

Embracing The Gift Of Shabbat

As many of you know, when I left Silicon Valley I decided to bring some of it with me by joining the masses and buying the new iphone 4G. One morning, along with the hundreds of thousands of other people who pre-ordered the phone, we woke up early, stood in line, and marveled at the hoards of people waiting for this new gadget. And I must say it is pretty impressive.

For those of you who don't know what I am talking about, just a few months ago, Apple came out with a newer, faster, Smart phone which does everything from act as a phone, to take video and pictures, act as a GPS to give directions on the go, allows us to find movies, check e-mail, surf the web, video chat with friends and family, even scan barcodes in a store to help make sure you find the best deal when shopping. There are over 300,000 applications, or computer programs, that I can download onto my new toy. Sounds great, right?! Well, truth be told, there are moments where it is terrible and I feel like throwing it out the window.

In just a few short months, I have become addicted to my phone. Sounds crazy, but I am only sort of kidding. When I am at home in the early evening spending a couple of precious hours with my family before coming back to the synagogue for a meeting, I can feel my hand pulling towards my pocket to grab my iphone. After all, I may have an e-mail, or a voice mail, or I just feel a need to check something online that instant. Or, we are in the car, and I am sitting next to my daughter playing a game when I feel that pull of my hand again. I am sitting in a meeting, when I "need" to answer the phone, check a "reminder" that just beeped on my iphone, or see what new e-mails have come in. And there has been more than one occasion when Jane-Rachel or I need to remind the other to put the phones away because we are in the middle of an actual conversation. We are thinking about putting a ban on using our iphones during certain times of the day when we are all at home. Because the truth is, this crazy hyper connectedness is madness- pure and simple madness.

Don't get me wrong, the world is moving very quickly and keeping up is not a bad thing. I don't think all smart phones are evil and I am not giving up mine any time soon. But, I am quickly becoming aware of the dangers of being "too connected." We are often so connected in life, with our technology that we are not really connected at all.

Nor is this good for our health. Just a few weeks ago, I read an article many you may have seen in the NY times (ironically, I probably read it on my iphone while waiting in line somewhere) entitled: *"Digital Devices Deprive*

the Brain of Needed Downtime" by Matt Richtel. Quoting a study done at the University of Michigan, the article said:

Even though people feel entertained, even relaxed, when they multitask while exercising, or pass a moment at the bus stop by catching a quick video clip, they might be taxing their brains, scientists say.

"People think they're refreshing themselves, but they're fatiguing themselves," said Marc Berman, a University of Michigan neuroscientist.

Sound familiar yet?

Many business people, of course, have good reason to be constantly checking their phones. But this can take a mental toll. Henry Chen, 26, a self-employed auto mechanic in San Francisco, has mixed feelings about his BlackBerry habits.

"I check it a lot, whenever there is downtime," Chen said. Moments earlier, he was texting with a friend while he stood in line at a bagel shop; he stopped only when the woman behind the counter interrupted him to ask for his order.

"It's become a demand. Not necessarily a demand of the customer, but a demand of my head," he said. "I told my girlfriend that I'm more tired since I got this thing."

In the parking lot outside the bagel shop, others were filling up moments with their phones. While Eddie Umadhay, 59, a construction inspector, sat in his car waiting for his wife to grocery shop, he deleted old e-mail while listening to news on the radio. On a bench outside a coffee house, Ossie Gabriel, 44, a nurse practitioner, waited for a friend and checked e-mail "to kill time."

Crossing the street from the grocery store to his car, David Alvarado pushed his 2-year-old daughter in a cart filled with shopping bags, his phone pressed to his ear.

He was talking to a colleague about work scheduling, noting that he wanted to steal a moment to make the call between paying for the groceries and driving.

"I wanted to take advantage of the little gap," said Mr. Alvarado, 30, a facilities manager at a community center.

I would imagine that these stories sound familiar to many of us in the room. And we are not alone. According to Wikipedia, nearly 45.5 million people in the United States currently own Smart phones. And it goes beyond our smart phones. For all of our networks of friends on facebook, or linkedin, our phone calls, our e-mails, our text messages, and our blogging, many of us somehow still feel "disconnected" and often, the challenge is that we just aren't sure how to stop and re-connect.

