

And on the Seventh Day, God Unplugged

A second day Rosh Hashanah Sermon

By Rabbi Todd Chizner

In the beginning – we read today – God created the heavens and the earth – the water and sky – the trees the animals the human and then – and then God Rested. This is the model for achieving order out of chaos. Work and create for six days – rest and appreciate on one. Shabbat is the source of balance and order in our lives – when we use it.

However, throughout time – we humans have been busying ourselves with the latest and newest technologies – and have found it hard – not just now – to balance everything. Listen to this New York Times quote from 1852. In reflecting on the new technology of their day, New York businessman W.E. Dodge wrote of how hard it is to come home and relax after a hard day of work when as soon as you sit down to dinner, a telegram arrives from London directing the purchase of 20,000 barrels of flour from San Francisco. “The poor man,” he wrote, “must dispatch his dinner as hurriedly as possible in order to send off his message to California. The businessman of the present day must be continually on the jump.”

And yet, in our world today, I have to believe it's harder than ever for us to stop jumping.

So let me share with you some of my own advice. Maybe the most important regular Jewish tradition in my house is Shabbat. Lauren and I have made it our business to carve out Shabbat time. And it has been a source of meaning and fulfillment for our entire family. The Shabbat meal – always homemade – Lauren delicious chicken – and veggies and a *challah* – sometimes that's homemade, too. And most importantly – a relaxed uninterrupted meal. With real conversation. Conversation about our lives – the kids included - or something going on in the world – or just talking without an agenda. And up until recently – this has been rather effortless for us.

But things have begun to change. I began to notice it about a year ago. One of our cell phones rang during dinner. We didn't answer it – it was a little annoying. The next Shabbat – the phone rang – and one of said just check to see who's calling. Then on another – an annoying ‘ping!’ - it was a text – Lauren said, “I'll just text a quick “kk” – (it means – I got your message – I understand - all is okay.) But all wasn't okay with me! Down the slippery slope we slid. That opened the door for one of us to answer the phone during a subsequent Shabbat dinner – which led to my son asking if he could be excused from the Shabbat table before we were done eating – to video chat with friends. Which led to one of us – keeping his head down – through the meal – till we finally realized he was hiding the cell phone in his lap to text in secret.

Then finally, during one particular Shabbat meal recently - my cell phone – I

ignored it - Jacobs cell phone made it the vibrating sound – I told him to ignore it – Lauren’s cell phone pinged - and then home phone rang. I had enough – I yelled “everyone turn off your phones Its Shabbat! A time of peace – I need peace!! Can we go a half hour without the phones?!!”

Needless to say it was not a peaceful Shabbat after that – it seems that I not only cut of the connections to the outside world and I managed to cut off the connections with those sitting at my own table.

Friends we live with a paradox – technology is supposed to connect us – but it so often removes us from the ones right in front of us. And yet – when we don’t have the technology – we have trouble communicating with the people we love.

Its time to return to Shabbat – maybe to a Shabbat unplugged. We need a break. We need down time – we need real connection with people. Shabbat is that – it has always been that – it was written into the fabric of time – as we read today – at creation – God said – there is chaos – let us order it on six days and let us not worry about it on one.

You want to hear something ironic. With all the modern technology – people are turning to this ancient wisdom on their own. Back in 2008 the term secular Sabbath started popping up on the internet - For example, a journalist named Mark Bittman, wrote an article for the NYTimes in June of 2008 entitled “I need a Virtual Break...” – I’ll paraphrase what he wrote - My name is Mark, and I’m a techno-addict. I am one of those Americans who’ve developed the latest in American problems, IAD, Internet addiction disorder? I decided to do something about it. Thus began his “secular Sabbath” — a term he found floating around on blogs — “a day a week where I would be free of screens, bells and beeps. An old-fashioned day not only of rest but of relief. Like many, though, I wondered whether breaking my habit would be entirely beneficial. I worried about the colleagues, friends, daughters, parents and so on who relied on me, the people who knew that whether I was home or away I would get back to them, if not instantly then certainly before the end of the day. What if something *important* was happening, something that couldn’t wait 24 hours?”

