

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

Yom Kippur 5771/2010

“The Inner Shabbat: Shabbat Shabbaton (Everywhere and All the Time)”

We Jews like to tout our ancestors for having realized that circumcision reduces cervical cancer and cancer of the male genitalia, and now is seen as a major stopgap to AIDS in Africa, and therefore “weren’t those Jews savvy when they came up with the idea of the b’ris!”

We like to say that our forebears picked up the connection between pigs and trichinosis and then forbade the eating of pork. The same goes for mercury exposure from shellfish. Again, Yiddishe kop to the rescue!

Likewise with the washing of hands before a meal. See? Our people avoided the Black Plague by practicing this ritual! True, we suffered persecution and mass murder by people who figured we had *caused* the Plague, but it was still better than being wiped out by the pandemic.

I'm all for enjoying the practical benefits of our Jewish traditions. And if the improving of health or the saving of life had anything at all to do with the emergence of these mitzvot, then *mah tov*. All to the good.

But neither the Rabbis of the 1st century, nor Maimonides of the 12th, nor any serious Jewish thinkers of the 20th and 21st centuries think that health or physical survival had much to do with it.

Of course, if you're a real traditionalist you believe that God is the direct source of these mitzvot, and not natural sociological forces. And God has God's own reasons for making us circumcise our sons, eat only specific types of animals, refrain from our labors one day a week, and examine our souls while fasting on this one day a year. Maimonides would tell you that we cannot get into God's mind, and that it isn't particularly worth it to try.

The rationalist Mordecai Kaplan, and even the non-rationalist Abraham Joshua Heschel, would tell you that we Jews did indeed derive our mitzvot by sociological

and anthropological means. Kaplan would tell you outright; Heschel would not tell you otherwise. Both would say, though – and here’s the crux of the matter – that the *ta’amey hamitzvot*, the so-called “reasons” behind our ancient sacred practices, are not what we would call “practical.” Not for health, unless you mean *spiritual* health. Not for survival, unless you mean survival of our most human – most Godly – essence. That’s what these mitzvot are about. Survival *of our most human, most Godly essence*.

What our 19th and pre-War 20th century teachers did was to “liberate” us from seeing our tradition as a literal dictate from a God on high. But in the process they may have distanced us from our great keys to divine awareness. They gifted us with the rational, but they robbed us of the mysterious. As Kaplan liked to put it, the modern Jew stood at the threshold of the synagogue, with his mind outside and his heart inside, knowing that if he followed the one he would need to sacrifice the other. Either the modern Jew thinks, or he feels. But not both. Not in one Jewish body at one in the same time.

The great Jewish intellectual enterprise for the past 65 years has been to re-think this dead-end equation. Everything I, for one, have tried to convey from this bima for over a generation has been toward that end. The point is simply this: the mitzvot may not originate with the Divine, but they are *keys* to the Divine. They are not essentially utilitarian. They don't fight germs or trichinosis or cancer. They are means to mindfulness; means to building sacred community. They are "good" for individuals, only in that they help us as individuals to build a group identity based on the radically ethical; what our tradition calls *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*, the realignment of the universe in which divinity pervades everything. Irradiates everything. Everywhere. All the time.

And now to the subject of Shabbat. I want to bring up Shabbat because tonight *is* Shabbat, and because on Yom Kippur the laws of Shabbat apply no matter what day it falls, rather than the more lenient rules of a Yom Tov. So I felt Shabbat to be beckoning. Let's go there.

Now, it has become rather faddish to tout Shabbat as the great ritual of "unplugging." Once again, it's cool to be Jewish. The Jews do Shabbat. Shabbat

is about unplugging. We're all so plugged in that we don't give our brains a rest from the bombardment of information and contact and demand and stimulus, 24/7. Everywhere. All the time. The antidote, according to a spate of new books and articles, is Shabbat, whether you're Jewish or not. If one would only observe the basic rules of the Jewish Sabbath – walking instead of riding, staying off of the TV and computer and Blackberry, lighting the candles and dining on chicken and challah and kugel – one could restore one's senses, find emotional balance, achieve inner peace.

And I'm all for restoring my senses, balancing my emotions, and achieving personal inner peace. And to tell you the truth, my personal Shabbos is a *m'chayeh*. It's pretty traditional. Lots of big meals, lots of walking instead of riding, lots of naps and schmoozing, lots of absence of electronic sights and sounds. And for us, it has worked very well over the course of raising three kids to adulthood. But this argument sounds to me like pork and trichinosis. In other words, there's a connection, but it's not *the* connection.

Here's my main thesis: If you want to know why we have Shabbat, and why we need to observe Shabbat in some form or fashion, you need to look at Yom Kippur. Not at candles and kugel and Kiddush, but at the great white fast itself. Because Shabbat is a weekly mini-version of Yom Kippur. Shabbat is, to borrow a phrase from computer lingo, a "soft re-boot." Yom Kippur is a "hard re-boot."

And what are we re-booting? Nothing less than our essential, raw humanity. Our elemental stuff. Our *tzelem elohim*. Our drive to do what is right and good and just, and to turn away from what is wrong and bad and unjust, *everywhere and all the time*.

