

Shabbat and the Power of the “Regular” and “Routine”
Parashat Behar

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אַתְּשִׁבֶּתֵתִי תִשְׁמְרוּ וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה :

You shall keep My Sabbaths, and venerate My Sanctuary, Mine, the Lord's.

Leviticus 26:2

It is the middle of a school year, and suddenly, unexpectedly, a teacher must step down. The quickly-found replacement enters the class, with the task of getting to know her new students as quickly as possible. The curriculum tells her it is time for a book report, and she faces a choice. She can let the students choose any book they want to read, and she can learn about her students from the choices that they make. Or she can assign the entire class the same book, and let the differences lift off of the pages, personalities emerge out of different interpretations... of the very same text.

We live in a time and place which appreciates the new, the exciting, which assigns value based on that which is rare. “Uniformity” and “regularity” are boring in comparison, almost dirty words in a world which places a premium on the novel, and the individual.

But the very last words of Parashat Behar, coming as they do after an entire chapter about cycles of time, the sabbatical and jubilee years, serve as a reminder that the power of Shabbat comes not from its novelty, but precisely from its frequency, its familiarity.

Indeed, if Shabbat is measured against the standard of the “latest and greatest,” the chic and trendy, it will fail every time. In competition against a movie, well, the movie will make a better impression; against a play the theater will be better drama. In comparison to a concert, the

performance might have better music. And against something you have not done before, if it is “new-ness” rather than re-newal that you are looking for, Shabbat will always seem second-best.

But the power of Shabbat comes in precisely the opposite way we usually function. It builds up, it seeps in, it works its magic not with flash and excitement but with repetition, regularity, routine. Like learning deep lessons about each individual only when watching them separately react to a single subject, subtlety, understanding and power emerge out of sameness. We unwind into the embrace of Shabbat only in the face of the familiar, the comforting, the sense of falling into a rhythm and a pattern.

It’s not an easy message, nor one that fits in well with contemporary lifestyles. Often, we choose to light candles, to raise a cup in blessing, to break bread with family, to go to services only on special occasions, when there are invited guests or added reasons or particular programs that pull us in. But there are plenty of programming options in our lives. Shabbat will not work as a “program.” It is only when “kept,” when held close and treasured well and part of the usual and expected rhythm of our week... that we can awaken to its wonders.

Shabbat is the gift that keeps on giving, our unique contribution to the world, a way of regularly resetting and restoring and renewing our lives. And what a concept: that the very gift that is the most valuable... is the one that visits... the most frequently.

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