

**Rosh Hashanah Evening 5774**  
**Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim**  
**Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander**

**SHABBAT: REST FROM OUR STRESS**

This evening we welcome in the New Year, 5774 - we clean the slate and begin anew. But in order to do so, we first need to reflect on 5773 and take some time to consider the year that's been.

For some, there have been major life transitions since we gathered for the last High Holy Days - a new job, the start of a new school, or the beginning of retirement. Perhaps you've made a big move - to a new home, a new part of the city, or from a different part of the country entirely ("from off" as we say down here). In fact, perhaps this is your very first Rosh Hashanah at KKBE, in which case, Welcome! - and please know how thrilled we are to have you as part of our congregational family.

For some, this past year has had its share of medical challenges - maybe more than its fair share. Some will recite *Birkat ha-Gomeil* tomorrow morning, giving thanks for coming through a difficult and scary time. Others continue to seek strength and comfort in our prayers for healing. The year has been, as the prayer book says, a journey "from weakness to strength or strength to weakness; ... from health to sickness and, back, we pray to health [and wholeness] again."

Some in our congregation have welcomed new souls into their families in the past year - new children and grandchildren, new spouses and in-laws. And some have had to say difficult goodbyes to family members and friends. While they will always carry the memories of their loved ones with them in their hearts and souls, they are still coming to grips with their physical absence, still wanting to see their smiling faces or pick up the phone to hear their voices.

As a congregation, we have certainly experienced both - the loss of near and dear members of our synagogue community, and the joy of new arrivals, including those new to Judaism itself who both joined and strengthened the Jewish people with their conversion in the past year.

And, of course, there's all that has happened on the national and global stage in the past year, as well. Several months ago, we watched the Israeli national elections with special interest; considered the significance and impact of the first coalition government in recent memory formed without ultra-religious parties. We celebrated in June as our own Supreme Court rendered its historic decision on same-sex marriage and opened the door for the recognition and celebration of *all* marriages, hopefully and eventually, throughout our country. And locally, here in Charleston, we took pride in the growth of the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, and rejoiced that the presence and power of some 1500 people who turned out on a dreary rainy night in April made such a profound and tangible difference. As a result of that evening and follow up throughout the summer, 300 new early childhood spots have been added in local schools to help ensure that all entering Kindergarteners are ready to read; and a task force of clergy and law enforcement officials has been formed - the first time all local law enforcement agencies have

ever sat down together to address a common issue - to develop a plan to reduce juvenile detention and help our youth get back on the *right* track, rather than traveling further down the *wrong* one.

Yet, with all that's happened in 5773, and all that remains to be seen in 5774, what might be most notable is how *quickly* another year seemed to go by ... and how poorly too many of us seemed to handle it.

According to an American Psychological Association study released earlier this year, 70% of Americans report that they experience physical and non-physical symptoms of stress. We become irritable, angry and depressed; we overeat, skip meals, lie awake at night; we suffer from headaches, stomachaches, and any number of chronic conditions; we get overwhelmed and fatigued. We may not feel all of these ways all of the time - certainly I hope that we don't! - but 80% of us report that our stress levels have stayed the same or increased in the past year. And here's what's most telling: Nearly everyone in the report - no matter their gender, no matter their location, no matter their age - say "they experience stress at levels higher than they believe is healthy", and that experience is what matters most.<sup>1</sup>

Between 60 and 90 percent of all visits to doctors' offices are currently believed to be stress-related. Most of us worry far too much, about far too many things, to the detriment of our bodies and health.<sup>2</sup> And in 2012, we left an average of 9.2 unused vacation days on the table. Even when given the chance to get away, we feel too weighed down, too burdened to do it. No matter what we do, by its very definition, a day only has 24 hours. Yet a German sociologist who conducted a time-diary study in twelve countries, found that "the more industrialized the country, the more likely a person was to crowd more activities into the same twenty-four hours."<sup>3</sup> He called this "time-deepening", but author Judith Shulevitz says "'time-stretching' may be a better term ... because stuffing life with more things and distractions makes time feel shallower, not deeper."

So tonight I'd like to share with you three techniques for slowing things down and managing our stress. They're nothing new - in fact they're very old, deriving from the laws of the Sabbath: Judaism's first and greatest gift to humanity. Yet never have we needed Shabbat more than now - a day of rest, a day of peace, a day of being.

