

## “ You Need to Unplug to Recharge”

### Simply Shabbat

What’s the meaning of life? I’m sure every one of us at some time or another has pondered this most existential of all of life’s conundrums. Well, the story is told of a particular gentleman who was obsessed with finding an answer to this most troubling question. For years, he searched far and wide to find someone who could help him solve his dilemma. Finally, he heard of a certain guru who lived in the Himalayas who was considered by many as the wisest man who ever lived. Our seeker of wisdom made it his life’s mission to find this guru and pose to him the most vexing question of all, namely, what’s it all about? After years of searching the Himalayas, finally one day as he was ascending the highest peak, he encountered the guru himself as he was on his way down the mountain. Breathlessly the man explained his plight and then asked the question he had been harboring his whole life: “Oh, wise one, please tell me the meaning of life.

With that, the guru, without uttering a word, stopped in his tracks, put down his sack which he was carrying on his back, sat down for a brief respite, and then continued on his way. And then it was all abundantly clear: as if a bolt of lightning had struck him, he finally understood. The meaning of life was revealed to him without the guru ever uttering a word.

The meaning of life, he concluded, is found in our choosing to periodically remove ourselves from the treadmill of life, in laying down our sack of troubles, resting for a while, and then picking ourselves up and continuing our journey through life.

I've always loved this story. It teaches us quite simply that really great music is not made up of the notes themselves, but the rests that come between them. Unlike the wisdom seeker in the story, we Jews have to look no further than our own inherited tradition to appreciate the importance of this most profound aspect of the human condition. It is

given to us in the form of a commandment, and yet is the greatest gift we can receive. An ancient midrash taken from the Mechilta D'Rabbi Ishmael tells the origin of this reward.

The midrash relates that “at the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: my children! If you accept the Torah and observe my mitzvot, I will give you the most precious thing that I have in my possession.

- And what, asked Israel, is that most precious thing which you will give us if we obey your Torah?
- The world to come, Olam Ha-ba.
- Show us in this world an example of the world to come.
- God Responded Shabbat is an example of the world to come.
- An ancient tradition declares: “The world to come is characterized by the kind of holiness possessed by the Sabbath in this world . . . The Sabbath possesses a holiness like that of the world to come.”

- In other words, when we feel the serene calm and tranquility of a perfect Shabbat experience, when our inner life is at peace with itself and the world, when all its trials and tribulations are all but forgotten . . . when we suspend our interaction with things of space and instead live solely for the sanctity of time, then truly we can experience a small taste of paradise.

Because I believe the experience of Shabbat is so necessary for our individual and communal well-being I have asked our professional staff and our lay leadership to dedicate this coming year to exploring how each one of us can enrich our lives through the observance of Shabbat and its awesome power to transform our lives. “Shabbat is the centerpiece of all that we do as a sacred community. It is the hub of the wheel that keeps our beloved synagogue in motion. Can we imagine closing CKT on Shabbat in deference to keeping the synagogue open but one or two days a year? I would think not, as it is the precious regularity, the sacred continuity of the weekly

rhythm, which binds us together as a covenant people, bound to one another and to God as an “Am Kadosh” a Holy people”.

One of the most familiar verses regarding Shabbat found in the Torah and sung on Shabbat as part of our liturgy is the popular “V’shamru”. And while we sing the words with great fervor, rarely do we stop to think about the words and what they convey regarding the purpose and meaning of Shabbat. If we look carefully at these verses, I believe we can discern three important insights into the significance of this pillar of our Jewish faith, culture, heritage and identity.

Hebrew:

The very essence of Shabbat is the mandate to sanctify time, to raise our awareness of the fleeting nature of time itself and to imbue within us an acute consciousness of the fleeting nature of time.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher and theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel eloquently describes this concept in his book

entitled, *The Sabbath*: “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.

When others speak of “Kodak moments” in the realm of the secular, we as Jews speak of k’dushah moments”, moments of holiness which are consciously set apart in order to elevate the ordinary to the extra-ordinary. We proclaim Shabbat as “kadosh” a day set apart for the weekly renewal of our spiritual lives. As we read in our Siddur: “A garland of glory have you given us, a crown of salvation: a day of rest and holiness”.

Let me be personal, Shabbat for me is the period at the end of a sentence. Otherwise, life would be a run-on sentence, unintelligible, babble gobbly gook. Shabbat for me puts life in perspective – a way to frame our lives with meaning.

Another aspect of Shabbat is its power to unite our people through time and space, throughout the generations, L’dorotam. As the great Zionist thinker Echad Ha-am put it: “More than Israel has kept the

Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel". Through so many dark ages the Sabbath has stood as Israel's refuge, protecting her from the ravages of anti-semitism, abject poverty and assimilation.

