

Reclaiming Sabbath

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Chalice Lighting:

We light this chalice for this hour, carved out of our week, cradled in between days of work. We light this chalice for this hour of thanksgiving, repose and renewal. May we find what we seek in this hour.

Opening Words:

From Pablo Casals, *Joys and Sorrows*

"For the past eight years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life. I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day is something new, fantastic and unbelievable."

Reading:

From Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

"One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar?"

It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: 'And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*.' There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.

This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place - a holy mountain or a holy spring -- whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is *holiness in time*, the Sabbath, which comes first."

Sermon:

The holidays went by in a blur -- a string of family gatherings, ushering guests around town, meals, wrapping and unwrapping of presents, and eating way too much chocolate. I woke up on New Year's Day as if from a hangover, though we went to bed at 12:01 and after no champagne.

Then there was the two-day truncated week that followed, when you had to catch up on a week's worth of messages and mail and do that filing you had promised yourself would be a marker of a stellar new year. And then came Friday night, and that ice storm hit. It was beautiful to look at from inside -- the branches glazed with ice. It was awful if you had to go out into it.

That night, I promised my parents we'd take them out for a dinner in the city -- actually it was my husband who promised. He thought he'd share his bonus with them, since it was their floor he'd slept on a dozen times in the fall's crush at work. So, tired already, I showered and primped, packed a bag with the snow shoes we'd borrowed from my mother on Christmas Day, and started to slide my way down to the car, bag of shoes in one hand, umbrella in the other. I got in the car, found a space across from the station, then, seeing one closer, made a quick U-turn to seize that one, got out to check that all was legal, put my quarters in the meter (I still don't know what the meters say in Summit, so I put in my goodwill money no matter when) and went over to grab my bags and lock the car ... And lock the car??? And where the heck are those keys?

Twenty minutes later -- 20 minutes of looking down at the dark, wet pavement, of retracing steps, 20 minutes of panicked searching in bag and on the car floor, 20 minutes when the umbrella was a second-tier consideration, when I wondered if I could leave an unlocked car in Summit knowing the keys were waiting to be found. Twenty minutes of added frantic stress later, I found them, in the pocket of the door. How they got there I did not know, nor did I care. I'd missed my train. When I looked for a moment into the rearview mirror of the car to see how I looked, it was frightful. Once beautifully quaffed for a night out at a nice restaurant, now my hair went every which way, my eyes looked wild, my face haggard. "You look like a crazy woman," I thought to myself. Then I thought, "*Right now*, you ARE a crazy woman!"

It was a low point, not a lifetime low point, but a regional low point. The end of a slippery slope of loss of self, of a gradual wearing away of self-care, the erosion of groundedness by inches and days that leaves us -- you and me -- raw, exhausted, at best not at all ourselves, at worst crazy. On my train ride into the city, the one after the one I missed, I had plenty of time to think about what leads me (us) down this path. I won't go into it all. I think part of it is perfectionism, wanting to cram into life all that would make it full, shoehorning in that one additional piece that would, you think, make the whole complete, but which crowds out something far more precious. The pace of life around us, too, is fast and furious. To slow it down is so radically counter-cultural, an act of incredible willpower to maintain. But, of course, as hit me under an ice-storm sky recently, the price of not doing so is a kind of madness, so the choice is not a real one for me.

The solution, it occurred to me, is the reclamation of Sabbath.

Sabbath, of course, is a day of rest. At least that's the first formulation that often comes to mind. It is a day modeled in the Jewish, Christian and even Muslim traditions on that seventh day when God, after having created the world, gave herself one day of rest. She was given one day to reflect on what she had done, glory in it, and recover. And so, the tradition dictates, should we have such a day.

In the Jewish tradition, among the more Orthodox, there are strict rules that govern the Sabbath. From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, no work is to be done. And there are long treatises that govern what is work and what is not. Turning on lights is work; so is driving, or doing home repairs. This is why Joseph Lieberman, the senator, was famous around D.C. for walking home on winter Friday nights from the Capitol to his home in Georgetown, when the sessions got out after the sun had set. It is also why most Orthodox families have their lights on timers, and how the idea of *shabbes goyim* came into being -- *shabbes goyim* being non-Jews whom you arranged to have do the things you could not on shabbes.

But the Jewish idea of Sabbath is not just about leaving work behind. It is far richer than that.

