.

When we reflect on it, when we enjoy it, then we and the world exist in a state of unity.

You can imagine how transformative this must have been to the ancient Israelites. Most people were farmers and their work was back-breaking. Life could be inordinately difficult. The toil, sweat, and pain must have been overwhelming and those who lacked resources or land and worked for others, may have worked even harder.

Along comes the Torah and introduces this radically new innovation.

Yes, there is a lot to do, but you need to take a break. Every seven days. Always. And it's serious – you can't miss it. And it's for everyone – rich or poor. Even domesticated animals. We are all in this together.

And it worked – it transformed our civilization. It was a hit with people of all different means, bringing communities together.

When converts who were formerly pagan were asked in the first century of the Common Era why so many of them were choosing to join the Jewish people, Shabbat was one of the three most cited reasons.

Eventually, through other religions and civilizations, this idea has spread and become accepted. Everyone should take a day off.

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But, in recent times, it has slipped away. As we live in a 24/7 world, we have lost the 24/6 paradigm from our Torah. Many people work at night and on the weekend and find it hard to unplug for a day each week.

I want to argue that as important as Shabbat was to our ancestors, it may in fact be more important to us today.

While we are not farmers,

most of us are often glued to our devices. They ping and ding and buzz incessantly, affording us no respite from their beckoning call.



That is not to say that they are not useful, they are – incredibly so, but they are also dangerous. They take us away from what we are doing and distract us – both on the road and in our relationships. They prevent us from doing the hard and meaningful work of building connections with others face-to-face.

That's where Shabbat comes in. As more and more people realize the dangers of our modern world that takes us into a never-ending sea of links, social media posts, emails and texts, we are aware of how important it is to put down our phones.

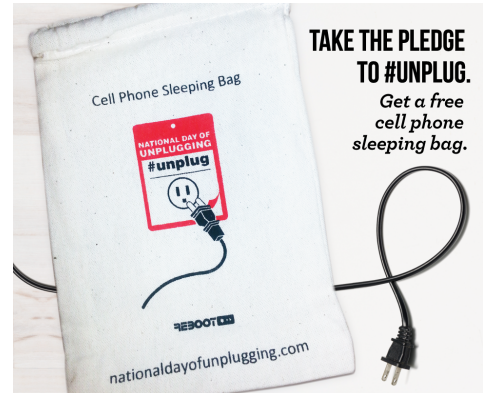
I cannot tell you how many secular articles are written that encourage people to have a technology-free Sabbath.

For example, we have [Forbes Magazine 30-Day Digital Detox Challenge](#), designed for people “suffering from the effects of too much connection and not enough connectedness to what matters most.”

This past March marked the 10th anniversary of the [National Day of Unplugging](#). What started as a Jewish Sabbath project became a project that has hosted 2,000 unplugging events with more than 175,000 participants. If you took the pledge to unplug, you received “[A free resource kit with ideas for activities and conversations](#)” and when we

hosted this event last year, we gave away free sleeping bags for your smartphone!

We see that traditional Judaism's invitation to put down our devices is resonating with people of all backgrounds.



Once we do that, we see the brilliance of our rituals – especially those that sanctify time: lighting candles on Friday night, Shabbat dinner with its *kiddush* and *hallah*, song and conversation at meals, and of course, *havdalah* – a multi-sensory moment to smell, taste, see and listen as Shabbat comes to a close so that we can take the feelings into the busy-ness of the week.

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Now, there is a piece of all this that is counter-intuitive at first. [Like the part of me that struggles to write a sermon when I have so many things to do – I am often told, to stop, meditate, take a break, go and exercise, go for a drive and I reply that I can't, I don't have the time.](#)

But, there are studies that explain this. When we work without end, our productivity slips, our minds wander. So, taking breaks during the day can actually make us more effective. And the week is no different.

But, I know we have some skeptics here and we are a community with one of the highest percentages of scientists and engineers of any synagogue, so I am excited to announce that I am working with Hal Miller-Jacobs and Yair Listokin who is a professor at Yale to create a Shabbat Pilot Study. We will be – as far as I know – the first *shul* to actually study if and how Shabbat works.

In a couple of months, the community will receive an email inviting us to participate in this randomized study which will invite us to try on a number of Shabbat practices including removing electronic devices, connecting with others in our community, and lighting Shabbat candles. We hope you will say yes and be our guinea pigs!



Our hypothesis is that observing Shabbat is actually good for us, that it can help us feel more connected, centered, relaxed and calm. It can help us renew ourselves each week in this increasingly manic and fast-paced society that our world has become. We will see if what I am saying is actually true!

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I would be remiss this year if I did not add that Shabbat also invites us to lessen our impact on the environment. [As we have become more and more aware of climate change – that this planet is on the brink of major catastrophes, Shabbat presents us with an opportunity.](#) In its ideal form, we can use fewer resources, walk more and travel less. It can remind us that we can be God's partners in treating the planet more kindly, changing our eating habits and more so that the earth can rest and recover....

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Shabbat is a time when human beings can take this incredible, natural wonder of life and the universe and bring our experience of them to the next level, adding a human-driven element.

Lighting the candles on Shabbat is a good example of this. While Shabbat begins automatically 18 minutes before the sun sets, we are invited to be active partners in



reenacted creation by lighting the candles, embracing this sacred time.

That is what the Kabbalists in the 16th Century did – living in Tzfat, in

Northern Israel, they went outside, wearing white, each Friday night to greet and accept Shabbat with song and dance.

They called this ritual *Kabbalat Shabbat* – receiving the Shabbat. Because while they understood the Shabbat would begin automatically as the sun set, they wanted to be God's partners in this moment – to accept this gift of Shabbat. Their actions fully actualized Shabbat.

Similarly, we are supposed to be active in this world, as God's partners, recreating this world in the image of God – *I'takein olam b'malkhut Shaddai*.

Those are the words of the *Aleinu* – written for the *Musaf* service on *Rosh Hashanah* – a prayer we will recite in a few minutes, which reminds us that we are invited to be partners in the recreation of the world.

So while Shabbat is about putting down our work, our emails and our phones, it is about bringing this gift of time – of deep awareness and connection to ourselves and to others.

The rabbis subtly wove two themes for Shabbat into the Friday night *Kiddush*: Creation and the Exodus. The Creation is fairly obvious – Shabbat is the culmination of the Creation of the Universe.

But why did they add the Exodus?

The Exodus is redemption, the repair, renewal and recreation of the world. Our rabbis wanted to remind us that the Shabbat is not only about harkening back to the Garden of Eden, a natural state of bliss, but it also has the power to redeem the world. Shabbat affords us the opportunity to be God's partners in the re-Creation of the world.

Shabbat is creation and redemption melded into one.

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Thousands of years ago, Shabbat transformed the lives of Israelite farmers. It is my hypothesis that it contains the power to transform the lives of moderns who suffer from new afflictions (and a planet that is suffering).

Each Friday night as we enjoy Shabbat dinner, I notice that Bamba comes over to the dinner table. I am not sure if it is the smells of the food – he is hopeful we will not eat that neatly – or maybe it's the atmosphere, (it's probably the food) but there is no doubt that he picks up on it.

There is a different mood.

Time has been transformed.

May this new year 5780 be one that brings blessing to us, to the Jewish people, to all humanity, bringing us closer to the renewed moment of Shabbat.