Our clue lies in the Torah's name for this day. Only later did we call this the "day of atonement," Yom Hakippurim. Our Torah reading tomorrow morning calls it *Shabbat Shabbaton*. It's hard to translate it. I personally think it means "the inner Shabbat. The essential Shabbat. The root Shabbat." *Shabbat Shabbaton*.

If Shabbat makes us feel better, *mah tov*. Good and lovely. Good and lovely if it relaxes us. If it's fun. If it's interesting. Refreshing. Pleasant. Aesthetically uplifting. All good and lovely. But we should not do Shabbat because it's like the flavor of the month, or the new place to travel to, or the latest diet or charitable cause. We should do it for the same reason we need to do Yom Kippur. Namely, if we don't do it, we'll be dead. Not physically dead, but *humanly* dead. All the rituals – the fasting on Yom Kippur, the feasting on Shabbat; the atoning on Yom Kippur, the rejoicing on Shabbat; the gathering in great numbers on Yom Kippur, the gathering in not-so-small numbers on Shabbat – all of these must lead not only to pleasure and self-satisfaction but also and *mainly* to what Kaplan called “salvation,” what Heschel and others called “redemption.” What I'm calling “radical ethicalism.”

People who need to write a quick speech about Shabbat go right to the shelf and pull down Heschel's *The Sabbath*. But they misunderstand it and therefore misuse it. When Heschel talks about Shabbat as a “cathedral in time” or a “palace in time,” he most definitely does not mean “time out” or “time off.” *Adaraba*. On the contrary. He is talking about space collapsing into time so as to render time

ultimately precious and meaningful; ultimately compelling and demanding. His Shabbat goal for us is to make us aware that time is hurtling us through life, and that we must get to the task of facing the challenge that life poses to us *now*. Time is always *now*. Therefore the time to become fully ethical is *now*. There is no “time out” or “time off” for ethics. For Heschel, a Sabbath observer who does not dive into the political fray and speak out for justice has totally missed the point of the Sabbath (and also the point of his book).

Here are Heschel’s own magnificent words:

“It must always be remembered that the Sabbath is not an occasion for diversion or frivolity; not a day to shoot fireworks or to turn somersaults, but an opportunity to mend our tattered lives; to collect rather than to dissipate time. Labor without dignity is the cause of misery; rest without spirit the source of depravity...To observe the Sabbath is to celebrate the coronation of a day in the spiritual wonderland of time, the air of which we inhale when we ‘call it a delight.’”

Put another way, ethics is a 24/7 proposition, a decision-making process that never stops for moral human beings. Shabbat, because it suspends the practical tasks of our lives like making a living and getting from place to place, confronts us with questions we might otherwise learn to drown out: What is right? What is just? What is wrong? What is sinful?

Likewise, Yom Kippur suspends time, as it were, to let us look carefully at our moral selves, and finally to our moral communities. In that way, Yom Kippur resets our regular weekly Shabbat practice, and Shabbat resets our even more regular daily practice: the practice of becoming ever more ethical. Thus, root or radical ethicalism.

Here is Kaplan:

“...we dare not permit life to sink to such a level of mere preoccupation with the problem of survival. The Sabbath, with its insistence upon interrupting the routine of our daily business and concerning ourselves with spiritual values, helps to save us from such a fate.”

When Kaplan says “spiritual values” he means moral values. He means finding the “Godly” in the give and take of daily life.

Notice that neither Kaplan nor Heschel spends any time writing about the rules, customs, practices, procedures, prohibitions, songs, liturgies, or recipes of Shabbat. Why? I think it is because they are not writing “guides to observance.” They’re writing, perhaps, for people who already observe, but who in observing have not made the leap from observance to meaning; from doing to mindfulness; from practice to ethics; from technique to transformation. From kugel to caring.

Tomorrow in the afternoon Torah reading we will hear Leviticus exhort us to respect our parents *and* to keep the Sabbath; to use just weights and measures *and* to keep the Sabbath; to leave the corner of the field and to integrate the stranger and to remove stumbling blocks from the path of the blind *and* to keep the Sabbath. To keep going back to Shabbat – and to Shabbat Shabbaton, to Yom Kippur – to keep resetting our ethical compass, our *collective* ethical compass.

That's why we in this holy moral community spend Yom Kippur in a tent, outside, connected to nature and to the neighborhood. That's why we built our Shabbat davening room with windows, so that we would continually confront the outside world, and not just to get a pretty view. The neighborhood we live in has America's richest people, and they're getting richer. Likewise our neighborhood has unprecedented unemployment and despair, and that despair is getting worse. In so many ways our prosperity could help us solve the problem, but in so many ways it makes it worse. We need Shabbat to help us look out the window and notice the pain.

We don't need Shabbat or Yom Kippur to help us get *unplugged*. We need them to get us *more* plugged in. More conscious of the way we work and earn and spend and play; more plugged in to the cries of the earth itself, and the cries of all the creatures who live on it. More plugged in to the call of conscience.

To the call of the *Atika Kadisha*, The One More Ancient Than All Time and Space, the One who uses Shabbat and Shabbat Shabbaton to ask us the question asked long ago to our primordial ancestor: *ayekah? Where are you?* And the One who gives us this magnificent holy day on which to teach ourselves the answer.

Everywhere, every day, and all the time.