

1st day Rosh Hashanah sermon

1 Tishrei 5760 (Sept. 11, 1999)

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Shanah Tovah!!

Last night I mentioned that the remarks I will share during the High Holiday services this year will have a common theme: I like to call it: "How to Bring the Messiah in your spare time, working out of your home." The thoughts I will share during each service will all focus on actions we can take that the sages of our tradition assert will help to make our world closer to the world of the Messianic era. So this morning's sermon will focus on one of the simplest practical steps that we ALL can take that has the potential to bring tremendous peace into our lives and into the world.

But first, here's a news story that many of us probably missed this year. Earlier this summer, there was a successful businessman in the city of Netanya, in Israel, who was pulled over to the side of the road for reckless driving. He was driving erratically, veering out of his lane, slowing down suddenly and then speeding up again. Well, the police pulled him over, and sure enough, he was driving the car with his elbows -- because he was holding TWO cell-phones, one in each hand, and speaking to a client AND checking back with his office, while also trying to drive.

Certainly we can all agree that this man exercised very poor judgment.

But this story captured the interest of a number of journalists, because it seems to be a symptom of our age. One of the most prominent themes in the media this year was the increased connectivity that characterizes many of our lives. Thanks to technological advancements like the internet and e-mail and cell phones and fax machines and palm pilots and beepers, and on-line after-hours trading -- It is now possible to be constantly in touch.

Of course every technological advance comes with a host of benefits. And our world's increased connectivity carries so many wonderful and exciting possibilities that have the potential to revolutionize the way we work, the way we shop, the way we learn. But a detrimental side effect of the world's increased connectivity is the increased pressure so many of us feel today. There's an urgency and immediacy to our lives that would have baffled our grandparents. Just a few years ago, "multi-tasking" was something new we expected from computers -- we expected a computer to be working on a number of tasks simultaneously and doing them all just as well and just as efficiently as if they were doing just one task at a time. But increasingly this multi-tasking model has become an expectation about how we should live our lives. But when we live our lives at such an unnaturally fast pace, we are likely to feel emptier. We may be able to get more done, but we feel that we've accomplished less. We may be able to communicate with more people, but our interactions are more superficial.

And no wonder that our world has become so complex and stressful that we relish any moments that we are able to spend away from the stress -- moments when we are able to be inaccessible to the demands that get placed upon us.

I would like to share a passage with you that comes from an advertising brochure - and maybe you'll recognize the source of this passage before I'm done.

"Among the rewards of living in the modern world, there are a few booby prizes. Among them are phones that ring too long, too loud and too often, alarm clocks that go off before we feel ready to face the day, traffic jams, newspapers that are full of bad news, blaring radios and the tensions that come with living in such a complex world.

This is why, back in 1950, we created Club Med, a unique way to have a holiday, based on the belief that to shed the trappings of civilization is the most relaxing way to vacation.

Today, at hundreds of Club Med villages around the world, you won't be bothered by televisions or telephones, by radios or newspapers or alarm clocks. Nor will you miss them. Instead, you will be lazing on a sunny beach, or dancing to your heart's content, or feasting on our justly famous French cuisine, with its freshly baked breads, pastries and pitchers of wine, or water skiing, surfing, scuba diving or playing tennis.

...As you avail yourself of all the diversions which are offered, you will realize that at Club Med, time is something to be savored, not worried about.

Club Med-----The antidote to civilization"

Now for decades, this concept has brought out thousands of vacationers every year -

These words express the message that, no matter how much we appreciate the advances and developments of our modern society, they come at a tremendous cost - and people often feel wistful for a simpler time, a time before there were beepers and faxes and e-mail - when people actually had to get to know each other face to face.

And what a radical concept this advertisement presents - the best way to go on vacation is to WITHDRAW from technology.

The things that the ad describes as the "trappings of civilization" - like telephones, televisions, cars, alarm clocks, computers -- are absolutely fundamental to our society - and we thank God for the miracles of human ingenuity that brought them about.

But these "trappings of civilization" can so easily become the "TRAPS of civilization" - they are the things that keep us from fulfilling our potential as people - things that keep us from being who we really are. So, according to the Club Med people, when we go on vacation, we withdraw from these "trappings," and we give our true selves - our souls - the room they need to grow.

Well -- Club Med is one answer.

I would like to tell you about another answer to our existential challenge as we approach the new millenium.

It's a good deal cheaper than Club Med.

And it has the potential to be even more satisfying.

It's a treasure that was given as a gift to each and every Jew.

I'm speaking of Shabbat.

Because Shabbat is the "antidote to civilization" that our people has been using with great success for over four thousand years.

It's an idea particularly well suited to the unique stresses in our lives in this decade.

