

# Building the World of Shabbos: A Shabbos Guide

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By: Yehuda Fogel

*Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: If only the Jewish people would keep two Shabbatot in accordance with their halakhot, they would be immediately redeemed, as it is stated... Rabbi Yosei said: May my portion be among those who eat three meals on Shabbat. (Shabbat 118b)*

One of the most powerful and enduring lines about the Shabbos, Rabbi Yochanan tells us that if only we would keep two Shabboses, all will be OK. Why two? And why would two Shabboses have such an outsized effect, bringing redemption with it? This becomes the stuff of unceasing philosophical exploration, as Jewish commentators offer differing options for what these elusive two Shabboses are. Is it just two consecutive Shabboses? Some see the two Shabboses as a reference to the potential sanctification of the week, conceptualizing the two Shabboses as keeping the sanctity of the week and the sanctity of the Shabbos together.

But to realize the answer, we turn to our recent guest, Judith Shulevitz. Judith, a highly accomplished journalist and author, points us to a fascinating text in the Talmud, which wonders about when Shabbos should be observed in a vacuum, a void. Should someone somehow lose their sense of time, perhaps through being lost in a desert, when should they keep Shabbos? One perspective posits that they should wait a week and then keep the seventh day. The debating side urges one to start right away and to immediately keep one Shabbos, and then to wait a week before keeping another.

What lays at the heart of this dispute? While there are multivalent possibilities, Judith thinks about the two perspectives with characteristic depth, seeing in this text a question about where humanity should go, or can go, after it realizes its own limitations. In the former, we see humanity turning to the *imitatio dei* it knows so well, turning to divine imitation when it loses its own self-awareness. As God built a world and then, seven days later, built a Shabbos, so too must humanity wait seven days. But in the latter opinion, it is not God we imitate but the primordial humans, who experienced Shabbos after only one day.

While Judith stops here, acknowledging that we have a choice in choosing a Shabbos patterned after God or after Adam HaRishon when it comes to creating our world, we might go further. When cultivating a Shabbos from scratch, in a vacuum, should Shabbos be *before*, or *after*? In words that might be more local to us, does Shabbos end the week or begin it? Moreover, might it be both?

Franz Rosensweig, the great Jewish philosopher, and one of the all time great articulators of the Jewish symbolic system, saw in Shabbos an expression of the triangular cycle of time that he saw as fundamental to Jewish meaning making: creation, revelation, redemption. On Friday night, we read (and pray) about the Shabbos of creation, the first Shabbos, as we think back to the creation of the world. On Shabbos morning, we read-pray about the Shabbos of revelation, as we think back to Sinai. And on Shabbos afternoon, we read-pray about the Shabbos of the world to come, as we think back to the distant future of the hereafter.

The Shabbos of the past (creation), of the future (redemption), and perhaps of the present: revelation. This is the tale of the world, our nation, and each one of ourselves as well, in some ways. We are born, we come into our own, we pass, and we are redeemed.

Thus we have a Shabbos that comes *before*, as well as a Shabbos that comes *after*, and perhaps we live in the Shabbos that dwells between these two, the present moment in our lives. We aspire to safeguard all moments of this continuum: to create a world of meaning, in the creation, to experience connection and awareness, in the revelation, and to find redemption, freedom. These symbols produce meaning on a national level, but they are also deeply personal, and each of us choose and cultivate the Shabbos that we dwell in.

As we think about the Shabbos that we create, we are thinking of the rituals of Shabbos and how we make them our own. We pair these thoughts with words from Casper ter Kuile's timely and moving book, *The Power of Ritual*, from his exploration of time. This read has us thinking about the Shabbos of our lives, and the ways we might find ever more meaning in the practices and questions of our life.

down to engage this performed piece of text because we knew it would call us to a more loving view of the world.

At the beginning of the story, Scrooge refuses an invitation from his nephew Fred to come and play games on Christmas Eve. He has convinced himself that isolation and accumulating wealth are what make him happy. But the ghosts prove him wrong. And so, at the end of the story, he walks up to his nephew's house, where festive games are underway, and haltingly asks, "Will you let me in, Fred?" In that moment he's asking to be let into a house, to be readmitted into his own family, to be forgiven for his selfishness, and to rebuild his sense of identity not on how much he owns, but on how much he loves. Young as I was, I learned that a story could inspire and instruct us to live lives of meaning and purpose, connection and joy. But it didn't just happen by itself. It took someone—in this case, my mother—to set an intention, bring people together, bake a huge number of Christmas cookies, and repeat the event each year.

