

What Shabbos Means to Me



I am only 36 years old, but I have already experienced three very different relationships with Shabbos. In many ways, my own development can be traced through the evolving nature of my relationship with Shabbos: The Shabbos of my childhood, the Shabbos of my twenties, and my Shabbos as a husband and father.

My Childhood Shabbos

The Shabbos of my childhood, as I wrote about in an essay for *Tablet Magazine*, was magical:

As a child, the day was magical. "There is a realm of time," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

mused in the opening page of his seminal work, *The Sabbath*, “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 accord.” His poetic style gave lyrics to the palace in time I watched my parents and grandparents construct each week. Adding to the mysticism was my grandfather, the rabbi, who would dress up in his Shabbos suit and sit at the dining room table, just waiting for the holy day to begin.

The magic of my childhood Shabbos was a product of Shabbos being made for me. Shabbos felt like an elaborate magic trick; I was a participant and my parents and grandparents were the magicians. From the crowd, I would watch them conceal the week and pull out, like a rabbit, a day of rest, friendship, and basketball games in the backyard of my close friend Yoni (though we never were allowed to change into basketball clothes). I didn’t have any hand in this magic trick—I didn’t shop, I didn’t cook, I didn’t even set the table. My mother would sometimes crawl into Shabbos exhausted—she didn’t get much help from my brother or me and my sisters had mostly ready moved out. My one job—not fighting with my brother—I also managed to ignore. Friday nights, as my brother and I chased each other around the table, would sometimes be punctuated with shouts from my tired mother, “you are ruining my Shabbos!” But I didn’t understand what she meant. How could Shabbos be ruined? When you have no hand in the preparations, the magic of Shabbos seems effortless. Soon enough, as the chaos of young adulthood descended in my twenties, I discovered what it meant to ruin Shabbos.

My Twenties

It’s hard to know exactly what year it happened, but at some point after leaving the yeshiva I was studying in Baltimore, I discovered what it meant to ruin Shabbos. The magic was beginning to dim. I still didn’t shop, I still didn’t cook, I still didn’t set the table—so without a parent making it for me, Shabbos no longer amazed. I never adjusted to Shabbos in my older single years. I didn’t like having to arrange meals, I didn’t like the singles scene outside of shul, and I didn’t like being a guest at other people’s homes for Shabbos. I couldn’t find a place where Shabbos felt like home and there is nothing quite as lonely as being homesick in your own home.

My relationship with Shabbos reminded me of this dialogue from the movie *Garden State*:

Andrew Largeman: You know that point in your life when you realize the house you grew up in isn’t really your home anymore? All of a sudden even though you have some place where you put your [stuff], that idea of home is gone.

Sam: I still feel at home in my house.

Andrew Largeman: You’ll see one day when you move out it just sort of happens one day and it’s gone. You feel like you can never get it back. It’s like you feel homesick for a place that doesn’t even exist. Maybe it’s like this rite of passage, you know. You won’t ever have this feeling again until you create a new idea of home for yourself, you know, for your kids, for the family you start, it’s like a cycle or something. I don’t know, but I miss the idea of it, you know. Maybe that’s all family really is. A group of people that miss the same imaginary place.

Sam: Maybe.

My roommate at the time, Moshe, and I spent a Shabbos from time to time at the home of David Lichtenstein, a well-known real estate investor. He said something to us that we still talk about. In Shabbos *zemiros*, there is a song which describes Shabbos as a *mincha al-machavas* (מנחה על מחבת), loosely translated as a gift offering in a pan. It is a strange description because *mincha* is one of the cheapest offerings. David asked us while surrounded by a gorgeous Shabbos table, so why is Shabbos described as a *mincha* offering? David paused. On the table was Chimay ale, wines, and meats prepared by a personal chef. “It wasn’t always like this,” David explained. Shabbos won’t always be around a nice table with great food and great friends—it wasn’t always for me, admitted David. Instead, like the more austere *mincha* offering, we need to be able to discover the beauty of Shabbos even in times of simplicity and interiority.

Shabbos is a litmus test for how you relate to the quiet of your life.