So what might we do about all of this? In general terms, the first step is becoming aware of the problem and taking small steps to address it. If you are at dinner with your family, talking to someone else, or having five minutes to yourself during the day- put the phone down. Take a few minutes to remember that relationships are built face to face, even if they can be maintained in new and exciting ways. Try and remind yourself of the calm and peacefulness that can come with a few moments of down time- real down time with no technology and no distractions. And what is one major Jewish tool that we have at our disposal? A gift that has traditionally forced us to slow down, and pay attention to the important things in life- family, friends, community, God, our world, and our values?? The gift of Shabbat.

Today, is Yom Kippur, but it is also Shabbat. Yom Kippur is correctly regarded as the holiest day of the Jewish year, but Shabbat is the second holiest day in the Jewish calendar and it comes every week. So let us spend a few moments this Yom Kippur, this Shabbat Shabbaton, Sabbath of all Sabbaths, thinking about how we might use this day that comes once a week to bring more meaning into our lives, to help us to slow down and pay attention to what is important in life, in an attempt to forge deeper connections with our friends, family, community, and even God.

From the very beginning, the Torah teaches us about the mitzvah of celebrating Shabbat. We are taught that just as God created the world, and took time out to rest, so too are we to stop our busy lives and rest. Like God, all of us have the incredible gift to "create" all sorts of things during the week, but there is one day a week where we should stop to remind ourselves that it is God, and not us, who is the ultimate Creator. Remembering that there are things actually beyond our control, taking moments to appreciate the creation and the world around us, and reminding ourselves of our responsibility to that world- are some of the most central lessons of Shabbat. But celebrating Shabbat goes beyond the theme of Creation. There is also an inherent message of the power of relationship that is found in the observance of Shabbat. In fact, the V'Shamru (which we say

at Kiddush every Shabbat), describes God's instructions to the Israelites to keep the Shabbat, is couched in the language of relationship. "This (Shabbat) is a sign between Me (God) and you throughout the generations..." Shabbat is meant to somehow bring us closer to God. But beyond our relationship with God, Shabbat is also meant to bring us closer to one another. That is why Shabbat is celebrated in community, at dinners around the table, in the synagogue, and with family and friends on Shabbat afternoon. We nurture our relationships with other people and at the same time discover God's presence in our lives.

Even more than the values of creation and relationship is the value of sanctifying time. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed this very powerfully in his wonderful book entitled "The Sabbath" where he wrote:

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world (10).

Commenting on this text, Rabbi David Wolpe wrote:

Friday night arrives. I know what my task is at this moment: I am to stop affecting the world and live in harmony with it. Even though I am a tangle of yearnings, on this day everything is to be perfect. I am to be satisfied with the many blessings that I have in my life. For once, I am to be at peace with the universe. My friends have not time. Their lives are crowded. They do not see their friends play with their overscheduled children, put their feet up and stare out the window. They cannot; they must drive somewhere, check their e-mail, return their phone calls- in other words, conquer space.

But even if we correspond at the touch of a button with others around the world, technology does not sanctify time. We do. God's greatest gift is to endow human beings with the capacity to perceive- and to create- holiness. Jews have not, through their wanderings, had the leisure or the need to build grand cathedrals. Yet we have celebrated the Shabbat, a cathedral in time. It can be celebrated in a ramshackle hut, in a cave, in a barren field. The sanctity of time requires not technology but devotion of soul.... (*A Day Apart, Shabbat at Home*, Zion, Fields-Meyer, ed.)

Many of us are blessed to have more than we need in life. Most of us have plenty of possessions, even in tough economic times such as these. But what

we seem to lack is time. Time to enjoy what we have, time to enjoy our family, our friends, our world; Time to take care of ourselves, to connect with our tradition, our values, and our God. Time, as Heschel so eloquently put it, is what Shabbat is all about. Shabbat helps us take back the time that we seem to have lost each week. Shabbat is the gift that can help to keep us grounded in a world that is pulling us in a million different directions.