This is the wisdom of treating a text as sacred. It brings us closer to who we are, deep down. It helps us integrate our experiences. It helps us see beyond ourselves so that we can then turn back and see ourselves more clearly. To paraphrase thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, sacred texts teach us a truth vital for our lives that we couldn't discover by ourselves. They act as a mirror in which we confront attitudes and behaviors that we want to let go of. They can inspire and ennoble who we want to become. Perhaps you've already chosen Harry Potter, or perhaps you prefer Toni Morrison. It might be Shakespeare or Isabel Allende. Or you might return to a traditional sacred text with a new way of reading. All of it is welcome. When we read sacredly, any of these—and so many more—can accompany us up the ladder toward an eternal sweetness that is always waiting for us.

## SABBATH TIME

Making time for ourselves is more and more difficult. Our digital devices distract us, offering us a life where everything is available at the recognition of a fingerprint, and being "busy" is likely the first thing we tell people when they ask how we are. This makes it difficult to even be aware of our inner life, or how we're really feeling. We can go for days without noticing

that we're angry and resentful, for example, or that we've spent the last week particularly anxious, until that "difficult conversation" that we were anxious about has passed.

Shabbat, or sabbath, the ancient practice of rest in the Jewish tradition, offers us a model that we can draw on to create a modern ritual of making space for connecting to ourselves. Sabbath is about taking some much-needed soul time. When we make a conscious choice to enter a sabbath—creating a rule about when we do and won't do things, setting boundaries on screen time, whatever it may be—we create a pillar of clarity in our spiritual lives.

Sabbath has verified practical benefits too. A 2014 study looked at Seventh-day Adventists, a Christian group, who are known for strict sabbath observance and demonstrated a significant link between sabbath keeping and mental and physical health. A tight-knit community of nine thousand Adventists in Loma Linda, California, has been labeled as a "Blue Zone"—an area where people live much longer than the national average. Similarly, researchers have established that there are fewer adult deaths in Israel on Shabbat. So let's explore what sabbath can look like for those of us looking for deeper connection with ourselves.

Through our research of case studies for *How We Gather*, we found that in our modern lives, sabbath can be applied especially usefully in three ways: tech sabbath, sabbath for solo time, and sabbath for play and creativity. Of course, the traditional Jewish Shabbat is centered on shared celebration with others—and we'll explore more of that communal connection in the next chapter. But these sabbath practices are focused on helping us connect with our authentic selves.

## TECH SABBATH

When I first arrived at Harvard Divinity School, I didn't think of myself as spiritual. I came because I wanted to learn about building community. I imagined myself having to sift through the curriculum to glean the useful bits while throwing out chunks of hocus-pocus that made no sense to me. Instead, I was surprised time and again by the broad and counterintuitive understanding of "religion" that my professors offered. And it wasn't just what happened in the classroom that expanded my imagination. It was

normal for a meeting to start with a few moments of quiet meditation. On Wednesdays, the students, faculty, and staff gathered for a service led by a rotating series of student groups offering the riches of their traditions. This kind of learning environment allowed us all to be more human with one another. It turns out that academic discussions are much more fulfilling when you have a sense of someone's life story before you hear their perspective! All this is to say, I was a little skeptical about anything overtly religious being helpful to me as a modern, secular person, even after enrolling in divinity school.

One day, while perusing the library, I checked out Abraham Joshua Heschel's book *The Sabbath* on a whim. This short text floored me. I'd assumed that sabbath-keeping was an anachronistic hangover from shtetl life. Not turning on light switches and having to prepare all the food you'd want to eat a day before seemed irrelevant to my technology-powered lifestyle. But I realized that my tech use was getting in the way of actually enjoying myself. I'd long ago started the habit of waking up to my phone's alarm in the morning, making its glowing screen the first thing I looked at every day. I'd scroll through social media, check emails, and read the news before even getting out of bed. My focus was shattered, and any centered calm was long gone by the time I went to brush my teeth—all the while listening to a podcast. "Addiction" is a big word to use, but when I found myself checking my phone compulsively while cycling to school, it was clear that I had a problem. As artist Jenny Odell writes in her fabulous book *How to Do Nothing*, nothing is harder to do these days than doing nothing.

