

The Millie Arbesfeld
Midreshet Yom Rishon

Sunday Morning Learning Program for Women

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*Heighening Our
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The learning this morning is sponsored by Michelle and Daniel Berman in memory of Michelle's father, Erwin (Motyu) Eisenberg Z"L, marking his 2nd yartzeit on Erev Yom Kippur.



Dr. Rivkah Blau
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Bring Back the Sabbath, By Judith Shulevitz

(NY Times Magazine: March 2, 2003)

Sandor Ferenczi, a disciple of Freud's, once identified a disorder he called Sunday neurosis. Every Sunday (or, in the case of a Jewish patient, every Saturday), the Sunday neurotic developed a headache or a stomachache or an attack of depression. After ruling out purely physiological causes, including the rich food served at Sunday dinners, Ferenczi figured out what was bothering his patients. They were suffering from the Sabbath.

On that weekly holiday observed by all "present-day civilized humanity" (Ferenczi was writing in 1919, when Sunday was still sacred, even in Budapest, his very cosmopolitan hometown), not only did drudgery give way to festivity, family gatherings and occasionally worship, but the machinery of self-censorship shut down, too, stilling the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach. The Sunday neurotic, rather than enjoying his respite, became distraught; he feared that impulses repressed only with great effort might be unleashed. He induced pain or mental anguish to pre-empt the feeling of being out of control.

About a decade ago I developed a full-blown weekend disorder of my own. Perhaps because I am Jewish, it came on Friday nights. My mood would darken until, by Saturday afternoon, I'd be unresponsive and morose. My normal routine, which involved brunch with friends and swapping tales of misadventure in the relentless quest for romance and professional success, made me feel impossibly restless. I started spending Saturdays by myself. After a while I got lonely and did something that, as a teenager profoundly put off by her religious education, I could never have imagined wanting to do. I began dropping in on a nearby synagogue.

It was a small building in Brooklyn, self-consciously built nearly a century ago to look European; it had once served as a set in an inadvertently hilarious movie in which Melanie Griffith plays a police officer who goes undercover in a Hasidic community. I sat in the back of this Disneyfied sanctuary and discovered that 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.

It was only much later, after I joined the synagogue and changed my life in a million other unforeseen ways, that I developed a theory about my condition. If Ferenczi's patients had suffered from the Sabbath, I was suffering from the lack thereof. In the Darwinian world of the New York 20-something, everything -- even socializing, reading or exercising -- felt like work or the pursuit of work by other means. Had I been able to consult Ferenczi, I believe he would have told me that I was experiencing the painful inklings of sanity. For in the 84

years since Ferenczi identified his syndrome, which bears a striking resemblance to what is now called workaholism, it has become the norm, and the Sabbath, the one day in seven dedicated to rest by divine command, has become the holiday Americans are most likely never to take.

It can be startling to realize just how integral the Sabbath once was to American time. When we tell our children stories about the first pilgrims landing on our shores, we talk rather vaguely about their quest for religious freedom. We leave out that this freedom was needed in large part so that the Puritans could obey the Fourth Commandment -- "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" -- with a zealotry that had deeply alienated their countrymen back home. We all have heard of the Puritan "blue laws," named, supposedly, for the color of paper they were printed on. They required attendance at church but punished anyone who got there with unseemly haste or on too showy a horse. They forbade unnecessary visiting, except in emergencies, and smoking and sports. Unlike Orthodox Jews, who though strict about the Sabbath are nonetheless encouraged to drink and have marital sex on Friday night, the ascetic Puritans frowned on any kind of drinking or sex on Sunday. In at least one documented instance, the "lewd and unseemly behavior" of kissing your wife on your doorstep upon returning home from a journey of three years was punished by a spell in the stocks. From sunset Saturday to sunset Sunday, the most pious Sabbatarians (usually clergymen) wouldn't shave, have their rooms swept or beds made or allow food to be prepared or dishes washed. They ate only what had been cooked in advance and devoted all time not spent in church to reading Scripture.

Even after Puritanism lost its hold on American culture, the American Sunday was observed with unusual strictness. In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville observed with some surprise that few Americans were "permitted to go on a hunt, to dance or even to play an instrument on Sunday." As recently as 125 years ago, you would have been hard pressed to find a museum or library open on Sunday. Eighty years ago, football was considered too vulgar to be played on Sunday. Oldsters remember standing in line at the bank on Fridays to get cash for the weekend; youngsters assume they can withdraw at will. Anyone older than 30 can remember living with the expectation that most stores would be closed on Sunday; the expectation now is that they will be open, and we're miffed when they aren't.

"The Lonely Days Were Sundays" is the title of a book about growing up Jewish in the churchgoing South. The lonely Sunday has been replaced by the overscheduled Sunday -- soccer Sunday, Little League Sunday, yoga-

class Sunday, catch-up-around-the-house Sunday. Americans still go to church, of course, but only in between chores, sporting events and shopping expeditions. (You can now find A.T.M. machines inside megachurches; congregants don't have to waste a minute between services and the mall.)

