

Shavat Vayinafash: Be Still and Breathe Again.

This summer, after an intense eight months, Ana and I took Micah and Jonas to the Grand Tetons in Wyoming. We stayed in a rustic cabin with family. There was no television or cell reception. We spent our days outdoors hiking, exploring, swimming, taking naps, reading, laughing, and avoiding bears. The long summer days were filled with no particular plans, no place that we had to be, no emails that had to be written. We created a space in time to experience the beauty of nature, the presence of loving family. We caught our breath. It was the Shabbat of our year.

A few days into our vacation, I started to notice something happening: I was more joyful. I was less stressed. I was more present. I was connecting with my family in ways that I felt like I hadn't in the prior months. Sometimes you don't know the breath you need until you actually take a breath.¹

Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, writes in his book *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, that the idea of renewal is something we often take for granted. When our vehicles run out of gas, we refill them. When our phones or laptops run out of power, we plug them in to recharge. But when we are exhausted and the well of our soul has dried up, we often continue to push ourselves harder and harder. We think that ceaseless work will define our success. We pursue pleasure or acquire material goods in an effort to make us feel like all the stress is worth it. We elevate our own importance, as though everything depends on us.²

Rabbi Lew suggests that, "We've talked ourselves into believing that we can solve any problem, overcome any obstacle, if we just do more...if we just think about it long and hard enough, if we just try a little harder. But our problem is not always that we don't try hard enough, it's that we try too hard. It's that we have such an exaggerated belief in the force of our own effort that we never stop trying."³

We live the age of the selfie – where our news and social media feeds keep us “connected. We can order nearly anything on demand, at any time of the day, with curated lists specifically designed for each our “likes.” It's amazing how helpful and convenient all this is. But it can also prevent us from setting appropriate boundaries, to say “wait,” or “I need a break.” We actually become more connected to people when we give ourselves time to breathe and support each other taking a break as well.

¹ Thank you to my rabbinic coach, Larry Dressler, for reminding me of this lesson.

² Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* pg. 116-120

³ Ibid. pg. 119.

In the Book of Genesis, we read that God created the world. On the first three days, God's *spirit* – *ruach* – created distinction: between darkness and light, between the waters above and the waters below, and between land and seas. Then God's words filled those distinctions with the sun and the moon, the fish and birds, the animals that walk the earth, and humanity. The Torah explains that God formed humans from the dust of the ground and breathed life, *nishmat Chayim*, giving humanity a living soul, *nefesh chayah*.⁴

God breathes the *nefesh*, the soul, into our bodies. We become animated by the soul given to us by the breath of God. But the story of creation does not conclude with giving life to humanity. Rather, it ends with the seventh day, when God stopped and rested – *Shavat Vayinafash*.⁵ God saw the good in the cosmic Temple that we call the Universe. Shabbat was the culmination of God's creation plan – a final distinction that only humanity can appreciate. God intentionally created a “palace in time” for reflection.⁶ And through Shabbat, God re-*nefeshed* – re-ensouled, God's self.⁷

In her book, *The Sabbath World*, Judith Shulevitz reminds us that there is something unique about the story of creation in Genesis when compared to other creation myths, none of which contain *rest* as the culmination. Shulevitz wonders, “Why did God stop, anyway?” She cites Rabbi Elijah of Vilna who said, “God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only once we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating it in the first place.”⁸

So often when I talk with people about Shabbat, they ask me about all of the Biblical “Thou Shalt Nots.” I prefer to think about the essence of what Shabbat can provide in our lives. Shabbat can be about taking time for learning or doing some good in the world, about joyful celebration, reflection, prayer and introspection, and connecting with ancient and enduring rhythms. Shabbat can be a dinner with challah and wine – or Shabbat can be that awesome challah French toast breakfast. Shabbat can be practicing yoga or a long walk in nature or meditation or prayer. Shabbat doesn't have to be all of these things. We can start with one and build from there.

The genesis of our faith has one of the best answers to key challenges of our age: overwhelm and a false sense of self-importance. Nearly everyone I speak with these days tells me that they are having troubles with the hectic pace of life. Technology brings constant distractions—some

⁴ Genesis 2:7

⁵ Exodus 31:17

⁶ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel speaks of Shabbat as a “Palace in Time” in his book, *the Sabbath*.

⁷ This is a gender neutral citation from Alan Lew, *Be Still and Get Going, A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life* pg. 190 and *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, pg. 121

⁸ This text was referenced by Rabbi David Stern in a sermon he gave about Shabbat in 2010. During the Sabbath Initiative at Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, I read Judith Shulevitz', *The Sabbath World*. where this story is found on pg. 217. You may also read about the research of J.M Darley and C.D. Batson *From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Dispositional variables in Helping Behavior*.

http://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org_site/soc_psych/darley_samarit.html

may even call it addiction or a requirement of life today. The very things that are supposed to give us freedom tie us to the world at lightning speed. Our rapid pace is profoundly affecting our inner lives, the depth of our relationships, and our spiritual selves. When we are overwhelmed, we become less effective in reaching out to people who need us, less motivated to repair the world beyond our own doorsteps.