Let me tell you about an animated video that we show the kids in our learning Center about Shabbat. It's a video designed for little kids -- but it carries a sophisticated message that can only be fully comprehended by adults. This animated short film begins with a number of people

waiting at a bus stop for a bus that will take them to work. But there's something strange about each of these people. None of them have heads. Instead of a head, one man has a calculator growing out of his neck. One man has a judge's gavel coming out of his neck. And a woman has a stethoscope coming out of her neck -- no head, just a stethoscope.

Then we follow the people as they get on the bus. The bus driver also looks completely normal from his feet up to his neck -- but he has a steering wheel where his head is supposed to be.

Then we follow Mr. Calculator-head as he gets off the bus, and walks to his office building. Along the way, he passes a flower shop whose proprietor has a flower instead of a head, and then a barbershop where the barber has scissors instead of a head. We see him take the elevator up to the 20th floor in his large office building, and he goes to his desk. Every so often his secretary comes in -- she has a steno pad in place of her head. -- and every so often his boss comes in -- he has cufflinks in place of his head! And this is how the work day proceeds -- for the next two minutes of the animation.....

Until Mr. Calculator-head sees the clock on the wall -- it's getting close to 3 o'clock -- and as soon as it does, letters below the clock light up, saying, "Shabbat is coming!"

And suddenly, the calculator connected to his shoulders morphs into a man's head. And then the next time his secretary comes in, he greets her by saying "Shabbat Shalom" -- and HER steno-pad morphs into her own real face. And he greets each and every person he meets along the way back home with the words "Shabbat Shalom" -- and then, one by one, all their faces are transformed from their work implements, to faces representing their true selves. And this is how the cartoon ends.

And the point is not lost on any of our Learning Center students. I ask: does it sometimes happen that your parents come home from work, but they're still wearing their work faces? And what do you think they answer? How often do WE interact with our family and friends when we're still wearing our work faces?

Maybe I love this cartoon so much because I know that I'm one of the people who needs to heed its message. Since the birth of my daughter seven months ago, I'm especially conscious of what face I'm wearing when I'm at home -- which eyes do I use when I look at my daughter -- are they my work-eyes, reflecting my pre-occupation with tasks that are still undone, or are they my home-eyes, giving her the full and undivided attention that she deserves? What a blessing it would be each week to give her one full day of the gift of my presence....

The message of this cartoon is very sophisticated and very radical. It says: every time we go to work, no matter what it is we do, we are becoming dehumanized. We are prized for our skills, not for who we are. We become a cog in a machine -- we become a commodity. We stop being ourselves. And when this happens on a long-term basis, it is damaging to our souls. And Shabbat is an entire day -- one day out of every seven -- when we get to wear our own faces again.

One of the classic passages about Shabbat from the Torah is recited at every Shabbat service -- we'll recite these words when we say Kiddush at the end of the service. We say: "Ve-shamru....." The Shabbat is an eternal covenant between God and the People of Israel, that God made the heavens and the earth in six days, and on the seventh day, God rested.

Now in the Hebrew, this passage includes two words for "rested" -- *uvayom hashvi'i - shavat vayinafash*. And these refer to the two kinds of rest that typify Shabbat. First is the word "Shavat" - it means "rested" in the sense of "ceased from work" - - that's the understanding of rest that we're very familiar with --

But next we have a different word - the word "*vayinafash*" -

The word Vayinafash is often translated just as "rested," but it has a deeper meaning than that - The word 'yinafash' contains the word "nefesh," the Hebrew word for "soul." so the word really means "activated the soul," or "permitted the soul to be fully alive."

Because this is what happens when we cease from the bustle of our daily lives. When you quiet all the background noise that fills up our lives -- you can hear the sweet song of the soul, which tends to get lost because we're preoccupied with all our pressing needs. That's what Shabbat is - not just a mini-vacation, but the opportunity for the soul to soar.

Now some of you may be thinking, "Sounds beautiful, rabbi. But I seem to remember that there's a lot more to it than that. Like no television, no driving, no turning electric lights on or off - That certainly doesn't sound like Club Med to me! Why so many restrictions? What does that have to do with permitting the soul to soar?"

I have a teacher who uses the following image to help people to understand why there are so many restrictions associated with the traditional observance of Shabbat.

He says: Suppose I invited you to spend an evening with me -- This is my idea: that we go to a large, dark room and we sit there. The lights will be turned out, so we won't be able to read, and we aren't supposed to talk to each other -- we're supposed to be as quiet as possible. And we aren't supposed to walk around -- we're supposed to just sit in these seats -- for a couple of hours. Sound like fun?

And then suppose I told you that, in fact, this is such a wonderful activity that they charge you for it. We have to pay about \$8.50 each for the privilege of sitting in this room for a couple of hours -- just sitting in this dark room - no getting up -- no talking -- no reading. Sounds great, doesn't it? And I must be a really fun guy for suggesting it!