Heschel published his book in 1951, the year superglue was invented and the first commercial computer was sold. But already he knew how best we should engage modern technology. "The solution to mankind's most vexing problems will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence from it," he wrote. He proposed that we find a way to live with new technologies and to do without them—not to abolish technology or turn back time, but to be intentional about how we use it. And to practice this, we have the sabbath. For one day a week, Heschel teaches us to live independently from our most important tools of production and to embrace the world—and ourselves—as we find it.

So, inspired by Heschel and a second text on sabbath by Wayne Muller, I made Friday nights a sacred time of digitally disconnecting from the outside world to make space for connecting with myself. Since 2014, I have

been observing a “tech sabbath”—twenty-four hours of not using my laptop or phone from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. No email, no social media, no nothing. As darkness comes, I stand in front of my window and watch the sky for a few moments. Then I light a candle, and while holding it, I sing a song I learned in childhood to enter the magical and mysterious sabbath time. The moment I put the candle back on the table I can feel it: my shoulders relax, my breath comes easier, and usually, the tiredness that I’ve been able to hold off catches up with me, and I’m in bed by nine o’clock. If I’m really feeling it, I’ll light incense. Without my tech, there’s no music or podcasts to listen to, so I’m in silence, often for the first time in days. I am suddenly given the opportunity (or forced, depending on the day) to look inward.

This practice of “resting” from technology is quite different from everyday life, where the world is ours to consume—to be selected, filtered, tapped, and enjoyed. Tech indelibly shapes our reality. We work, shop, unwind, and find love on our pocket-size screens. And as convenient as it is, we’re undone by our compulsion to check the feeds, scrolling deep into the night. Technologist Kevin Kelly explains that it takes every new technology a decade before society comes to consensus on what etiquette we need to tame it. For example, it was ten years after the cell phone was invented that manufacturers introduced the option of a silent, or vibrate, mode. And because real conversations have difficulty competing with even a silent phone, we’re in the midst of learning when to put phones out of sight or even, if we’re brave, to turn them off altogether. Our mobile devices grant us three wishes, explains founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self Sherry Turkle in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*: “first, that we will always be heard; second, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and third, that we will never have to be alone.” That final wish denies us a crucial experience of connection—to our authentic selves.

Canadian researchers have demonstrated that staring into screens leaves us distracted, distant, and drained. A 2018 study from the University of British Columbia found that people who use phones during social interactions have less enjoyment of time spent with friends and family, while another study led by Sara Konrath at Indiana University concluded that those who struggle to identify and process their emotions use social media more often than those who are in touch with their feelings. This is

worrying, as the average American now spends ten hours a day looking at a screen. We're even looking when there's nothing to see! Sixty-seven percent of cell phone owners check their phone for messages or other alerts even when they don't notice their phone vibrating or ringing. And it isn't just how we feel during the day. A 2016 University of Pittsburgh study concluded that young adults who spend a lot of time on social media are more likely to suffer sleep disturbance than their peers. All of which points to the value of taking a regular and total break from our tech.

Filmmaker Tiffany Shlain has long been a champion of tech sabbaths. In her online video series *The Future Starts Here*, she explains, "I love technology—but I feel like I'm constantly responding to everyone and not really responding to myself. A few years ago, I started thinking a lot about time. My father was dying of brain cancer, and sometimes he only had one good hour a day. So it made me think about how little time we have. During that time my family and I decided to completely unplug from technology for one day a week." Tiffany was inspired by the National Day of Unplugging—one day in the year where normal technology users are challenged to take a break and put their cell phone in a mini sleeping bag in which it can safely rest, while Unpluggers spend time gardening, talking with one another, or simply resting. Putting my tech out of sight has become essential. If I can see my laptop or phone lying around, it is amazing how tempting it can be to go onto social media or check my email. Especially when it gets to three on Saturday afternoon and I'm a little bored of reading!

During the week, Shlain describes herself as being in an "emotional pinball machine," barraged by emails, calls, and alerts. When her tech sabbath arrives, "it's like a valve of pressure releases from facts, articles and tidbits that I consume daily. I feel so much more grounded and balanced," she explains. "I feel like a better mother, wife, and person."

Surprisingly, I've learned that I don't need to be responsive all the time. Since putting a small note in my email signature that reads, "I am offline from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, when I observe a tech sabbath," I'm often asked if I'm not worried about missing an urgent call. So far, no emergencies have struck and no once-in-a-lifetime opportunities have been lost. And even if I did miss an urgent call, that cumulative restful time might still be worth it.