Mark did do something about it – and so have many.

In fact, about two years ago, the Jewish non-profit organization Reboot, dedicated to renewing Jewish identity for the next generation of Jewish adults, sponsored a National Day of Unplugging. From sundown on Friday March 19 to sundown on Saturday March 20, people across the nation voluntarily committed to not using computers, cell phones, or other contemporary technology.

It was Reboot’s launch of what they are calling the Sabbath Manifesto, a hip, non-sectarian and totally un-traditional reinvigoration of the ancient day of rest. The manifest includes such advice as “Get outside” “connect with loved ones” “Give Back,” “Find silence,” and “Drink Wine” and of course – “avoid technology” - one of the comments – on the avoid technology principle was “How can we be expected to connect with loved

ones and avoid technology?”

To answer this angered blogger – I guess you’ll have to do it the old fashioned way – face to face – at home.

Shabbat has always been there for a reason – it makes sense in any period of time.

In a wonderful piece by Rabbi David Stern – he challenges us with “When we lose the boundary between family time and work time, between screen time and human time, between being in touch and holding a gentle solitude, we suffer, our creativity suffers, and whatever is on either side of those boundaries suffers.” Or as Rabbi Naomi Levy wrote, “Ecclesiastes wisely teaches us, ‘To everything there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to laugh and a time to weep, a time to build and a time to tear down.’ But he didn’t mean all at once.”

Friends – we have shabbat – because we need it – we actually need it.

I invite you to – give it a try – unplugging with the world and connecting with the ones you love.

Shabbat – gives us an opportunity to make connection and we all crave more connection in our lives.

So much so that our tradition says that the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* – welcoming others into our home – for face to face connection – is one of our most important obligations. There is nothing more energizing than spending a Shabbat with friends and family.

Showing hospitality, in fact, is one of the primary ways we practice Judaism – as much a part of our religious observance as prayer, study and giving *tzedaka*. Remarkably, the Talmud defines the *mitzvah* of hospitality as even more important than Torah study [*Shabbat* 127a]; and in another striking statement, we’re told that welcoming guests is even more important than receiving the God’s presence [T. Shavuot 35b]

Why is such importance attached to this haimish, down to earth behavior and how does it benefit us? Inviting guests over may sound like more work and can be stressful but having guests over for Shabbat is quite the opposite. One way to understand Judaism is that it’s a system that helps us to grow balance the hectic-ness of our lives – intellectually, morally, emotionally and spiritually. Every *mitzvah* teaches us in some way to expand our capabilities, to enhance our awareness, to develop our character. *Hachnasat Orchim*, a simple act that we can practice every day, gradually expands our circle of concern and brings others into our consciousness. As such, it helps train us in the habits of sensitivity, compassion and care that are at the very heart of the Jewish way of life.

Interestingly, my home growing up was a hub much of the time. I am one of six – and with aunts uncles and cousins, and friends in the area – my parents were always inviting people over – and there was standing invitations for many. I never once heard my parents complain about too many people – or too much preparation – or too much hassle – but I always heard laughter and spirited conversation in my house.

I want to offer us an opportunity to benefit from this ancient and new tradition of Shabbat.

I hope you will join us for a class we will offer for adults on how to make Shabbat in your home. Cantor Sher, and I will teach the class. Ellen will share her recipes – Cantor her songs – and me the in between the food and songs – I will share with you a very personal look at Shabbat in my home and others I have visited.

And here is the best part. At the class you will be given the opportunity to sign up to either host a Shabbat for another family – or attend a Shabbat. There are no requirements for these meals – you can follow the traditional Jewish traditions – or make your own. I only ask that you get to know one another. And then maybe – after you have attended someone Shabbat dinner – you will host one – for a different family - sort of a Shabbat pay it forward. I cannot tell you how much of an impact this can have in you life.

Shabbat is the day for us to stop hurrying and to stop jumping. A reminder of how vital it is to make our way back to Judaism, day in and day out: to see and to be seen. To hear the still small voice within our souls – to feel God’s creative presence all around us.

May the new year be a good year – a year that contains pauses every seven days Shanah Tovah.