I personally witnessed this phenomenon of Jewish history when I went on a secret mission to visit with Soviet Jewish Refusniks in the former Soviet Union now over 40 years ago. Among my most exhilarating and at times harrowing experiences was gathering with hundreds of fellow Jews on Shabbat outside "The Official Soviet Synagogue" in Moscow on Archipov Street. Here the Jews did not enter the synagogue to pray for they feared the ever watchful eyes of the KGB. Instead they met outside each and every Shabbat to share news of each other's lives, give each other moral support in their defiance of the oppressive regime, and even at times to sing and dance. For these Jewish heroes and heroines of the spirit, Shabbat gave them strength as they maintained their Jewish identities and bonded with their fellow Jews the world over. That

particular Shabbat in Moscow, I shall never forget the feeling of being at one with my people, united by a common language and heritage of faith. I was NOT a stranger among them; I was kin, I was mishpocha. I was a fellow shabbatanik. What an amazing feeling of solidarity! I share with you the words of Natan Sharanzky, formerly Anatoly, perhaps the most famous prisoner of ZION.

“Indeed, Shabbat is a time for many to acknowledge his Creator. But it is also a time for the individual Jew to reconnect to his family and to his nation. On those Saturdays in Moscow, not only did I strengthen my relationship with fellow activists devoted to a common cause, I deepened my connection to my people. Those Shabbatot were a porthole that transported me from the emptiness of a rootless communist state to a world rich in identity and tradition. It was there that we met our fellow Jews from abroad, that we spoke of our faith and where we exchanged the illegal books that taught us of a past that the State had tried to confiscate long ago.”



Shabbat as celebration of the victory of time over space wherein we can transcend the limitations of our own finitude and Shabbat as the bond whose power can unite a Jew from America with refuseniks half a world away, is worthy of our remembering and our observance.

Finally, the phrase which packs the most punch is the one that teaches, *La-asot et Ha-Shabbat*, to make the Sabbath. That is to say that Shabbat doesn't really occur unless we "make Shabbat", unless we do Shabbat. In other words, unless we do something to honor Shabbat, then Friday night is just another Friday night and Saturday is just another Saturday.

Like most things in life, you get out of it, what you put into it. *L'fum Tza-ara-agra*, according to the effort is the reward. As Liberal Jews we are called upon to honor and keep Shabbat as it states in the latest platform of Reform Judaism saying: "We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives through regular home and congregational observance. Shabbat calls

us to bring the highest moral values to our daily labor and to culminate the work week with (kedushah), holiness, (menuchah), rest and (oneg), joy.

As liberal Jews we can freely choose how to sanctify the seventh day each in our own way, but sanctify we must! In your pews you will find a pamphlet entitled “50 Ways to Honor Shabbat and Nourish Your Soul”. I invite you to take it home with you and discuss as a family way you can “make Shabbat”.

Ultimately, it is not each individual act of making Shabbat which matters, but rather the kavannah, the intentionality of our efforts to hallow the seventh day which lends holiness to the Sabbath. It’s not only about making Shabbat, it is also about Shabbat making us.

A story is told about a rabbi who once entered heaven in his dream. He was permitted to approach the Temple in paradise where the great sages of the Talmud were spending their eternal lives. He saw that they were just sitting around tables studying the Talmud. The

disappointed rabbi wondered, “Is this all there is to paradise? But suddenly he heard a voice: “You are mistaken. The sages are not in paradise. Paradise is in the sages.” In our making of Shabbat, may we know the inner joy of experiencing paradise from within.

This New Year at CKT we will aim to help all our members to inculcate an awareness of and deepening appreciation of Shabbat and all that it can offer.

In late winter and early spring, we will roll out a three-part study series on the Sabbath and during the weekend of January 12-14 we are looking to hold a weekend Shabbaton. The Shabbaton which will begin Friday with Shabbat dinner and services will provide a plethora of activities for members of all ages and stations in life, throughout the weekend. Our three day, two nights, Shabbaton will conclude Sunday morning. In between we'll study and sing, laugh and learn, eat and nosh, play and have fun. The Shabbaton promises to be a most remarkable and memorable event in the history of our

congregation. You definitely don't want to miss it. Also, URJ celebration Shabbaton in DC is December 15-17.

These along with other programs and activities will hopefully move us all to greater Shabbat observance and in so doing allow us to bask in its luminous glow.

I leave you with this: the story is told of an English explorer who was investigating the intriguing lifestyles of African Bushmen in the heart of darkest Africa. After a period of days of following this fascinating tribe through the forests, suddenly the leader of the tribe sat down on a downed tree limb and just stopped in his tracks. After a 24 hour respite, the explorer asked the tribesman why he suddenly stopped.

He replied "I simply need to wait for my soul to catch up with me."

My friends, simply, Shabbat, that's all it takes, simply Shabbat, to help our souls catch up with us. In other words, we need to unplug to recharge.

On this first day of the new year, I pray that each one of us can vow to keep the fourth commandment, to remember and observe the Sabbath day and set it apart, and may I wish one and all a Shanah Tovah, and perhaps even more importantly, Shabbat Shalom!