Taking time away from our technology gives us the space, time, and energy to reconnect to ourselves. We can slow down mentally and physically. I love to journal on my sabbath days, writing stream-of-consciousness thoughts and often finding new ideas or inspiration as my brain unwinds itself from the tight curl it's been wrapped up in. Heschel writes, "We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; but it is the moment that lends significance to things." But unless we take the time away from incessant interruption, we cannot be present to that significance. With a tech sabbath, we can finally be present to ourselves and the significance of being alive.

## SABBATH FROM OTHERS

We can bring sabbath into our modern lives to create connection with ourselves by taking a sabbath from others. For some people, this is their Sunday night bath. For others, it is a long run alone. Whatever it is, I invite you to make it intentional and set clear boundaries so you can make sure to honor your time alone.

My husband has learned that my sabbath time is more than a chance for me to get away from work emails and Twitter threads—it is also about being on my own. He generously spends a few hours out running errands or going to see a movie, giving me the ultimate luxury of some space and time all to myself. Although as a Harvard proctor I live with twenty-eight college freshmen down the hall, a weekly sabbath offers a mini staycation of sorts, a chance to mentally reset and spiritually re-center.

Sabbath isn't a time to catch up on tasks. Nor is it simply a time of rest to prepare for a busy week. It is a time to revel in the beauty and delight of simply being. The sabbath "is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor," Heschel writes. "The sabbath is a day for the sake of life. . . . The sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of sabbath." This was a revelation to me: to think of sabbath time as the apex of the week, a "climax of living." I started to look forward to the times when I'd read for the sake of pleasure, rather than learning or productivity. I read historical fiction like the novels of Maurice Druon and found myself in science fiction adventures with N. K. Jemisin. Reading during sabbath time opened up new worlds

because I was free from the constraints I'd built myself. "The point about the novel is that you're free in your head," writes journalist Robert McCrum in an interview with Five Books. "It's unpoliced. Reading really does liberate you."

Sabbath inverts some of the most destructive stories we tell ourselves: that we are what we do, that we're worth only what we create. "The sabbath is the inspirer, the other days are the inspired," writes Heschel. We're allowed to be the fullness of who we are and have the space to dive deeply into difficult questions or decisions. We can take time to ponder things, to think thoughts through to the end without interruption. In silence and solitude, we rediscover childhood passions. Sabbath is all about remembering who we truly are.

That can feel strange at first. So much of our lives is spent hovering in the unfulfilling no-man's-land between true solitude and deep community. Parker Palmer argues that this is where the prevailing sense of vacuousness comes from, that our lives "alternate between collective busyness and individual isolation but rarely allow for an authentically solitary or corporate experience. In this half-lived middle ground, our solitude is loneliness and our attempts at community are fleeting and defeating." Sabbath from collective busyness not only frees us from distraction but gives us time alone so that we can dip down into our experience consciously, letting our minds wander. I've found myself pulling out paper and pastels or a songbook. Now and then I write a poem. With this luxury of sabbath time, we get to explore creative parts of ourselves that the everyday keeps hidden under lock and key. In the Age of the Screen, there is little room for amateur creativity. We feel no permission to sing or dance because we've seen what it *should* look like when professionals perform. We're never free to learn a craft because the horror of someone seeing our imperfect work is paralyzing. In sabbath time, our creativity is not meant for performance—but for enjoyment, and perhaps even as an offering of thanks for the time and freedom we have.

You probably do some or all of these things already. But it might take an intentional shift to start thinking of this time as a sacred time for solitude. I invite you to change that. Whatever your practice is, make it an intentional ritual. Light a candle. Recite a poem. Breathe ten times. Whatever you do, try to notice how taking this time heals and softens you. Our inner life is the foundation for our outer lives, so committing to this practice will yield

countless gifts. This is the paradigm shift: everyday moments can be the sacred foundation of your spiritual life.

## SABBATH FROM WORK TO MAKE ROOM FOR PLAY

Although sabbath time involves putting daily tools away, it is not about depriving ourselves. The opposite is true. What can we learn about ourselves when we press PAUSE on work and productivity and make space for playtime? Traditionally, the sabbath is a time for joy and fullness. Delicious food, good company—even sex is a mitzvah (Jewish religious duty) during sabbath time! So wonderful is Shabbat that Jews traditionally observe it for twenty-five hours instead of a full day—delighting in the time of rest so much that there’s a desire to keep hold of it for one extra hour. Customarily, the sabbath is received as a queen or a bride—the home is cleaned, and each member of the household looks their best. Inspired by this tradition, I like to pretend that sabbath time is like going to a royal wedding. I’m lucky to be invited, and I’m going to make the most of enjoying it! If you’re exploring a sabbath practice, I invite you to discover how you might create some rituals that help you cross into sabbath time and that can unleash your creative or playful spirit!