In 1973, social psychologists conducted an experiment at Princeton Theological Seminary. Three groups of seminary students were asked to give two presentations at two entirely different locations on the campus. After the presentation, the first group of students were told that they were late for the second presentation and that they needed to hurry to the next location. The second group of students was told that they were right on time and that they should make their way over. The third group was told that there was a delay, that they had time, and that they could head over to the second location.

On their way to the second location, all of the seminary students passed by a man slumped on the ground in front of a doorway, moaning and coughing. The only discerning influence on whether or not the students stopped to help was whether or not the students were in a hurry. The researchers concluded that, “Ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases.”⁹ This was in 1973. It’s not hard to imagine all the things we may be failing to see and respond to today in the chaotic din of 2019.

Yom Kippur is known as *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Great Sabbath. We slow down enough to consider how we are living our lives. We reconnect to the *nefesh* – the soul within. This day calls on each of us to take a breath, and to consider the breath that we really need as we re-*nefesh* – re-ensoul *ourselves* – for the journey ahead.

In the Jewish tradition of *Mussar*, the *nefesh*, the soul, isn’t just some mystical thing that lives within us. Rather, our souls are made up of our emotional inner lives – our personal traits including gratitude, strength, generosity, patience, compassion, and courage.¹⁰

All of us have had moments in our lives that have tested our faith, our trust, and our personal sense of strength. Caring for others while taking care of ourselves can be a life-long struggle. Many of us can be impatient and quick to anger. And some are so calm they struggle to express emotion. For some, generosity comes easily—and sometimes it comes so easily that we have trouble setting boundaries or saying no. For some, generosity can be difficult for others. Because we are human, we are each trying to find the right balance, and we each have growing to do.

On this *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Great Sabbath of Yom Kippur –take time to consider how your *nefesh* – your soul needs tending. Take the time to ask reflective questions: How have I

⁹ Ibid. pg. 24.

¹⁰ See Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness* and *Jacob’s Ladder for a* much fuller list of the soul traits, *middot*, and incorporating the study and learning of them into your everyday life.

interacted with others and cared for myself? What have I accomplished and created? What has taken my time? Have I ignored my personal health or my family? Who have I been? What kind of person have I been? What kind of person do I want to become?

On this *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Great Sabbath of Yom Kippur – consider how you will be like God in creating a space in time to be introspective on a weekly basis. The space in time is valuable. When we express gratitude to God and our loved ones on Shabbat, we bring more gratitude into the world. When we have more patience with ourselves, we have more patience with others. When we are compassionate towards ourselves, we can be more compassionate to others. When we become more whole within ourselves, we can bring more wholeness to our families, our friends, our community, and to the world. The often-unacknowledged message of Shabbat is that it starts within each of us.

I recently watched a video of the person who holds the Guinness Book of World Records award for being the fastest violin player. The musician’s “great” insight was that “if you can play something slowly, you can play something quickly.”¹¹ So he demonstrated: his hands were flying up and down the neck of the violin, his bow was racing back and forth. He played 15 notes *per second*. And, you know what? The music sounded awful.

Just because we can play something fast doesn’t mean we should. The difference between good musicians and great musicians is rarely in the speed of the notes that they play. As the Jewish composer and pianist Artur Schnabel said: “The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes – ah, that is where the art resides.” So, it is with life. Good living requires silence and space and intentional pauses, which make life more meaningful and beautiful.

The challenge is that the re-centering can’t just happen once a year during the High Holy Days or on that yearly vacation in a majestic setting. Just like learning to play a musical instrument, we need practice. Judaism’s multi-millennium tradition of the Sabbath arrives every seven days to help us practice slowing down, reaching out to God, reflecting on our lives, and repairing the fragmentation and overwhelm that can feel soul shattering.

Shavat Vayinafash: Slowing down and *re-nefeshing* – re-ensouling – can feel terrifying when we are overwhelmed. But when we slow down, we might actually learn that we are both better refreshed to take care of our responsibilities and also that things don’t *usually* fall apart because everything doesn’t *actually* depend on us. Each of us needs time to **be still** and to **breathe again**.

Shavat Vayinafash: Judaism helps us to separate, even for a little while, from the powerful devices of connection. So focused on the screen in front of us, we sometimes ignore the people we love all around us. When we realize that the digital devices that promise connection can also make us lonelier – that’s when we know we need to **be still** and **breathe again**.

¹¹See Ben Lee’s BBC interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_tQk25pR60

Shavat Vayinafash: The Sabbath gives us an opportunity to thank God for our lives and for our souls. When we focus so much on what we need to do, we forget about looking outward to others. When our focus on our to-do list prevents us from bringing loving-kindness, justice and mercy to others – it’s a sign that we need to **be still** and **breathe again**.

May we not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We can’t do everything at once. But we can try **Shavat Vayinafash** – to be still and to breathe again. May the Sabbath we experience each and every week—and on this Shabbat Shabbaton—inspire our souls and help us light our paths. May we find stillness and breath in this New Year and the space we need to renew our souls.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah – May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.