

Stealing A Day Out Of Life To Live

We are assailed by the constant obsession with communication through ubiquitous screen devices

The late Oliver Sacks, famed professor of neurology and best-selling author recently wrote these emotional words for The New York Times days before he died, reflecting on the Shabbat of his childhood:

"The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering...

His words reminded me of those of Justice Louis Brandeis, one of the most celebrated judges in American history, who wrote many decades before:

"In the home of my parents, there was no Jewish Sabbath, nor in my own home. But I recall vividly the joy and awe with which my uncle, Lewis Dembitz welcomed the arrival of the day and the piety with which he observed it. I remember the extra delicacies, lighting of candles, prayers over a cup of wine, and quaint chants, and Uncle Lewis poring over the books most of the day. I remember more particularly an elusive something about him which was spoken of as Sabbath Peace? and which later brought to my mind a passage from Addison in which he speaks of ?stealing a day out of life to live.?"

Sacks and Brandeis were both profoundly drawn to the ?peace of the Sabbath?. For Sacks it is ?a stopped world, a time outside time? and Brandeis turns to the words of the great seventeenth-century British poet, Joseph Addison, who spoke of ?stealing a day out of life to live?.

Brandeis goes on to complain about the restrictions of Shabbat, the fact that there are certain activities that Jewish law prohibits on the day ? we don?t write, work, cook, garden, drive cars, use the phone, turn on lights, activate electrical appliances, amongst other things.

It is important to understand the philosophy behind these restrictions ? rather than impeding our enjoyment of the day, they actually create the magic and inspiration of the Shabbat experience, what Sacks calls a ?stopped world? and a ?time outside of time.?"

To understand this idea, let?s go back to that inspiring phrase Brandeis used to describe Shabbat of, ?stealing a day out of life to live?. What does it mean to live? Living is really about connecting ? connecting to our family, friends and community, connecting to G-d, and ultimately connecting to ourselves. We know from personal experience that there is no joy in life comparable to the joy of connection.

And yet, because there is so much that we do, day in and day out, in order to get by ? to survive and to achieve in this world ? that in the end we spend so little time actively connecting. The pace of modern life, and the tasks and responsibilities that consume our lives morning until evening, are an intrusion; they distract us and prevent us from really connecting with our family and friends, with G-d, and with ourselves. Shabbat is a day on which we are not overwhelmed with operational and functional matters; it is a day dedicated to living.

But why do we need so many rigid rules for a day of connection? Duke University Professor of Psychology and Behavioural Economics, Dan Ariely, explains it best:

?Shabbat isn?t just about relaxing. It?s also about keeping a list of rules and restrictions - things that make the day different from all others. Rules offer relief, because somebody else (in this case, God) is doing the driving, and you can doze off in the passenger seat. Shabbat isn?t just about relaxing, it?s about keeping a list of rules and restrictions - things that make the day different from all

others? When we have to make lots of decisions with no rules to guide us, nothing is automatic and we have to invest some energy in every one of those decisions. All of those decisions sap our moral energy, making us more likely to yield to temptation. But when we have rules ? particularly strict rules ? we don't have to make the same number of decisions, and we are left with much more moral energy... The rules link us to other people, to some other larger purpose, or to a deep belief.?

So here is the exquisite irony. The restrictions of Shabbat are actually liberating. It is the things we can't do on Shabbat which free us to do the things we can. Take, for example, the restriction on driving. It may seem as if it infringes on our ability to move around. But actually it frees us ? to walk together as family and friends, really connecting and talking in peace and tranquillity, side-by-side, instead of talking into the speaker-phone of a car as we negotiate traffic. The restriction on cell phones and computers is another example. We are assailed by the constant obsession with communication through ubiquitous screen devices. Shabbat frees us from these devices, so that we actually have the space to really connect with one another, face-to-face, without interruption or interference.

Modern life has fragmented; we are constantly pulled in different directions by distractions, demands and onerous responsibilities that pile up with increasing speed. We seldom get the chance to be truly present. In a world of distraction and disconnection, Shabbat enters to offers us that chance to connect, to revisit, reinvigorate and reinvest in our most important relationships. And so, in an unexpected twist, at this point of the greatest technological and civilizational development in history, it turns out that we moderns need the ancient Biblical institution of Shabbat more than ever.

Shabbat grants the gift of a profound tranquillity and a truly refreshing break that can only come from a non-negotiable day off. Professor Ariely points out that most stress in life comes from mental stress ? buckling under a list of ?to do's?; knowing that right now, we could be doing this, or ought to be doing that. But on Shabbat we have the freedom and peace of mind that comes with knowing all our work is done. The Torah says: ?six days you shall labour and complete all of your work? and the seventh is a Shabbat to the L-rd your G-d.? What is meant by ?complete all your work?? Who can finish all their work? And in six days! The Talmud says that on Shabbat we feel as if all our work is done. Once a week, when Shabbat comes in, we really can feel as if all our work is done, because, on Shabbat, work is not even an option. And because of that, we have to step back and let go. There is a real sense of peace and tranquillity in accepting that all our work that can be done, has been done.

And from inner peace we find purpose and meaning. The cacophony of life recedes so that we can actually discern our true purpose in the world.

As Sacks reflects:

"?And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life ? achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest."

And so, G-d created the Shabbat and made it an integral part of the fabric of the world. He created one day a week when the noise fades. He stopped creating and so do we. The world goes quite. And once the noise and distraction dissipate ? the hidden, spiritual, miraculous reality of the world emerges for us all.