Reform Jews have rarely taken a serious look at traditional Shabbat observance, including its numerous prohibited categories of "work" on Shabbat. The fact is they often strike us as unnecessarily restrictive and extensive - exactly the kind of thing that prompted us to reform in the first place. As Shulevitz says, "The Sabbath seems designed to make life as inconvenient as possible. ... It seems a child's idea, really, of life before civilization."

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<sup>1</sup> [www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2012/full-report.pdf](http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2012/full-report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Easing the Burden of Stress," Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

<sup>3</sup> *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*, Judith Shulevitz

Consider the prohibition against **building**, which has been extended to forbid even "the opening of an umbrella ... since it affords the same protection from the elements as a tent."<sup>4</sup> Or the prohibition against **dyeing**, "changing the color of any object or substance," like hair or wool, which has even come to prohibit the use of lipstick or eyeshadow on Shabbat (unless it can be applied before Shabbat begins and more-or-less guaranteed to last for 24 hours). Or here's my favorite: The prohibition against **selecting**, separating unwanted objects or portions from other objects or portions that are desired. As the Orthodox Union describes it: "This includes separating unwanted portions of food by hand." So if, for example, you're eating berries or grapes, you can't pick out the bad ones before eating the good ones - it's all or nothing. And this category also forbids picking bones out of a fish, which is one of the reasons why we eat Gefilte fish on Shabbat, since it doesn't have any bones. Who knew?

So, yes, there is much that may strike us as outdated or excessive in the traditional Sabbath observance. Yet, if we look a little deeper, we see that embedded in this ancient gift of Shabbat are the seeds of strategies to help us cope with the hustle and stress that fills so many parts of our lives today. So here are the aspects of Shabbat observance I would recommend to you tonight; setting aside one day each week when we cease doing these three things.

The first actually derives from one of the categories I just mentioned, that of **selecting**. According to the same Orthodox body that forbids separating berries and fish bones on Shabbat, "the spirit of this category also forbids all [types] of sorting and filing activities". So imagine... a whole day free of busy work!

Rabbi Alexander Schindler, *alav ha-shalom*, once told the story that when Rabbi Plaut - the same Rabbi Plaut who edited the Torah commentaries we keep outside our sanctuary doors, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut who was a giant among giants in our Reform movement - when Rabbi Plaut arrived at his new post in St. Paul, MN, he wanted to get things straight right off the bat. He took great pride in his sermons and approached them with exceeding care and attention. So, everyday it was his custom to set aside time - rising early in the morning and isolating himself in a private room in the temple library - to work on them. If a congregant would call during this time, he instructed his secretary to respond by saying: "I'm sorry, Rabbi Plaut cannot come to the phone right now. He's thinking."

Well, congregants were furious! They wanted access to their rabbi and he was off thinking?? So Rabbi Plaut gave his secretary new instructions. When a call came she was to say instead: "I'm sorry, Rabbi Plaut cannot come to the phone right now. He's *busy*." And everyone was pleased to know their rabbi was busy. But why - Rabbi Plaut asked, and Rabbi Schindler after him - why is it so inconceivable that one could be busy thinking?

In fact, we need a day to do just that - no sorting, no calendaring; no packing or unpacking. Read - but don't highlight or take notes. Write - but record the answers prompted by the questions on your mind and heart, not forms and worksheets. There has to be one day a week when we don't need an excuse to be with our own thoughts, but are instead free to follow them wherever they may take us for as long as it may take to get there.

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<sup>4</sup> ou.org

So for one day every week, follow the Sabbath rule - no busy work.

The second category of work from which we all need a regular break is **carrying**. "This is one of the few categories of work ... actually mentioned in the Torah; the very first type of work ... prohibited [on Shabbat]." But how does carrying lead to stress today? I am indebted to Linda Bergman for sharing the following:

A young lady confidently walked across the room with a raised glass of water while leading and explaining stress management to an audience. Everyone knew she was going to ask the ultimate, but predictable, question: "Half empty or half full?" But she fooled them all.

"How heavy is this glass of water?" she inquired with a smile. "8 ounces," someone called out. "20 ounces," said another.

"The absolute weight doesn't matter," she replied. "What matters is how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute that's not a problem. But if I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. And if I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case its weight is the same, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes.

"And that's the way it is with stress," she continued. "If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burdens become increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on. As with the glass of water, you have to put it down for a while and rest before holding it again. When we're refreshed, we can carry on with the burden."

