

A rabbi and a soap-maker once went for a walk together. The soap-maker said to the rabbi: “What good is Judaism? After thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth, justice, and peace, after all the study of Torah, and all the fine ideals of the Prophets, look at all the trouble and misery in the world! If Judaism is so wonderful and true, why should all this be so?”

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking, in silence, until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was filthy with soot and grime. “Look at that child,” said the rabbi. “You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, that child is still filthy. I wonder if soap is of any use at all.”

The soap-maker protested and said, “But, Rabbi, soap can’t do any good unless it is used!”

“Exactly!” cried the rabbi. “So it is with Judaism. It isn’t effective unless it is applied in daily life and used!”¹

We are all guilty of not applying and using Judaism in our daily lives – none of us is perfect in it – not even your clergy. During High Holy Days, we hear the word *teshuvah* a lot. In many cases, it means repentance, but the root of the word is שׁוּב or, return. In this case, it is really about returning to who we are. Judaism is not like a dirty child using soap that with a few scrubs and some rinses the child is clean. Instead, Judaism has to be constantly explored.

In my History of Reform Judaism class for our 9th grade students, I ask them to define Reform Judaism. The most common answers are “light Judaism” or “Judaism where we don’t have to follow the rules” or Reform Judaism is not as “Jewish” or as “strict” as other streams of Judaism. So many of us have fallen into the trap of using Reform Judaism as an excuse to not learn, stay in our bubble, and/or to only engage during the High Holy Days. This is all incorrect. Reform Judaism is Judaism that looks at the historical, biblical, rabbinical, cultural, ritual pieces of Judaism and connects them to the modern world. We don’t follow all of the laws of Judaism, not because we are lazy or are not interested, but because we are supposed to learn the foundations of Judaism and make decisions about how we will apply them to our lives in 2023. And yet, many use Reform Judaism as an excuse to not even learn the background to discover why we do or do not do something. This goes beyond what the Torah or the rabbis have said. It is about what is in your heart, what Sarah Hurwitz, author of *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – In Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*, refers to as our need to “find that beating heart.”²

That is not always the easiest thing to do. Because, as Sarah Hurwitz said “...learning about Judaism as an adult is no small task. In addition to being a family, Judaism... has its own languages, history, customs, religions, holidays, and laws.... Consequently, the source material about Judaism is mind-bogglingly vast—millions of pages written over thousands of years, much of it in Hebrew and other languages many of us don’t understand.”³ It doesn’t mean that we can

¹ <https://templejudah.org/2022/05/26/rabbi-june-2022-column/>

² Hurwitz, Sarah. *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – In Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*. New York: Random House, 2019. p. xxx.

³ Ibid. p. xxix.

sit back and not take action for our beating heart and connection to Judaism. Instead, we are here, returning to the basics *teshuvah* – a way to return to ourselves as Reform Jews.

In my 9 years at Temple Beth-El, I have accompanied about 130 people on their Jewish journey as they converted to Judaism. These people – of all ages – have come to Judaism for all different reasons – some have discovered Jewish roots in their genealogy research, some have always been fascinated by Judaism, some have not felt welcomed into the religious and spiritual community they were raised in, some have come to learn about Judaism and decided to become Jewish, some have been married to or engaged to someone Jewish and have chosen *for themselves* to become Jewish, and a million other reasons and combinations. It is not the simple idea of someone converting to marry someone Jewish – a stereotype that is no longer accurate. Regardless, these people have come to Temple Beth-El to delve into Judaism and explore with a fascination that is inspiring. In one of my text studies with this group of people, I explain that even if they weren't born Jewish or have carried Jewish traditions for generations, they are still considered by the rabbis to have been at Sinai in a spiritual sense. These students of Judaism are experiencing what Rabbi Nathan calls a “change in sacred frequency” – the opportunity they are taking advantage of to explore religion in a new way and discover what it could mean for them. It is said that we are not supposed to tell anyone that they have converted because once a person is Jewish, they are Jewish. In more modern times, we have been using the phrase “Jews-by-choice”. However, I truly believe that all of us are Jews by choice in the sense that we each choose how we show up as Jews each and every day. I agree with Sarah Hurwitz when she says “At a time when all Jews are Jews by choice, we have to believe that Judaism is worth choosing.”⁴

How can we make that choice? In Sarah Hurwitz's book, she opens up with an amusing story about leaving one Hebrew school and pleading to her parents to let her to go a different one, but even that new Hebrew school was boring, unmotivating, uninspirational, and unexciting, so she and her family stopped going to Hebrew school and then stopped going altogether. This story is not a new one and is probably pretty relatable for many people who grew up in Jewish households who attended Hebrew school.

