

Shabbat VaYakhel - Pekudei
Sinai Synagogue, Shabbat AM, March 12, 2010

Sandor Ferenczi a disciple of Freud identified a disorder he called 'Sabbath neurosis'. Writing in 1919 Budapest, the Sabbath he described was Sunday. In a society in which businesses and other weekday activities shut down on Sunday and families spent time together in celebration, some of his patients became distraught only on this Sabbath day. The disorder was caused, he reasoned, by the fact that the Sunday neurotic feared that certain impulses, which the individual repressed only with great effort, might be unleashed. He induced pain or mental anguish to pre-empt the feeling of being out of control.

Less than a century later, Judith Shulevitz a writer for Slate magazine, found herself with an opposite disorder. Raised in a Conservative Sabbath observant Jewish home, she had given up her ties to Jewish ritual and was living a young professional's life in Brooklyn. But starting on Friday nights her mood would darken. It would get worse on Saturday. Hanging out with friends did not help and she isolated herself more and more. One day she entered a synagogue, she writes, "I had no interest in praying, which I hardly remembered how to do. What I wanted to do was listen to the hymns, which offered the uncanny comfort of songs heard in childhood." Later in life it occurred to her that whereas Ferenczi's patients suffered because of the Sabbath, she was suffering because of the lack of the Sabbath. She has now written a book about the Sabbath called The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.

One of points she makes in the book and in an article she wrote in NY Times Magazine in 2003 is "Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily, the way you might slip into bed at the end of a long day. As the Cat in the Hat says, 'It is fun to have fun but you have to know how.' This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional, requiring extensive advance preparation -- at the very least a scrubbed house, a full larder and a bath. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. They were meant to communicate the insight that interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.... only a Sabbath that you have to work for will appear worth keeping, just as, in psychoanalysis, a patient will value only those sessions for which he pays. Anything gotten for nothing will be treated as such. After all, as in therapy, the good that comes from the Sabbath is mostly intangible. We don't produce anything when we don't work."

This morning we continue our participation in the Mitzvah Initiative Project with a Davar Torah on the 'Shabbat as a Mitzvah: Constructing a God-Centered Community'. Appropriately this morning's Torah portion opens with yet another call to observe Shabbat. And for a second time this call is juxtaposed with the instructions to build the Mishkan.

At the beginning and now the conclusion of the project to build this portable sanctuary for worship the people of Israel are told of the importance of the project.

However, as Rashi explains, as important as this construction job is, one must stop working on it to observe the Shabbat.

Melakhah, the labor prohibited on Shabbat, is defined by the rabbis of Mishnah and Talmud as related to 39 types of activity that were involved in the construction of that Wilderness sanctuary, the *Mishkan*. These activities fall into seven areas: growing and preparing food, producing and preparing cloth and garments, writing and working with leather, building shelter, kindling fire, doing something that completes a task, and transporting/carrying from one area to another.

Thus building the tabernacle is the photographic negative to Shabbat. That which one could do to construct the Tabernacle, one could not do to observe the Shabbat. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel developed this dichotomy in his great work *The Sabbath*, in which he compared the weekday world of space to the Sabbath, world of Time.

The Mishkan was an attempt to conquer the limitations of space. God is infinite and we are finite, how could we ever hope to commune with the Infinite Presence of God? The Mishkan would be that place. And this morning's Torah portion makes that clear: "When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle." The Sabbath was an attempt to overcome the limitations of time. "Time is man's greatest challenge", wrote Heschel, "It is beyond our reach, beyond our power. It is both near and far..it is otherness. Yet it is only within time that there is fellowship and togetherness of all beings." Shabbat

allows us to live within time and to face spiritual moments.

But it is also possible to look at the close connection between Shabbat and the Mishkan in a different way. In that both are necessary to create community.

Barry Holtz, dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, comments: (The Torah portion of) Pekudey repeats one refrain over and over again when the tasks are being completed: the people did "as the Lord had commanded Moses." At least twelve different times the Torah repeats that phrase. Why? It appears that this phrase serves another function. The highly specified nature of the Tabernacle is a reflection of the Torah's message about the nature of reality itself: there is order in our chaotic world. We live, the Torah tells us, in a universe of order that encompasses both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our existence. In one sense—the horizontal axis—there is the world of social equality, of a community that needs to work together across all distinctions of class and gender. But in addition, there is the other vertical axis that recognizes our need for genius like Bezalel's and leadership like Moses'. Finally, there is a kind of unifying whole: we must do as God commands us, because without that there is chaos. We must, therefore, erect the Tabernacle as God has ordered. But in a certain sense, by building the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle builds us. For when we do, God does something quite surprising. No longer distant, no longer the aloof 'commanding' one, God comes into our midst. God's Presence lives among us, in the very heart of our community, and God becomes our guide, leading us with cloud and with fire not from a great distance, but from a dwelling place within our very

world... This biblical narrative then becomes a kind of model of our hopes for a life of mitzvot: through our fulfillment of the commandments, we greet the Presence of God in our own lives.”

The Tabernacle brought the community together and sustained the community through its functioning. The Sabbath does the same thing for the Jewish people. Ahad HaAm wrote “More than the Jewish people have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat keeps the Jewish people.”

10 years I spoke on Rosh HaShanah about the role Shabbat plays in building community:

“ ‘What we are depends on what the Sabbath is to us,’ wrote Heschel. I would have to say as the rabbi of this congregation that all of the growth and increased vitality we find in this community over the last decade is due not to the Fund for the Future Campaign, not to the remodeling, no, not even to yours truly. No, the main reason for our community’s resurgence is the commitment of our community to make Shabbat the focus of our congregation and of each congregants’ week.”

Our community wide lunch and the commitment that the Yad b’Yad group puts into making sure it happens each week, our FEAST youth education program, encouraging our members to participate in leading services, reading Torah and being gabbaim, and this year our FEAST for Adults program, all of these activities testify to our congregation’s commitment to make Shabbat the centerpiece of our communal life.

In the last year I have spoken in Heidelberg and at the Jewish Educator’s Assembly to make the very same point. In creating a community Shabbat is vital. This

was the genius in traditional communities in insisting that one not travel by car or other means of transportation on Shabbat. It forced them to live near each other and to create community through geographic proximity. For our community we have to make up for that by consciously choosing to make Shabbat special.

Prepping the lunches, teaching the kids, working on davvening and Torah reading. It is the preparation that makes the day special as well.

“What we are depends on what Shabbat is to us” -- as a community as well. We resist the restrictions and refuse to be beholden to the day’s schedule because we live in a libertarian age of the autonomous self. But as Judith Shulevitz tells us you can’t get anything out of that with which you don’t put forth effort and don’t accept as discipline. One need not heed every aspect of halacha of Shabbat but we should strive to refrain from as many weekday activities as possible in that list of 39 categories and involve ourselves in the rhythm of the day as much as we can.

As we move from Sabbath neurosis to Sabbath exaltation we will see with it the spiritual power of our community grow.