The eclipse of the Sabbath is just one small part of the larger erosion of social time, with its former generally agreed-upon rhythms of labor and repose. "After hours" has become a strictly personal concept, since the 24-hour convenience store, gas station, pharmacy, supermarket, movie theater, diner, factory and bar all allow us to work, shop, dine and be entertained at any time of day or night. We greet each shift of an activity from weekday to evening or weekend as proof of American cultural superiority; we knock over the barriers between us and the perpetual motion machine that is the marketplace with the glee you might expect of insomniacs who had been chained for too long to their beds.

The lingering traces of Sabbatarianism seem comically vestigial, like the fetal tail: the New York blue law that won't let you buy beer till after noon on Sunday; Broadway stages that go dark on Sunday nights; work rules requiring us to show up at our offices Monday through Friday, even though many of us do our best work at night or on weekends (and, as you know if you've seen the movie "Office Space," putting in face time at the office is often a cover for doing less).

Customs exist because they answer a need; when they disappear, that need must be met in some other way. There is ample evidence that our relationship to work is out of whack. Economists, psychologists and sociologists have charted our ballooning work hours; the increase in time devoted to competitive shopping; the commercialization of leisure that turns fun into work and requires military-scale budgeting and logistics and emotionally draining interactions with service personnel. Personally, I think the alarm about these matters is often overblown. Most people, with the possible exception of parents of 13-year-olds, have the wherewithal to avoid the mall if they want to, and anyone who seeks to relax in a theme park or on a packaged tour deserves what he gets. So I won't weary you with cautionary tales about what our work-addicted culture can do to you, psychologically and physiologically, because, for one thing, it's completely within your power to hold it at bay, and for another, you don't want to anyway. Ours is a society that pegs status to overachievement; we can't help admiring workaholics. Let me argue, instead, on behalf of an institution that has kept workaholism in reasonable check for thousands of years.

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.

Take the Puritan Sunday. It would be excruciating to us, and yet the restrictions were not pointless. They made of the day something rare and otherworldly, a realization of the Puritan vision of a city on the hill. "Sweet to the Pilgrims and to their descendants was the hush of their calm Saturday night and their still, tranquil Sabbath," wrote the 19th-century historian Alice Morse Earle, who shared with more famous authors, like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, a qualified nostalgia for the preindustrial Sabbath. "No work, no play, no idle strolling was known; no sign of human life or motion was seen except the necessary care of the patient cattle and other dumb beasts, the orderly and quiet going to and from the meeting, and at the nooning, a visit to the churchyard to stand by the side of the silent dead." Anyone who has experienced the eerie serenity of the ultra-Orthodox sections of Jerusalem or Brooklyn on Saturdays would be in a position to conjure a Puritan Sunday.

Americans, of course, no longer cherish obedience as a virtue. We have become individualists, even libertarians. We will no longer put up with being told how to dispose of our free time. But our unwillingness to suffer constraint shouldn't blind us to the possibility that Sabbath discipline may have real benefits. For one thing, it reflects a paradoxical insight: 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.

So counterintuitive is the idea of organized nonproductivity, given the force and universality of the human urge to make things, that you can't believe anyone ever managed to lift his head from his workbench or plow long enough to think of it. To the first-century Stoic philosopher Seneca, the Sabbath was absurd, a way for Rome's backward Jewish subjects to waste "almost a seventh of their life in inactivity." But when (or if), perhaps a millennium earlier, the Jews took over an old Mesopotamian day of taboo and transformed it into one of holy rest, they brought into the world not just the Sabbath but something just as precious, and

surprisingly closely linked. They invented the idea of social equality.

The Israelite Sabbath institutionalized an astonishing, hitherto undreamed-of notion: that every single creature has the right to rest, not just the rich and the privileged. Covered under the Fourth Commandment are women, slaves, strangers and, improbably, animals. The verse in Deuteronomy that elaborates on this aspect of the Sabbath repeats, twice, that slaves were not to work, as if to drive home what must have been very hard to understand in the ancient world. The Jews were meant to perceive the Sabbath not only as a way to honor God but also as the central vehicle of their liberation theology, a weekly reminder of their escape from their servitude in Egypt.

In other words, we have the Sabbath to thank for labor legislation and for our belief that it is wrong for employers to drive their employees until they drop from exhaustion. So what do we do, today, with this remarkable heritage, which in the last century expanded to a generous two days, rather than just one? Much more than our ancestors could ever have imagined, and much, much less. We relax on the run and, in rare bursts of free time, we recreate. We choose from a dizzying array of leisure options and pursue them with an exemplary degree of professionalism and perfectionism. We rush our children from activity to activity, their days a blur of tight connections.

And yet there are important ways in which even our impressive recreational creativity fails to reproduce the benefits of the Sabbath. Few elective activities will ever rise to a status higher than work in our minds, and therefore cannot be relied upon to counterbalance our neurotic drive to achieve. Most of us will jettison plans to go skiing if a deadline looms near. We will assign a high priority to a non-work-related hobby only if we have committed to it in some public manner, as we do when we join a volleyball team or a choir. (Oddly, one of the few times a parent can truly relax is when lingering on the sidelines of a child's baseball or soccer game; there is nothing like being forced to be somewhere and do very little for an hour and a half to declench the muscles of the mind.)

