

Shabbat Unplugged: A Day for Rest, Relationships, Renewal and To Reboot

Someone who likes to talk during High Holiday services once said to me rather sheepishly, “I guess rabbi that from where you sit on the bima you can see everything people do out in the congregation during services.” This is true not only in the sanctuary, but in my life as your rabbi for almost four decades. What do I see this year as I watch your lives unfold before me? I see more than ever, whatever your age, you are more rushed, pushed, and stressed than ever before. I see you weary from years of deep economic recession working harder and longer than ever. I see children younger and younger, worn out from constant activity and the pressure to do well in school to get into a good college. I see all of us more stressed and time pressured from the incredible increase in traffic in our community and commuting over the hill. I see not only stress and exhaustion but enormous distraction and absorption of your attention in electronic screens-laptops, tablets and smart phones. The average child spends 7.5 hours a day front of a screen and adults and teens check their smart phones, on average, every 3 minutes. Between our frazzling multitasking work and our absorption in our electronics, research reports we are less and less happy with our work, our families, and our personal lives.

Obviously, we have to continue to multi task and work hard to keep our jobs, use the advantages of technology and drive on our increasingly congested roads. But today is a day to pause and think about what changes **are doable** and will make us happier and more satisfied with our lives in the coming New Year. Therefore I’m going to share with you today something very valuable from Jewish tradition that is quite easily started. A great deal of research shows that doing it will result in greater happiness and life satisfaction. It is my version of something from a Jewish organization, Reboot.org called **the Shabbat Manifesto. It calls for Shabbat Unplugged: A new kind of Shabbat for Rest, Relaxation, Rejuvenation, and To Reboot.** This new kind of Shabbat includes ten small changes, any of which can lead to a lot more life satisfaction. First, I’m going to succinctly share my version of them. I want you to just let the **idea of each** sink into your mind. Then I’ll share two or three easy contemporary ways we might practice each one. Finally, as I go through them, I’m going to touch on a bit of the research that explains why they might really work. For starters, forget everything about Shabbat you know that makes you want to stop listening right now. Next simply listen and open your mind to each element that could be a pathway for you to a happier year. Here are the ten, any one of which you might try a bit during the 52 Shabbaths of the coming New Year:

- 1. Set some boundaries around your work**
- 2. Withdraw from absorption in technology**
- 3. Connect personally with family & friends**
- 4. Avoid Shopping**

- 5. Savor tasty nourishing food
- 6. Restore your soul through Gratitude, Joy and Play
- 7. Get out into Nature
- 8. Bask in the light of wisdom
- 9. Find Silence and Self Reflection
- And 10. Embrace community

- In the Ten Commandments we read that the Shabbat is a remembrance of our going out of Egypt. What does this mean? It means that we can be enslaved in every age not only by political forces, but also by social norms and technologies. So each Shabbat we are bidden to remember that we are free human beings. We can pause and reflect and become aware of what things and patterns of life we have created, that **enslave and control us instead of us controlling them**. Certainly, the way we have come to develop work in the 21st century is a major source of unhappiness today. The Sabbath was the first social revolution in history to put a boundary around work. It gave every person no matter what their economic or social standing and every animal, a day of rest from labor. Today, work is more and more 24/7. Doctors answer emails into the night. Sales people have to work 24/7 because brick and mortar stores have to compete with the always open stores on the internet. All this makes our work not only constant multitasking but also ceaseless without boundaries. Even in retirement today we can be overbooked everyday of the week.
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- The Torah says that work itself can be an enhancement of human life. **But we are not just human doers. We are human beings**. So God models Shabbat for us, putting boundaries around work and ceaseless doing. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that on Shabbat, we create a special “Palace in Time.” Once we’ve put boundaries around work and over scheduling, what are the best things to do in this palace in time?
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- The first thing we discover when we cease working, is that we are not only enslaved by work but by absorption in our electronics, smart phones and computers. Day and night, our experience is more and more reduced to some kind of screen time. Our absorption cuts us off from full experience of our own rich human experiences. Our attention is constantly divided between our screens and the people in our lives. Our relationships with loved ones and friends tend to grow more distant as we have less and less real face time with them. More and more adults and youth prefer communication through email and texting which requires so much less presence and so much less effort. But what do we say in the most important blessing we have? “May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” Not, “May God email or text you.” We know that the real presence of the human face and voice and touch all activate the neural pathways of the brain that generate the feel good and bonding neuro-chemicals of serotonin and oxytocin. One fascinating study asked people to rate their conversations. Half the subjects had nothing on the table next to them. Half the subjects were allowed to have their turned