And, yet, even if you don't have children or grandchildren in our Temple's religious school, it is critical to understand what is happening under this dome. Our religious school now consists of over 160 students, and we have a waitlist for Pre-K and our Kindergarten to 2nd grade classrooms. In recent years, our program has gone from being called religious school to “Beit Midrash” or a House of Study. A Beit Midrash is a place of in-depth learning which is rooted in community and dialogue learning from one another. This is what we strive for here. From kindergarten to 7th grade, our students are given a course guide to choose which classes they are interested in throughout the school year – 3 choices per trimester. They have the elements we have always wanted to cover – Jewish holidays, Jewish lifecycles, Torah, prayer, Israel, ethics, etc., but this time, we let the students have ownership. Definitely not the religious school I grew up attending where we learned the same things over and over again each year.

Cantor Kohn and I – along with Ellen Barshop, our Director of Congregational Learning – are re-envisioning t'filah, services. Our 3rd-6th grade students who are in person on Wednesdays for Hebrew school will continue to have a half hour of t'filah, but it is an in-depth look into the

⁴ Ibid. p. xxxi

prayers and their meanings – allowing them to share their individual connections or disconnections – conversations about God, each prayer, what is prayer, etc. On Sundays, the same students will be able to put what they have learned on Wednesdays into action with a service and some special explorations. This is just the tip of the iceberg for our students.

For our 8th-10th grade students, we meet on Wednesday evenings where they join together for dinner, then go to their respective classes. We close up the evening with an elective or a special presentation. Getting our learning goals accomplished is important, but being part of a community and sharing the beauty of being Jewish is paramount to our teen engagement. I have loved watching them make connections with others and be able to explore their Judaism as “adults”. This variety in learning and exploration of Judaism extends to our adults as well. How do we come back – return, תשובה – to Judaism – to take advantage of not only what we have at Temple, but what we have in Judaism? Let’s go back to the roots.

Many refer to us as the “chosen people”, which is not my favorite. We are a difficult and complicated people – I mean, just look at how much complaining happens in the Torah! And, while God may have chosen us to build a covenant with, it is not one-directional. It is a back-and-forth covenant where we work with God and we hold each other accountable. If we were just beholden to God in the sense that God chose us and dictated to us, then wouldn’t Abraham or Moses or Miriam or any of the people who stood up to God be decimated? Wouldn’t our covenant have been destroyed a million times over? Instead, we are to work with God to make the world a better place. Sarah Hurwitz explains “A better name for us would be “the choosing people”—the people who chose to accept a particular covenant with the Divine, and who must continue choosing, in each new generation, to honor it.”⁵

So how can we honor it and be a choosing people? It must be on an individual basis. So, how can each one of us be a choosing person? There are a million different answers and I’m not here to tell you what to do. Instead, I’ll share with you where I am.

This shouldn’t be a surprise to you, but I am busy every Shabbat. I am here with the Temple Beth-El family greeting, schmoozing, leading services, engaging in words of Torah and prayer, singing, sometimes dancing, clapping, and recognizing the role Shabbat plays in our world.

However, I’m missing one big thing. Shabbat with my family – with Dave, and our boys, Trevor and Joshua. I have found myself saying, “I’m not worried about it. They are rabbi’s kids and will learn all of the things they need to throughout the years.” But, I’m not satisfied with that anymore. We’ve been engaged in all of the families with young children programming – the Family Friendly Shabbat morning services, the Tot Havdalahs, the Sunday Fundays, the Friday Freezes and Summer of Shalom programs, and, for Trevor, Beit Midrash. But, still, I’m missing the opportunity to make Shabbat special with them on Friday evenings. If they come to Temple, I am ushering them speedily into babysitting so I can get myself ready for services. If I have a babysitter at home, I am rushing back and forth in traffic – stressed about timing, not thinking about Shabbat coming. If they are at home with Dave, then I am missing Shabbat with the three of them – even when Dave has them call to say Shabbat Shalom on the phone after daycare and school pick up.

