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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
A Year Dedicated to Shabbat/Shmita Observance
Yom Kippur morning 2014/5775

Today is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. We gather to reflect on ourselves, ask God for forgiveness, and pray that in the coming year we will be more compassionate, forgiving, and just. Today is also Shabbat. In holiness, it's right up there with Yom Kippur and it comes every week to help us rest and refresh ourselves, reflect on our lives, and prepare for the week ahead. But, unlike Yom Kippur, it's a day of celebration, joy and relaxation. Shabbat is always a special time at Beth Emet, but this year, we are going to explore together how we can strengthen the spirit of Shabbat in our homes, our lives, and our community.

I'd like to share with you some of my Shabbat memories and what I learned from them about the power of Shabbat observance.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the coasts of Mississippi and Alabama, Bekki Kaplan, Elliot Leffler, and I chaperoned a group of BE teens that went to do reconstruction work. They were gung-ho and committed to working hard. After two days of clean up, house repair, and painting, Shabbat arrived. We were staying with families from the Reform Congregation in Mobile, AL, and our plan was to attend Shabbat worship on Friday evening and then spend Saturday relaxing with the teens who were hosting us. Many of the teens in our group were frustrated and complained, "We came to work. Why are we taking a day off?" We admired their zeal, but explained that it was Shabbat. "We can rest another time," they retorted. The chaperones didn't relent, explaining that observing Shabbat is an important part of our Jewish life. Just because we don't observe it to the letter of the law—*Halacha*—doesn't mean that we don't believe in its value. The conversation continued with an exploration of the philosophy behind Shabbat and why it is meaningful today. It was so hard to see the devastation and not want to work non-stop, but taking the day off for Shabbat was a good reminder that although our work was worthwhile, there was no way—even by working an extra day—that we'd be able to repair all that needed fixing. Observing Shabbat is an exercise in humility; it reminds us of our human limitations. Moreover, pausing to reflect and express our gratitude when we saw so much loss around us helped us remember that despite hardship, sorrow, and loss, there was still beauty and love in the world. Shabbat can help us live with this paradox of human existence. A few days later when we left to return home and saw all that still needed to be done, I was struck that the most important impact we had on our trip was not the quantity of work that we had done, but the relationships we developed with the people in whose homes we worked. Our care and concern made a lasting impression far beyond the dry wall we hung and the walls we painted.

I remember the first Orthodox Shabbat that I observed—it was with a family who lived in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Shmuel Hanavi where I was spending several months volunteering. They had five children and two bedrooms and me as a house guest. I slept

in the living room with one of the children. We had to go to sleep with the lights on because the timer hadn't turned the lights out yet. I remember putting a pillow over my head so that I could fall asleep. I have not chosen to observe Shabbat in my home in such a strict way, but I remember what a lovely Shabbat that was with nice meals, long walks, and relaxing time with family and friends. The strict rules, like not turning the lights on and off, were hard to follow, but they served as constant reminders that this day was different from the rest of the week.

A number of years ago when I was preparing to teach the Kindergarten parents about Shabbat, I pulled a box of microwave popcorn out of my pantry and read on the back of the box about a "do nothing day" that the popcorn manufacturers were promoting. It included spending time in nature and relaxing with family (and probably eating popcorn!). I remember thinking to myself, "If Shabbat hadn't been a commandment in the Torah, we'd have to invent it for ourselves!" Having a Shabbat is a human need.

Judith Shulevitz, in her 2010 award-winning book, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*, searches, as a non-Orthodox Jew, for the philosophical underpinnings of Shabbat and how it can be a respite from our culture of workaholism and our addiction to technology and rampant consumerism.

She writes: "People are obviously stressed-out and overburdened. It's not that we're overworked; we're actually working less than we used to, but it's that we've become discombobulated, we're not working at the same time as our loved ones, we don't get the reinforcement and refreshment of being together with our loved ones. Our time is becoming increasingly fragmented."

"... Shabbat gives you permission to stop." Shulevitz continues, "I myself am very obsessive-compulsive. I have a very hard time stopping, and I need social pressure and moral reinforcement to feel okay stopping. There's something to be said for having the world stop around you. How exactly you achieve that in America is very tough. It's very tough to enforce in our society. But it's very important to become more *sabbatarian*, to become more conscious of protecting workers' time in general, social time, weekend time, finding a way through incentives on taxation to encourage employers not to employ people at that time."

She uses the word *sabbatarian* to describe a way of observing Shabbat that is not based on strict adherence to Jewish law, but approaches Shabbat observance philosophically; it is a way to uphold Shabbat by focusing on its purpose.

So what is the purpose of Shabbat?

Every Shabbat when we say Kiddush over wine we remind ourselves of the two reasons that Torah gives us for Shabbat: Shabbat is *zecher litziat Mitzrayim*—a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt and *zikaron L'ma'aseh v'reishit*—a reminder of the creation of the world.