And not even our group leisure activities can do for us what Sabbath rituals could once be counted on to do. Religious rituals do not exist simply to promote togetherness. They're theater. They are designed to convey to us a certain story about who we are without our even quite noticing that they are doing so. (One defining feature of religious rituals, in fact, is that we often perform them for years before we come to understand what they mean; this is why ministers and rabbis are famously unsympathetic when congregants complain that worship services or holiday rites feel meaningless.) The story told by the Sabbath is that of

creation: we rest because God rested on the seventh day. What leads from God to humankind is the notion of *imitatio Dei*: the imitation of God. In other words, we rest in order to honor the divine in us, to remind ourselves that there is more to us than just what we do during the week.

Talk of God may disturb the secular, so they might prefer to frame the Sabbath in the more neutral context of aesthetics. The Sabbath provides two things essential to anyone who wishes to lift himself out of the banality of mercantile culture: time to contemplate and distance from everyday demands. The Sabbath is to the week what the line break is to poetic language. It is the silence that forces you to return to what came before to find its meaning.

After joining that synagogue in Brooklyn, I began to incorporate into my life the most elemental rudiments of a traditional Jewish Sabbath: lighting the candles and eating at home on Friday night; going to religious services on Saturday morning; sleeping or reading or going to a museum in the afternoon. Orthodox Jews will scoff when they read of my subminimal level of observance; my secular friends think I've become a fanatic. Sticking to these few rituals, however, is the hardest and least unconscious thing I've ever done. I fail to keep the Sabbath more than I succeed, probably because I started trying to do it not as a result of some redemptive revelation, such as might occur to a character in a Russian novel, but experimentally, out of curiosity, and in a social vacuum -- by myself, rather than in a group or family setting. I didn't know how else to attain the self-possession that eluded me, the sense of owing nothing to anybody except perhaps God. The conventional weekend felt claustrophobic. Silent, solitary contemplation was not sustainable. The ceremonies performed by my ancestors for the past two millenniums had at least the virtue of having been previously tested and found to be effective.

Do I think everyone else should observe a Sabbath? I believe it would be good for them, and even better for me, since the more widespread the ritual, the more likely I am to observe it. It is much easier to keep the Sabbath, for instance, when your family does, too, though getting children to agree to do anything their friends don't do may prove insurmountable. (The greatest benefit of this may be that it makes a habit of unstructured family intimacy, without which parents must resort to so-called quality time, which tends to leave everyone feeling self-conscious.)

For hundreds of years it was firmly believed that only a Sabbath enforced through social legislation would keep society from sliding into a kind of unwitting slavery, protecting the vulnerable from the powerful and quashing the punitive obsessive-compulsive who lurks within us all. One of the bitterest public policy debates in

19th-century America, in fact, was over whether offering postal service and opening public institutions on Sundays would harm our national character and lead directly to barbarism.

If the Sabbath you choose to observe isn't a religious one, you should nonetheless be religiously disciplined in your approach to it, observing it every week, not just when it's convenient. I confess, though, that I have a hard time imagining a Sabbath divorced from religion: who would make the effort to honor the godly part of himself if he didn't believe in a deity, no matter how ecumenical? It's just as difficult to envision the Sabbath surviving the current speeding-up of everything without some generally enforced slowdown. The great religions lasted as long as they did because they were able to make their rituals part of everyone's life.

But social legislation mandating Sunday (or Saturday) closings is no longer viable. Besides, it seems arrogant to tell someone what keeping the Sabbath would do for him, because it's impossible to know how a ritual will affect a person until he has performed it. "Holy days, rituals, liturgies -- all are like musical notations which, in

themselves, cannot convey the nuances and textures of live performance," the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has written.

Whenever I dream of living in a society with a greater respect for its Sabbatarian past -- a fantasy I entertain only with anxiety, since Sabbatarians have a long history of going too far -- I think of something two rabbis said. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, best known for his tales of the golem, pointed out that the story of Creation was written in such a way that each day, each new creation, is seen as a step toward a completion that occurred on the Sabbath. What was Creation's climactic culmination? The act of stopping. Why should God have considered it so important to stop? Rabbi Elijah of Vilna put it this way: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so. The implication is clear. We could let the world wind us up and set us to marching, like mechanical dolls that go and go until they fall over, because they don't have a mechanism that allows them to pause. But that would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.

The Mission of Orthodoxy, concisely stated: To live a life in constant awareness of the God Who took the Jews out of Egypt, gave the Torah at Sinai, and promised to reward and punish successes and failures at observing that. Central foci of those Torah observances are, again, looking to serve God at every turn, denying or rejecting all temptations to act in ways other than for the service of God ... and building families, communities, and a nation that shares those ideals.

(From Rabbi Gidon Rothstein's blog on "The Mission of Orthodoxy")