⁵ Ibid. p. 25.

I have been thinking about this a lot lately. This summer, I got to celebrate the magic of Shabbat with Trevor and Josh at Greene Family Camp, our movement's summer camp in Texas. It was so special to show them the Shabbat procession of all of the kids and staff in white, singing Shabbat songs. To show them how everyone joins together in the blessings in the dining hall – lighting shabbat candles together. To engage in the Shabbat shira chaos of a multi-generational song session with dance moves and belted out choruses. They missed Shabbat services – it was past their bedtime – and so missed the lifting of the tallit over the heads of the campers by the staff as they are blessed. And, yet, the way they were able to experience Shabbat at camp, is what I want for them each week. How do I make that happen?

Dave and I talked about it, and I shared with him something I heard from a colleague, who I regretfully cannot remember, that they blessed their children with their spouse every week. No matter where they were – even if not together – they would call and get everyone on the phone. They told me that even now that their children are adults, the kids still call to be blessed by their parents for Shabbat. I remember this conversation, even though I had it years ago. It keeps coming back to me.

Dave and I decided that this is what we want to do with our boys. We introduced it for this first time this past weekend since I was off for Shabbat. We did the traditional blessing of sons and children with a personal added blessing from each of us. It was a wonderful beginning, but will also be a work in progress as we try to institute this tradition weekly. From January through March, when I am on my much needed and much appreciated sabbatical, maybe our Shabbat practice will be more intentional with full Shabbat blessings, but, for now, marking Shabbat with my family with a special blessing is a good start.

This conversation of how to make Shabbat relevant has been happening for a long time. In 2007, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the then President of the Union for Reform Judaism, gave a speech at the Biennial entitled “Reform Jews need more Shabbat”. In this sermon, he explained, that we need

...to think through what Shabbat observance means for a Reform Jew. For most of us, ...it will not mean the Shabbat of eighteenth-century Europe; it will not mean an endless list of Shabbat prohibitions.... It will mean instead approaching Shabbat with the creativity that has always distinguished Reform Judaism. It will mean emphasizing the “Thou shalt” of Shabbat—candles and Kiddush, rest and study, prayer and community—rather than the “Thou shalt not.” It will mean expanding our understanding of rest, and defining in new ways what is, and is not, work. It will mean providing Reform Jews with the support of a loving community so that they can feel commanded without feeling coerced.⁶

So look around, here is your loving community. How can we connect to Shabbat in a way that is meaningful to us? Does “rest” mean taking an hour during the 25 hours of Shabbat to be screen free? Does it mean time to read? Does it mean time to get together with friends or play a game with family? I don't know what it means for you, and I am still trying to figure out what it means for me and my family in a world where we are all constantly being pulled in different directions.

⁶ <https://eric-yoffie.com/reform-jews-need-more-shabbat/>

Get Back to Where You Once Belonged
Rabbi Yergin – High Holy Days 5784

So now, using the words of the Beatles, we need to “get back, get back, get back to where you once belonged.”⁷ Where do we belong in Judaism? How can we use תשובה as a way to return to ourselves – our roots, our culture, our history, our religion, our Judaism? How can we look at Shabbat not as something we *have* to do, but something we *get* to do? How can we learn more about what is going on under our dome and participate? How can we learn more about the variety of backgrounds of people here and strive to get to know who they are in a deeper way? How can we engage with Judaism in a way that challenges us?

I hope that this year we will each explore what this could look like and how we want to engage with Judaism in a more meaningful, spiritual, in-depth way.

May we all find a way to return to ourselves as Reform Jews who are proud of who we are and how we connect to Judaism.

Shana tovah.

⁷ <https://thebeatles.com/get-back>