Torah teaches that because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, we should do the same. God models for us that we should stop working periodically, even though our work is not finished. The purpose of our rest is to help us regain our physical and spiritual strength so that we can continue our work with renewed vigor and clarity in the coming week. It helps us grow in wisdom and learn humility; no matter how hard we work, we can't do it all, but we can improve our insight, hone our judgment, and cultivate gratitude. These are the lessons we learned while repairing homes in the south after Hurricane Katrina.

Shabbat is a day to care for our souls. As Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel taught: "The national treasure that is imprinted deep within us, the image of a world that is good, upright, and godly—aligned with peace, justice, grace, and courage, all filled with a pervasive divine perspective that rests in the spirit of the people—cannot be actualized within a way of life that is purely occupied with work and everyday activities. Such a life, full of frenetic action, veils the glory of our divine soul, and the soul's clear light is blocked from shining through the overpowering, mundane reality."¹

The second rationale for the Sabbath is that it's a celebration of our freedom; once we were slaves in Egypt and now we are free. Slaves have no control over their time, but free people do. Therefore, when we rest on Shabbat, we show our gratitude for our freedom. In taking this time for ourselves, we are also reminded that there are many people who do not enjoy such a luxury. Shabbat should impel us to work toward a world where everyone enjoys basic freedoms.

Observing Shabbat should remind us that no one should be slaves to an unrelenting taskmaster which, unfortunately, still today is the work environment in which some people toil.

I would like to give you a concrete example today as to how we can uphold this injunction that workers should not be subject to oppressive and unfair labor practices. Last year some of the workers at Golan's moving company went to a worker center to complain about stolen wages and illegal deduction from their paychecks by Golan's. The company did not pay and eventually the workers voted on a union to represent them. Despite overwhelming support of the workers to unionize, the company has refused to bargain with the union in any meaningful way. Finally the workers went on strike in August and have been on strike ever since. I along with many other rabbis have signed a letter to Golan's urging them to come to settle a fair and just contract with the workers. Yet they have not. Just yesterday, our synagogue member, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, went to the picket line to hold a forum with the workers. She is standing up for the workers at Golan's and so am I. The Union for Reform Judaism has adopted language opposing "the exploitation of immigrants in the workplace" and encouraging "employers to maintain the highest safety standards and provide fair and just compensation for all workers." I urge you not to hire Golan's moving company until they reach a fair settlement with their employees.

¹ Rav Kook from the Introduction to *Shabbat Ha'aretz.*,

This year in which we explore together how Shabbat observance can make a difference in our lives and our community coincides with the shmita—sabbatical—year. Jewish tradition teaches us not only about a weekly day of rest, but that every seven years, we have a year of rest called the shmita. Every seventh year, the Torah commands farmers not to till their fields and to let poor people and animals feed off what grows; separately, it mandates that all debts be forgiven during shmita years.

Torah shows us the connection between Shabbat and shmita.

“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having been yourselves in the Land of Egypt. Six years shall you sow your land and gather in your field; but in the seventh year, you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it; and what they leave, let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves. Six days you shall do your work; but on the seventh day, you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and ass may rest and that your bondsman and stranger may be refreshed.”²

Later in the Book of Deuteronomy, we are told that we are to remit debts in the shmita year and not to refrain from lending others money, even as the shmita year approaches when we might be tempted not to loan money because we are concerned that it might not be repaid.

The shmita year as laid out in Torah is an ideal and one that is difficult to observe. An economy doesn't function well if money lending ceases, and this is exactly what began happening in the 1st century. Hillel saw that people, in violation of Torah, were refraining from loaning money as the shmita year approached so he created a document called a *Prozbul* that essentially transfers all of one's debts to the *Beit Din*, in order that the court will be responsible for them. The rule is that the shmita year does not cancel the debts of one who transfers his documents to the *Beit Din*.³ And once Jews were no longer living in the Land of Israel, the shmita of the land no longer applied.

When Jews returned to the Land of Israel, the issue of how to let the land lay fallow every seven years without impoverishing farmers resurfaced. For a hundred years, Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel's provision called *Heter Mechira*—permission to sell—which enables farmers to sell their land to non-Jews for the year so that they can continue to grow food on it has, despite some rabbinic opinions to the contrary, been the accepted way of dealing with the laws of shmita of the land.

These legal workarounds were a necessary response to economic conditions, but with them were lost the spirit of shmita. Shmita's injunctions, however, are a noble attempt to protect the earth from environmental degradation and to level the playing field for those who might fall into severe debt. To reject shmita entirely or to render its injunctions obsolete is a loss to our tradition's teachings on justice, greed, and stewardship of the earth.

² Exodus 23:10-12.

³ Mishnah Shvi'it 10:2

To recapture the essence of shmita for our modern era, there are groups in Israel and here in the U.S. that are working to reclaim its meaning and purpose.

The Sunday before Rosh Hashanah, close to half a million people marched in New York City to demand that something be done about climate change. How can we be part of making sure we preserve our planet and its resources for the next generations? What can we do in this shmita year to be better stewards of our planet and consume less? And how can we help those who have fallen into debt to have a fresh start?

