

Aspiring to Shabbat: A New Book For Shabbat

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I think Shabbat is an aspiration. I think Shabbat is also a brilliant, healing, gracious gift from our tradition.

But for most modern Jews, Shabbat is also not a given. They/we "aspire" to the possibility of a day set aside. They/we pretty much know what the world might feel like if we could enter the "gates of Shabbat," but it somehow doesn't quite happen as much as we might wish it to be so.

All this is why I've taken a journey over the last few years to update a book about Shabbat which I created back in 1991. The revised book, which is called Gates of Shabbat, was published this summer.

To be honest, when I was first asked if I wanted to revisit the 1991 Shabbat book, I wasn't sure what else I wanted to say about Shabbat that wasn't already in the existing text.

Then I began to think and I realized that, although Shabbat remains Shabbat, the world around Shabbat has changed substantially in these last 25 years. A changed world has to inspire new ways to engage the seventh day, and that is what emerged as Gates of Shabbat, Version 2016.

Here are a few of the developments that I responded to as I developed the new book.

First, I noted that technology has transformed our lives in ways we couldn't have anticipated years ago. If we were "busy" in 1991, we are busier still today. We are plugged in 24/7. We are bombarded with news and connections to the world that have a life of their own. Is it for good or is it all for bad?

As a Reform rabbi, I'm not willing to issue a blanket NO against all technology on the seventh day. Instead of that, I propose that we Jews need to be "intentional" about technology. We need to proceed creatively and carefully. Next to this article you can see how Gates of Shabbat proposes a way to maintain Shabbat alongside our electronic world.

Here's a related development. As a result of the Internet, we communicate differently. A new kind of "literature" has developed. People blog. People tell stories. People share first-person narratives about their experience in ways that were not a part of our lives earlier.

The new Gates of Shabbat does the same. I've assembled fourteen original reflections from both laypeople and rabbis. Each small essay offers readers a new and personal way of encountering Shabbat. One mother of young children describes how she posted an invitation for Friday dinner on her Facebook page and suddenly found herself connecting with and hosting friends from all parts of her life for wonderful Friday evenings. She calls her essay - Friday Night Meatballs!

Another writer, who is a law professor, describes how his Shabbat takes shape around Torah Study on Saturday mornings at his synagogue. Torah Study is something he does as an adult. It reminds him that Judaism isn't only for children.

Here are his words, "Torah study is the punctuation that marks the end of my week. It is the centerpiece of my Shabbat. During the week I study law to feed my body; on Shabbat I study Torah to feed my soul."

And, of course, the world has changed insofar as new family constellations have become part of the landscape. The new Gates of Shabbat speaks to those who are married with children, but it also speaks to households without children, to same-sex couples, to singles, and to a new growing population - those who are retired.

Here is a question that just didn't occur to me 25 years ago: What does Shabbat mean for retirees who are more less "free" every day?

Finally, these last 25 years have seen a new dimension of Jewish life emerge. There has come to be renewed interest in classic matters like spirituality and faith. Meditation and mindfulness are part of our new vocabulary. As a result, the new Gates of Shabbat introduces texts from Chasidic literature. Readings from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi are part of the mix.

You can even find several places in the new book entitled, Creating Holy Moments. They are designed to help readers slow down, pause, and really savor the reality of quiet moments. Next to these words, I'm including one such "meditation" that can be used before blessing the wine.

All in all, Gates of Shabbat 2016 brings something refreshing and important to the search for Shabbat. The book is based on my perspective as a Reform Rabbi. I explore Jewish tradition. What does halacha (our legal tradition) tell us about Shabbat. I also explore how halacha intersects with our modern lives. How can we find Shabbat and let it enrich our lives today?

Most of all, I hope the new Gates of Shabbat introduces and renews connections for Jews of all kinds with the seventh day.

Personally, I love the book because, among its many offerings, I continue to be moved by two very brief poems that capture my sense of Shabbat's magic.

A Day

*There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.
Wendell Berry*

Stillness

*Imagine not that life is all doing.
Stillness, too, is life;
And in that stillness t
The mind cluttered with busyness quiets,
The heart racing to win rests,
And we hear the whispered truth of God.
Rami Shapiro*

Gates of Shabbat contains a series of Questions (and Answers) covering all aspects of Shabbat for the Reform Jew. Here are two samples...

I'm retired. What can Shabbat mean for me when I am more or less "free" every day?

Yes, you are in a way "free." If you no longer work to make a living, you no longer have to follow a business schedule. Even with family and volunteer commitments, week days are probably more open than they ever were. Your lifestyle is more relaxed.

But Shabbat isn't only meant for busy workers who need a day off. Thus even if retirement allows you to feel less stressed when Friday evening arrives, Shabbat can "work" for you because it brings you something that other days don't. Shabbat connects you to Jewish ceremonies and Jewish history. It's about roots and heritage. Light candles and Shabbat introduces beauty and a

sense of the sacred around your dinner table. In a world where we often spend more time in front of a computer screen than we wish, Shabbat can bring you out of your home and into the community. Attend a synagogue service. Breathe in the serenity of that sacred space. Exercise your mind in a group conversation about the Torah portion. Spend time with other people.

You might consider Shabbat as the day for thinking about why your other days matter. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote extensively about Shabbat, taught that Shabbat is a day, “To turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

I’m not a religious person. How can I relate to Shabbat?

Shabbat belongs to all Jews. For some people, the focus may be on ritual. Blessings welcome Shabbat on Friday. Services both Friday evening and Saturday morning are meaningful and important.

Others, like you, may feel differently. You may wonder about your belief in God. The language and customs surrounding prayer may be unfamiliar. That doesn’t mean, however, that Shabbat can’t be part of your life. In fact, if you want to take back your time, Shabbat is the perfect vehicle for doing so.

On a broadly spiritual level, on a cultural level, think of Shabbat as your Jewish resource for renewal. Draw on the ceremonies that do speak to you. Look further into this guide for creative ways in which Shabbat might help you step away from your weekday routines. You will find readings of all different kinds later in this guide that may offer you language for who you really are as a Jew.

Since there isn’t only one Shabbat, you are most welcome to find a way to make a Shabbat that is really yours. (By the way, it’s not inconceivable that some of the religious language which now seems opaque to you will in time become meaningful.)