And then he says -- oh - there's one thing I forgot to mention. This room I've been describing -- it's a movie theater, and while we're there, there's going to be a movie shown on the screen in front of us!

Now it all makes sense. Now maybe we'll go.

But how interesting it is that when we just focused on the restrictions, it sounded like a miserable way to spend an evening. But when we go to a movie, we don't think about the restrictions. Because we know that each and every thing we're giving up is something that would distract us from the movie and diminish our appreciation of it.

It's the same thing with Shabbat. The Shabbat restrictions are things that would distract us from our REAL purposes on Shabbat -- to focus on the miracle of our existence. to focus on who we are, rather than on what we have or don't have. to connect with our loved ones face-to-face, giving them the time and attention they deserve. to get in touch with our life's most precious values. apbvk -- to allow our souls to be fully alive.

Can you imagine what our world might look like if we all were to spend an entire day allowing our souls to be fully alive?

the rabbis of our tradition DID imagine what such a world would look like - and they liked what they saw.

We read in the Talmud: if all of Israel were to observe two Shabbatot in a row, the inner peace that that would generate would be so powerful that it would spill out into the rest of the world and the redemption and the Messianic era would come immediately.

And considering the amount of inner peace that Shabbat brings me and my family every week, I don't think that's any exaggeration.

You may have noticed that we did not blow the Shofar during our services this morning. The most important symbol of Rosh HaShanah -- one of the holiest days of the year -- and we don't use it today, because today is Shabbat!

And there's an important lesson to be learned here. It demonstrates what our priorities REALLY are. Rosh HaShanah may be one of the most holy days of the year. But in the Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah pales in comparison with Shabbat which happens every week. And this Jewish priority is very sensible. Because so many of the values of Rosh Hashanah are meant to be re-affirmed on a regular basis, every Shabbat. What do we gain if we spend time in reflection and prayer for a few days each year, if we don't make these into regular priorities? What do we gain when we spend a few days each year focusing on reconciliation with family members and friends, thinking about mistakes we've made, if we are not prepared to make such reflection and reconciliation into a regular priority, a regular spiritual practice each and every week?

The spiritual truths of the high holiday season make an enduring difference in our lives only when we live by these principles throughout the entire year. And thus this most holy of days is not so holy as to override Shabbat.

Whenever people approach me and say "What's the one Jewish thing that you would recommend to help me connect spiritually to Judaism? I always respond: I would recommend that you find one additional way to incorporate the spirit and traditions of Shabbat into your life on a regular basis. Some people prefer to start by lighting candles on Friday nights to demonstrate this is a special and sacred time, set apart from the rest of the week. Some people may prefer to make a regular practice of spending time in meditation every Friday evening, reviewing each day of the week that has passed. Some may choose to spend Shabbat in community through synagogue services and communal Shabbat dinners. And some may want to take Jewish tradition's advice that we avoid certain stressful activities on Shabbat, like spending money, or answering the telephone, or hunting for a parking space. Any of these are great ways to start. And I strongly urge us that we NOT view Shabbat -- or anything in Jewish tradition, for that matter - as an all-or-nothing proposition. Especially for those at the beginning of their Jewish journey, the various details of a traditional Shabbat observance can serve as a repertoire from which we can map out the spiritual practice that will be appropriate for our lives and our needs at this time, with the knowledge that we always have the opportunity to deepen our commitment as our lives go on.

Let me conclude with the words that one of my colleagues, Rabbi Jack Riemer, has used as an advertisement for some of the benefits Shabbat can offer us in our contemporary over-connected world. And some parts of this advertisement may sound a bit familiar.

Among the rewards of living in the modern world, there are a few booby prizes. Among them are phones that ring too long, too loud and too often, alarm clocks that go off before we are ready to face the day, traffic jams, newspapers that are full of bad news, blaring radios and the tensions that come from living in such a complex world.

That is why, almost 6 thousand years ago, God created Shabbat, a unique holiday based on the belief that to shed the trappings of civilization one day a week is the most human way to live.

Today, in thousands of Jewish communities all around the world, you will not be bothered by television sets, telephones, radios, or alarm clocks. Nor will you miss them. Instead, you will be spending sunny afternoons with your family and friends, and joining your community in prayer, study and song, feasting on three lovely meals a day, featuring our justly famous Jewish cuisine with its freshly baked challahs, pastries and kiddush cups, full of wine, making good conversation with friends and relatives.

What's more, there is no charge at all. And as you avail yourself of all the pleasures that Shabbat offers you, you will realize that on Shabbat, time is something to be savored, not rushed or worried through.

Shabbat ----- the antidote to civilization Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!