Here are some creative ideas from Israel:

“Yossi Tsuria, a founder of NDS, a video-software company now part of Cisco Systems, has been promoting a list of 49 things technology firms might try to fulfill the shmita spirit. “A year without exorbitant bonuses. The money can be directed to social causes.” (No. 32). “The workday will be no longer than eight hours and the work week will have no more than five days” (No. 40). “Email only works during business hours.” (No 41).

“Four nonprofit groups have enrolled 1,500 families each with debts of about \$25,000 into an eight-month budgeting seminar. Those who complete it will have to pay only a third of their reduced debt; the groups promise to collect donations to cover another third, and convince creditors to forgive the rest.”

“Sara Halevi is the communications director at the Israeli company, Energiya. Her personal shmita commitments include exchanging the yellow pads she brings to meetings for a laptop, and leaving that laptop at the office four nights a week.”⁴

What could you do at your home, school, or workplace to make the observance of shmita have a positive impact on our community and our planet?

I had one idea for us at Beth Emet, and I hope this year we’ll have many more: What if this year instead of buying gifts for Hanukkah, we made donations in honor of friends, colleagues, and family? I envision a congregation-wide Tzedakah fair (the sixth graders do it every year so they can show us how) in which each of us would set up a booth with a charitable organization that we care about. We could teach each other about the causes that we are passionate about and give others the opportunity to make a donation in honor of someone. What a nice way to protect our planet by consuming less and giving a leg up to those in need.

And although I’d love for all of us to be together next Shabbat and the Shabbat after that, our exploration of Shabbat will include how to make Shabbat more meaningful in our homes as well as at Beth Emet and how we can strengthen our community through Shabbat observance even if we are not all gathered in the same place. Among other

⁴ Jodi Rudoren, “In Israel, Values of a Holy Respite are Adapted for a High-Tech World,” *The New York Times*, 9/24/14, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/25israel.html?_r=1.

ideas, each Friday, we will share with the congregation a Shabbat reflection written by a member of the community. If you'd like to contribute to this project, please let us know.

This summer my teenage daughter convinced me to watch the movie *Divergent*, a dystopian thriller set in a world where people are divided into distinct factions based on human virtues. In order to control the population, everyone is forced to live in one of five factions. The factions are: Abnegation, Dauntless, Erudite, Amity, and Candor. The charitable are in Abnegation, the fearless in Dauntless, the intelligent in Erudite, the congenial in Amity, and the honest in Candor. And, you guessed it, the divergent are those who don't fit neatly into one category which, of course, is the case for the heroine, Tris. Everyone is given a test to help them determine where they fit, but, ultimately, each person, once they reach adulthood, has to choose which faction they fit into. It's an impossible task for Tris, and, I would venture to guess, it would be difficult for us as well. We are complex individuals with many parts to our personality, and we don't fit neatly into one box or another.

When watching a movie like this, it seems obvious that we'd feel oppressed by being pigeon-holed into a narrow category. Yet, I think we often do this when it comes to our religious lives. We say, "I'm not the spiritual type, I believe in social action and doing acts of kindness." "I like the intellectual rigor, but not prayer." "I'd prefer just to pray and that's it." While it's true that we might lean in one direction or another, I would argue that the beauty of religious practice is that it's divergent. Prayer nourishes our souls, Torah ignites our intellect, and acts of lovingkindness and justice help us put our learning into action. Religious life is about nurturing ourselves, and caring for others. It's about thinking and questioning and struggling with difficult concepts and it's about recognizing the limits of intellectualizing everything. To be a spiritual person doesn't mean you can't also be an intellectual person. In fact, the challenge and power of religious life is that we don't check part of ourselves at the door to participate. We bring our whole divergent selves to this endeavor, and the practices and teachings are designed to help us align mind, heart, and soul; religious life, at its best, is holistic.

I bring this up today as I talk about Shabbat and shmita because both of these practices have a variety of components—intellectual, spiritual, and justice oriented. They are times to nurture ourselves and to be mindful of the values they teach us so that we can more fully live these values. If you consider yourself to be more of a spiritual or intellectual person, try implementing the justice lessons of Shabbat and shmita. If you are a social justice type, challenge yourself to see how prayer, rituals, and Torah study can nurture you and inform your justice work. Let's be a community of divergents!

In the Kabbalistic understanding of God, as God created the world, 10 qualities of God emanated into the world. Two of those qualities *netzach*—striving, and *hod*—gratitude or beauty—are paired which means they are meant to balance each other. Six days a week, we focus on *netzach*—we work to create a more just and peaceful society, but one day a week we dedicate to *hod*—we pause to appreciate the beauty and wonder in the world and express our gratitude. Shabbat is called *M'ein Olam Haba*—a taste of the world to come, a little heaven right here on earth. On Shabbat we refrain from any

prayers of petition because what is there to ask of God when everything is already perfect? We have six other days to see and grapple with the challenges in our world; one day, we get to experience eternity.

And one who is able to balance these two qualities, *Netzach* and *Hod* is called the *Tzadik*—the righteous one.

May this be a year of righteous living as we explore together how Shabbat and Shmita observance can transform us and our world for the better.