

Temple Israel
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Taking Time to Rest

The Midwest and North Atlantic regions this past week have experienced quite a white out. Our capital's steps have become a sled run just in time for this evening's Olympic opening ceremonies. New York City, the city that never sleeps, has become the city that cannot get out. Even here in Memphis, the accumulation of six inches on Monday and snow showers expected tonight could blanket our city through the weekend.

While snow can be, for adults and children alike, fun to watch fall and to play in, a snow covered "day off," can actually add to our stresses. We might become claustrophobic from being limited to inside play. We might become frustrated because we are not actively doing something. Or if we lose a workday, we might worry about overcoming the work that will pile up from the lost day.

No matter what the anxiety, even when forced to cozy up inside with a cup of hot cocoa, many of us still find it difficult and counterproductive to rest.

The idea of finding time to relax, as many of us know, is not foreign Judaism. Our biblical narrative from last week reminds us to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy for six days we shall work tirelessly and on the seventh we should strike from work."¹

Our fore-bearers, in our Torah portion this week, receive the law from Moses, who reads it aloud to the people. And they said, "*Kol had'varim asher di-ber adonai na-aseh*" -- "All that God has spoken we will faithfully do!"²

¹ Exodus 20:8-11

² Exodus 24:7

This acceptance by our ancestors of the resting on Shabbat was so vital to our rabbis that only in saving a life can a Jew disregard this obligation. It is the foundation for which we come together this and every Shabbat. Shabbat services were designed to provide Jews a controlled environment for us to take an extended break. Yet, sometimes while our intentions to rest either on Shabbat or each day are sincere, actually carving out the necessary time to relax proves to be much more complex.

Theoretically, most of us are aware of the physical and emotional benefits one gains by taking it easy. We know with moments of rest, we can become more motivated and grounded. Some lucky ones might even realize the power of relaxation following a vacation spent away from home. Or as Stephen Sauer commented on Facebook, “Watching Duke's of Hazard reruns [,which] worked in law school to relax me since I could laugh without any thought process whatsoever. Definitely helped rest a tired mind.”

Whatever we find offers us relaxation, we feel refreshed, contented, and reenergized afterwards. Yet, this euphoric feeling is predominately attributed to the spot we just sojourned or to the characters on television rather than the state of mind that we created in that moment. However, practically and sadly, many confuse “rest” with unproductive and even worse a code word for “lazy.”

Rest, of course is nothing of the sort, but rather becomes the conscious decision and recognition that doing nothing is not only acceptable, but most importantly, holy. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the 20th centuries foremost Jewish thinkers, expressed this idea as creating a “cathedral of time” rather than a “cathedral of space.” He expressed this more fully by stating “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.”³ For Heschel, and so too for us, when productivity becomes our lone barometer of self, we not only lose sight of the importance of rest, but also lose control of life. So, like Shabbat, let the snow remind us to rest, do nothing, and enjoy!

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1952, p. 3.