off cell phones sitting on the table next to them. The subjects with the cell phone on the table turned off, overwhelmingly rated their conversations less caring, less satisfying and more superficial. So we can see why second in the Shabbat Manifesto is Unplugging from absorption in electronic devices and media. This is not easy in a world where we have gotten used to the benefits of being electronically connected. Reboot suggests tested successful experience with creating a Shabbat box. Before lighting the Shabbat candles, you put your smart phone and tablets and remote controls all in the box. When you put your physical electronics in your Shabbat box, you write down and put in your Shabbat box a list of worries for work and chores you won't attend to until Shabbat, or the period of it you observe, is over. Then whether staying at home Friday night or going out for dinner, we are to gather family and or friends around a Shabbat table for face to face real conversation and relationship deepening rituals. One simple way to do this is to recapture the Shabbat tradition of blessing of children and each other. Baruch, blessing comes from the Hebrew word to praise. If you have a child, place your hands on his or her head or shoulders and give them warm words of praise and a hug or kiss. With other adults, be they mates or friends, go around the table and share some things you love, admire or value about each other. You can seal these blessings with a hug or a kiss. Soon you'll find important relationships more satisfyingly deepened and strengthened.

Which leads us to Shabbat Manifesto practice #3: Avoid Shopping. This is the piece of the traditional ban on commerce that is so wise today. One of the things we are enslaved to is the belief that owning more will make us happier. Rabbinic commentaries affirm that in Judaism having nice things is one of life's legitimate pleasures. But research shows that possessions are only a limited part of what makes us happy. The brain chemical activated most by shopping is Dopamin, a pleasure producing neurochemical. What has been recently discovered is that it is released to give us pleasure for seeking something, not attaining it. Since the pleasure is released for the seeking and buying, not the owning, it explains why the pleasure of new purchases soon wears off. Shopping also stimulates the flow of cortisol a stress inducing neuro-chemical. So shopping for fun or the household actually pumps up our stress level. Putting a boundary around shopping for some or all of Shabbat shifts us from the not so lasting good feeling of shopping to making time for parts of life that produce lasting and deep satisfaction. Also, shifting our household shopping to other days, means we reduce the pumping of stress neurochemicals into our blood stream, helping us to make our palace in time a real day of deeper/greater rest and relaxation.

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- What else shall we nurture in our palace in time that does produce deep and lasting happiness? This leads us to #4 on our list for Shabbat Unplugged, "Savoring tasty healthy food." During the week, we eat on the run. But on Shabbat, we carve out time and energy to eat more slowly, to dine, to savor the rich taste, look and smell of our food. We make it a point to eat things that are nourishing and we especially like. The Challah, a special bread is the symbol on the table to remind us to savor our food on

Shabbat. These days we may not have time to cook a great Shabbat meal. But there is so much good take out, that with a little bit of planning, we can have friends over, bring things to the homes of others to share, or get special things our family members may request. So let the blessing over the Shabbat Challah remind you to eat with the tasty blessing of savoring your meal.