Moshe and I still talk about a *machavas* Shabbos. A Shabbos that is maybe a little less glamorous, doesn’t feel quite as obviously special, perhaps a little less magical—but that too is Shabbos. I discovered the *machavas* Shabbos in my twenties.

But when you’re accustomed to the Shabbos of your childhood, Shabbos as a single was still an adjustment. I spent some Shabbosim downtown, with friends who grew up with a very different conception of Shabbos. I always stayed true to the structure of Shabbos I grew up with, I tried to at least, but it wasn’t easy. Shabbos didn’t feel the same. I remember, in 2014 I tweeted:

I don’t like the phrase “I broke Shabbos.” My dear, Shabbos is not the one that’s broken.

— D Bash (@DBashIdeas) December 3, 2014

Not everyone liked this. To some it felt accusatory or judgmental. But I was really talking about myself. I was broken, so my Shabbos experience felt broken as well.

In hindsight, this was an important part of my Shabbos experience. Because it taught me how to pick up the pieces and shards of Shabbos and build something on my own.

My Family Shabbos

Shabbos did not change dramatically during my first years of marriage. I was introduced to the intensity of Friday Shabbos preparations, but had not yet discovered the rhythm and beauty of Shabbos as a husband—a Shabbos I had to make on my own. I don’t remember all the details, but I remember one Friday, I was complaining to my wife about Shabbos. Maybe I was upset that something wasn’t ready, maybe I forgot to pick up my Shabbos suit, it doesn’t really matter—I was immature and complaining that Shabbos was not the Shabbos I wanted. My wife responded in a way that changed my relationship with Shabbos and ushered in the latest stage of my relationship with Shabbos. “Stop blaming everyone else for what Shabbos feels like,” she taught me, “Shabbos is what

you make of it.”

And then I discovered how to make Shabbos for myself. The first thing I learned was that making Shabbos is hard. As I wrote:

Still, feeling the love is sometimes easier said than done. The serene Shabbos of my youth, all magic and sanctity, changed drastically once I began a family of my own. As a kid, my parents made Shabbos for me. As an adult, I suddenly had to learn how to make Shabbos for myself. And here's the part Heschel never told me: Making Shabbos is super stressful. If you want to learn the emotional history of a newly married couple, watch what they remind one another on erev Shabbos. Don't forget the hot water urn, pick up the dry cleaning, is the stroller still in the car, buy a fruit platter, set up the hot plate. Every reminder is something someone once forgot. Shabbos didn't feel like entering a palace—it felt like fleeing a war zone.

But in the stress of Friday, I found the beauty of Shabbos:

It's because Shabbos, like anything else truly worth setting apart and sanctifying, requires both toil and transcendence. It's hard work to make it just right, but when you do—and only when you do—you'll be elevated into a world of meaning that exists, in large part, because you paid attention to it and made it special.

Not everyone has a changing, evolving Shabbos experience. For many, it is always a gift. For others, it is always difficult. Personally, I am grateful that my Shabbos experience has changed over time. Shabbos is a litmus test for how you relate to the quiet of your life. Some relationships thrive through moments of silence—others falter in the awkwardness. Shabbos in this way may be a litmus test for modernity itself. It is a lens to consider whether you shape the conveniences that modernity provides or if the conveniences of modernity shape you. Shabbos shows you how to control and regulate those conveniences so that you always remain in control. By ceding control to Shabbos, we gain control of the rest of the week. For more than anything else, Shabbos is a day where we learn to embrace imperfection. We stop trying to conquer the world and learn, instead, how to accept it.

Lecha Dodi Likras Kallah—Shabbos is our bride. Six days a week it's like a long date: making reservations, provide our passive-aggressive feedback to one another to see if we're really compatible for the long term. Shabbos is the wedding. Like a bride under the wedding canopy covered in a veil, we inaugurate Shabbos by stopping to look at what we can change and instead focus on what we should accept. And perhaps therein lies the significance of beginning the tractate with the laws of carrying from one domain to another. Shabbos begins with a reorientation of sorts. We stop looking at where we need to go, what can still be done, and instead our focus turns inward. We cover our eyes to all of life's imperfections and develop our interiority. The palace in time of Shabbos is tedious to build and daunting to enter. But as difficult, discouraging, and imperfect that process may be, once you're inside, it's perfect.