This ancient wisdom is getting recognized by Jews and non-Jews alike. A few months ago I read an article entitled: "*Disconnect to Reconnect: Sabbath Manifesto urges the Google Generation to Unplug and Slow Down.*" The article describes an organization called "The Sabbath Manifesto" started in 2008. It is not meant to be a particularly "religious" project, it is meant for Jews and non-Jews alike, and it has ten basic principles: Avoid technology, connect with loved ones, nurture your health, get outside, avoid commerce, light candles, drink wine, eat bread, find silence, and give back.

While this is not, nor does it claim to be, a program to promote the traditional observance of Shabbat, it is an amazing example of the genius behind basic Shabbat principles and the power that they can bring to a 21st century world. What we are seeing is that Shabbat is perhaps more important now than ever before, certainly at the pace that our world is moving. Shabbat gives us the structure to stop and slow down because we will never get "everything done" as that concept is merely a figment of our imagination.

So what might we do with all of this? What are the practical ramifications for attempting to bring Shabbat into our lives? Taking time to "disconnect in order to reconnect" probably means different things to each of us. And that is okay. For some of us, it means making a concerted effort to spend more time with family at a Shabbat dinner, or even a Shabbat lunch (imagine taking time on Saturday afternoon to sit down to lunch with family and friends). For others it means finding a quiet moment to light Shabbat candles on Friday night. It might mean coming to synagogue and trying to develop a deeper connection to God, community, and yourself through prayer. Or it might mean turning off the computer, putting away the smart phone for the day, and making time to take a walk, play with your children or grandchildren, or read that book which has been gathering dust by your bedside table because you are too tired each night to actually read it. And perhaps, as we begin to create Congregation Torat El, we should take time to imagine the Shabbat atmosphere that we could build right here, on top of what already exists- classes for study, book groups, leisurely Shabbat lunches filled with singing and schmoozing, or walks to the beach, just to name a few ideas.

The key here is that Shabbat is not an all or nothing proposition. Each one of us in this room is at a different place along our Jewish journey. Some people have been

lighting candles and having Shabbat dinner for forty years, but do not come to synagogue regularly. Others may not know how to light the candles and may rarely if ever come to services. Some of us may come to shul every Shabbat morning, but do not spend the rest of the day in "Shabbat mode." The question to ask yourself is: Where am I in terms of my own Shabbat consciousness and what might I do to bring more of Shabbat into my life? It is no accident that the Hebrew word for Jewish law is "halacha" meaning "the path." We are all on a path in our Jewish lives, but we must continually remind ourselves that paths are meant to be traveled. In other words, no matter where we are, we must always remember to keep walking, to keep growing as Jews.

The Torah teaches us that when God rested, God ceased from work "*vayinafash*" and God was refreshed. But *nefesh* is also soul. When we, like God, take time to stop creating in order to work on "being" our souls are refreshed. Our iphones can do many amazing things- but they can't refresh our souls. For that, we need the Shabbat. So this Yom Kippur, this Shabbat of all Shabbatot, I invite you to disconnect the phone and reconnect yourself by asking yourself the following questions:

What is one new Shabbat practice that might help me deepen my connection to myself, my family, my friends, my community, and my God? What is one new Shabbat practice that will help me to appreciate the gifts of God's creation that I might otherwise take for granted? Answer the questions and then, go for it. Try something new to bring more of Shabbat into your life. If you are not sure where to begin my door is always open, and you can always reach me by phone or e-mail (unless, of course it is Shabbat)! I would be happy to discuss this with you and help offer guidance in any way that I can. Our tradition has given us a beautiful and transformative gift, but it is only good if we have the wisdom, courage, and dedication to take it seriously. May each of us spend this New Year trying to bring more of Shabbat into our consciousness. May our lives be enriched, our souls be nourished, our community strengthened, and our relationships deepened by this renewed commitment.

Shabbat Shalom and Gmar Hatimah Tovah, May all of us be sealed in the Book of Life.