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- Enhanced happiness comes not only from savoring our food but also savoring the week's positive experiences. This takes us to activity number 5 in our Shabbat palace in time: Restore your soul through Gratitude, Playfulness, and Joy . For Friday evening and if possible throughout the Shabbat, we shift to an attitude of gratitude. The sweet wine or grape juice of the Kiddush is a ritual meant to cue us to consciously recall blessings in our lives. Before the Kiddush have each person, adult or child, share something good or sweet that occurred in their life during the past week. You may remember that I've shared in the past, Positive Psychology research demonstrating that one of the key elements of being happy is not how much you have, but how grateful you are. In shifting from shopping and thinking about what we don't have to taking the time to really recall what we feel blessed to have and to speak it out loud, cultivates lasting feelings of happiness and joy. Play is equally deeply satisfying. You may want to make Friday night, a family games night. Or you might want to invite people on a picnic or over for tasty sweets and conversation Saturday afternoon, traditionally known as Seduat Shelishit. You may want to exercise or read a book just for fun. The traditional mitzvah of a Sabbath nap, or making love on the Sabbath are also ways to put fun and joy as well as gratitude into replenishing our bodies and souls on a Shabbat Unplugged.
- Which takes us to #7, Go out into nature. The Ten Commandments also say that Shabbat is a remembrance of the joy of creation; zachar le maaseh v'reshit. That is, we remember how enriching the soul is by getting out and in touch with the beauty and grandeur of nature, God's creation. One experiment of just showing people pictures of nature elicited feelings of calm, relaxation, restfulness, awe, inspiration, restoration of energy and connection to God or the universe. How much more so do we experience these feelings of calm, relaxation, restoration, and inspiration when we are actually out in Nature. On Shabbat time carved out of working, screen time and shopping can be a time to garden, take a walk or hike, sit out in your yard, go to the beach, or picnic in one of our wonderful parks. Even only a half hour or hour in nature on Shabbat can be deeply restorative of body and soul.
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- Which takes us to #8 Find Silence and Self-Reflection. Certainly one of the things that we can experience in nature away from electronics and media is the restful and restorative calm of silence. Quiet full awareness is often called mindfulness. Daniel Siegel who is head of the study of Interpersonal Neural Biology at U.C.L.A. has demonstrated that even brief regular mindful awareness of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, attitudes, insights and relationships leads over time to a natural and predictable feeling being more whole. Shalom also comes from the same root as

Shelemut, wholeness. Erica Brown, one of the leading writers on human fulfillment talks about whole heartedness. With so much screen time in a day we are distracted from our distractedness by distractions. It's hard to find the time time to think deeply about the one's we care about or get in touch with our real needs. A half hour a week on Shabbat of silence and self reflection of mindfulness and experiencing all the aspects of our experience, can give us Shabbat Shalom, a feeling Shlemut, of feeling deeply whole rather than pieces of parceled out self. Thinking about our minds brings us to Shabbat prescription #9, "Basking in the Light of Wisdom." One of the results of silence and mindful self- reflection is that we gain wisdom about ourselves, our lives and about people in them. Of course reading, studying and discussing the Torah portion of the week is one of Judaism's best old and new ideas about the regular cultivation of wisdom. An easy way to acquire some Torah wisdom on Shabbat is to receive and print out to read on Shabbat, my weekly emailing of Ten Minutes of Torah. There are so many good books on living happier and healthier lives in print today. Wisdom is a deeper more lasting kind of knowledge that uplifts us and makes us feel more connected to what is timeless as it guides in increased ways of happiness and holiness.

Which leads us to #10 in our inviting choices for our Shabbat palace in time--connecting with community. Coming to the synagogue on Shabbat helps us connect with a community that includes the joy of learning wisdom with others. It exercises our brains and our hearts, as we bond with others in the process of discussion and the search for wisdom. Being part of a community that is worshiping also gives us a feeling of bonding, inspiration, and the happiness that comes from connection to others and to a shared faith or culture. Pride in this heritage generates lasting feelings of worth and connection to something valuable beyond ourselves and even our own lifetime. The great neurologist Oliver Sacks died just a couple of weeks ago. In the last year of his death, he wrote essays about what comforted, strengthened and uplifted him during his life and his dying days. Just before his death, he wrote an essay entitled. Sabbath. He reflected on how the memories the richness of Shabbat in his home and community as a child, the traditions the connections with people during Sabbath meals and afternoon social visits, all gave him a sense of calm and connection, as he moved towards his death. These are the last words of that essay that appeared in the New York Times. "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." You don't even know how much your life will be enriched by choosing to embrace during the Sabbaths of this

new year for even part of Shabbat, just one or a few of these ten portals to greater happiness and life satisfaction.

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- In the Shofar service towards the end of today's service we will all read that Rosh Hashanah is the Birthday of the World. As I move towards becoming your Emeritus Rabbi, I'd like to leave with you a very special birthday present that I hope you'll open on Shabbat again and again. To help you, I have the present also of a magnet you can pick up on the way out today, that lists all 10. Now it's yours, a present to help you experience the richness of being more fully present: A Shabbat Unplugged to Rest, Relax, Renew and Reboot. Leshana tova, may you have a happy and rejuvenating New Year. Amen