Ask any of our Past Presidents who hold a Torah scroll on Kol Nidre how much the weight of something increases the longer we hold it. We need breaks from the mental and spiritual burdens we carry just as much. Think about the anxieties and worries you carry... How often do you dwell and ruminate on them? How long have they weighed upon your heart? It's not only okay to take a break - it's necessary! If we lay our burdens down for a day and step away, we can always pick them up the next day, but *they* will feel lighter, *we* will be stronger, and there's a good chance we'll carry them forward with fresh perspective.

So no carrying, no busywork - and here's the third Shabbat prohibition we would do well to implement once a week: No **finishing**. Let me explain.

A friend of mine recently posted a link on Facebook. While I rarely read the numerous essays and articles posted there, for some reason I read this one - and when I did it stopped me in my tracks.

"When you're living a distracted life," the author wrote, "every minute must be accounted for. You feel like you must be checking something off the list, staring at a screen, or rushing off to the next destination. And no matter how many ways you divide your time and attention, no matter how many duties you try and multi-task, there's never enough time in a day to ever catch up.

"That was my life for two frantic years. ... [Then], six years ago I was blessed with a laid-back, carefree, stop-and-smell-the-roses type of child.

"When I needed to be out the door, she was taking her sweet time picking out a purse and a glittery crown.

"When I needed to be somewhere five minutes ago, she insisted on buckling her stuffed animal into a car seat.

"When I needed to grab a quick lunch at Subway, she'd stop to speak to the elderly woman who looked like her grandma.

"When I had thirty minutes to get in a run, she wanted me to stop the stroller and pet every dog we passed.

"When I had a full agenda that started at 6 a.m., she asked to crack the eggs and stir them ever so gently.

"My carefree child was a gift to my Type A, task-driven nature - but I didn't see it. ... When you live life distracted, you have tunnel vision - only looking ahead to what's next on the agenda. And anything that cannot be checked off the list is a waste of time. ... Consequently, the two words I most commonly spoke to my little lover of life were [these]: 'Hurry up.'

"I started my sentences with it.

"Hurry up, we're gonna be late.

"I ended sentences with it.

"We're going to miss everything if you don't hurry up.

"I started my day with it.

"Hurry up and eat your breakfast.

"Hurry up and get dressed.

"[And] I ended my day with it.

"Hurry up and brush your teeth.

"Hurry up and get in bed.

"And although the words 'hurry up' did little [or] nothing to increase my child's speed, I said them anyway. Maybe even more than the words, 'I love you.'

"Then one fateful day, things changed. We'd just picked my older daughter up from kindergarten and were getting out of the car. Not going fast enough for her liking, my older daughter said to her little sister, 'You are so slow.' And when she crossed her arms and let out an exasperated sigh, I saw myself - and it was a gut-wrenching sight.

"I was a bully who pushed and pressured and hurried a small child who simply wanted to enjoy life. My eyes were opened; I saw with clarity the damage my hurried existence was doing to both of my children. Although my voice trembled, I looked into my small child's eyes and said, 'I am so sorry I have been making your hurry. I love that you take your time, and I want to be more like you.' ... I finally realized, [my daughter] was a gift to my frenzied soul. ... Pausing to delight in the simple joys of everyday life is the only way to truly live."

Six days of the week we are rewarded for how much we can finish in a day, an afternoon, an hour - but what if, on the seventh day, the tables were turned? What if we were rewarded for how long we could take to enjoy something, and those rewards were the unquantifiable gifts of moving more leisurely, breathing more deeply, and appreciating so much more around us?

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This was the wisdom and vision of our ancient tradition: One day each week with no finishing, no carrying, no selecting or other busy work. This was, and is, the gift of Shabbat. It might be easy to dismiss it out of hand, for how could an *ancient* observance help us handle the stress of our *modern* lives? Yet isn't that precisely what this time of year is about? Why else do we gather together in 2013 for the start of 5774 - a year calculated by an ancient calendar and marked with the Shofar's ancient sound? Our hearts must know there is wisdom in that which has been passed down through the ages... and our souls must yearn for it.

This year may we find the strength and resolve to reclaim our timeless heritage and experience the gift of Shabbat. And may our doing so help to ensure that 5774 is indeed a good, sweet and *healthy* year for us all. Amen.