In our reading this morning, you heard how Abraham Heschel thinks of Sabbath as a sanctification of time, in a world caught up in the sanctification of space. In a world enamored of things, of mastery of place, here is a practice that asks us to pay attention to the gifts of time. There is a sense on Sabbath not only about mending the tattered fabric of our lives, but about being present to the eternity that stands in every moment. To stop ourselves and listen.

Moreover, it is not, Heschel contends, a day made so that we might rest enough so as to be more efficient workers the other six days. It is the day when the raw materials gathered from our other days are woven into wisdom. "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays," Heschel writes, "the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living."

To understand that last sentence, "It is not an interlude but the climax of living," you must understand that Sabbath is also a day of acting "as if." Whereas on all the other days we think of what has not yet been accomplished, at work, in the larger challenges of justice and the realization of our hopes and dreams for ourselves and others, on Sabbath we are supposed to pretend as if all our work has come to fruition. Sabbath is to be a day when we experience a taste of the world made whole. When we eat beautiful food, care for our bodies, play games, study deep thoughts, worship -- all as if the world is perfect and our work in it is done. It is this taste of the world dreamed of that is supposed to fuel us to work, in the six days that follow, for its realization. This taste of perfection, granted each week by God, is the greatest treasure given to the Jews, greater even than the Torah -- for without it, it is believed they could not continue with the hard and heartbreaking work of building a world without pain, injustice, selfishness, cruelty and so on. Why have

the Jews endured in their vision with indomitable spirit, you ask? It is Sabbath that keeps them alive to its vision.

"All week we may ponder and worry whether we are rich or poor, whether we succeed or fail in our occupations; whether we accomplish or fall short of reaching our goals. But who could feel distressed when gazing at spectral glimpses of eternity, except to feel startled at the vanity of being so distressed?" (Heschel).

"On Shabbat," writes Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "it is not really that one is forbidden to work, it is that all is perfect, there is nothing to do. ... 'The world was meant to be perfect,' says the Shabbat. 'Experience that perfection. Now, go and make it happen.'"

In this sense, Shabbat in Jewish tradition is a day of "imaginary boundaries" (Greenberg). It is about forgetting for a day the limits that face you, refusing to be cowed or diminished by them, building a cathedral in time for your own witness to what gives life worth and pretending as if all time is over and this is a day of perfection given to you to live. Anger is not allowed in to Sabbath, nor is drudgery. It is a mitzvah on Sabbath to make love to your partner. You should wear good clothes. Eat good food. Drink wine. Worship. Study. Body, soul, mind, heart are all to be nurtured this day.

So the Saturday after the Friday that culminated in a search for keys under a dark and ice-laden sky was a Saturday I rededicated to Sabbath. I cooked a dish I'd been wanting to make, healthy and nurturing, storing enough away for less leisurely days -- a frozen portion of nurture. I read good books, rich with story and large musings about life. I took a nap so luxurious it felt illegal or immoral. I spent time curled up with my husband talking. Truth be told (and I cannot lie, because I ran into a church member there), I also went to the mall, to repair my watch, so when Sabbath ended I wouldn't be late to my appointments, so it wasn't perfect in repose. However, even the rabbis talk about "growing into Shabbat."

Sabbath, at its core, is about nurturing *chessed*. *Chessed* is a special kind of love that accepts life totally, flaws and all, and affirms life's capacity to be perfected. It is the kind of love that is, I believe, at the heart of a grounded and an inspired life. And I wish it for us all.

Rabbi Greenberg writes: "Even more than the collective, the individual needs nurturing. People cannot live just for tomorrow; they need a personal life along the way. No one should try to save the world without having an inner life ... The *halacha* [law] had to bring out the humanness in people so they would keep growing in a hundred different settings. Tradition had to develop an individual's love for life. How else could people embrace living with a full heart even as they yearned to improve it?"

Moreover, more and more I am convinced that the way to such a life is, in part, through resuscitating some kind of Sabbath living for ourselves. Whether we sanctify a day or an hour, we must offer ourselves some kind of cathedral in time where we step out of the rat race to a place of depth in time, where beauty and repose and celebration is allowed to

wash over us. And where, for a time, all is well and it is clear to us that all will be well. From this place we will take strength and renewal to do what must be done in the spirit in which it was meant to be done. If we are co-creators of this world, and we are, perfecting it as we go, then certainly we deserve the rest and celebration that makes creative living possible, and without which it is certainly impossible.

So may it be for us. Be good to yourselves. Even for the sake of others, be good to yourselves. Shabbat Shalom, everyone. Shabbat Shalom.