Sabbaths can be longer than just a day—and can of course be celebrated with others. One of the case studies from our *How We Gather* research was Camp Grounded, a summer camp for adults. Set up in 2013, Camp Grounded describes itself like this: “Imagine a place where adults completely let go, get really, really weird, laugh uncontrollably, sing during meals, and stay up late sharing secrets until they fall asleep in a tipi . . . only to wake-up a few hours later to [enjoy] . . . sunrise paddle-boarding or morning yoga, endless arts ‘n crafts and silly competitions. They dress in funny costumes, dance a lot, perform at the talent show, call each other nicknames and play super super hard. All without the use of drugs or alcohol, without being instagrammed or updating their status online, and without talking about what they do for work. It’s surreal and amazing.”

Set up by Levi Felix, Camp Grounded took the principles of sabbath time and created a weeklong experience based on those rules. Getting away from technology and workplace identities allowed campers to reconnect with their innate creativity. To paint and sing, to laugh and be silly. To write

handwritten letters and sit around the campfire. Felix set up Camp Grounded after a serious health scare interrupted an eighty-hour-a-week work schedule and total focus on his career. It reminded him to work on what he really cared about. Tragically, after four years of Camp Grounded magic, he died of a brain tumor. But he has left a legacy. “He was a catalyst for so many people to get in touch with themselves and spark meaningful conversations,” explains one friend, Andrew Horn.

Summer camp has always echoed sabbath time for me too. When I was eleven years old, I arrived at a rural Dutch train station to be met by camp leaders in funny costumes who cycled with us to the edge of the campground. There they started a conga line “spaceship” so we could travel through time together. All our watches were turned forward two hours (so campfires could be enjoyed earlier in the day), and only after we’d entered the “camp time zone” could we walk onto the field where our tents and the firepit stood waiting. No need for epic structures or distant journeys, we could step into a different reality through a small ritual and large amounts of enthusiasm. Though camp rules and mentality might not be possible all year round, it was at least waiting for us to return to its sweet playfulness and joy whenever we were ready. This is what Heschel meant when he called the sabbath a palace in time. Or imagine a beautiful cathedral in time. We enter it with the same awe and inspiration. Indeed, crossing into sabbath means crossing into an encounter with the divine reality, wherever we are. There’s no need for a physical temple or a church, or even a beautiful forest. That is the beauty of sacred time: it stretches across all places and is accessible to us, wherever we are.

Here is the beauty of sabbath for exploring play: it’s really sabbath for exploring you. If you were anything like me, you learned at summer camp that you weren’t half bad at making crafts. Maybe through sabbath you will discover that you take great joy from playing an instrument, something you would have never carved out time to consider had you not established a set period of rest from everything else. Of course, learning a new skill or mastering something isn’t the goal of sabbath. You don’t have to, and in fact shouldn’t, play for a purpose. Hobbies don’t have to become hustles! Making room for play is about learning what things awaken joy for you, and making time for those special things.

## BRINGING SABBATH INTO OUR LIVES

Remember what I promised you at the beginning of this book: you are already doing most of these practices. All we are preparing to do is simply the next step of deepening them and giving them intention. You probably already have some self-care fallbacks that help you find solitude, or a few tricks for finding “me time.” Maybe you already try to limit screen time. Maybe you do yoga every Thursday to get away from your desk, the kids, or whatever it is that occupies most of your time. My invitation is to turn those practices into regular, sacred times of sabbath. Put it on the calendar. Make it a rule.

Though I’ve chosen to stick to the traditional timing, sabbath doesn’t need to be restricted to Friday nights. We can enter sabbath time whenever we want—though tradition recommends a regular rhythm. By Wednesday I’m usually already fantasizing about my Friday night tech sabbath, which always involves a lengthy shower and special moisturizing routine to welcome in the mini retreat! Discipline is key—and is the thing I struggle most with, especially when I’m away from home. Heschel’s advice would have been stern: “What we are depends on what the sabbath is to us.” When we keep a sabbath, we get to practice saying “no.” No one will enforce it for us. Our employers will always be grateful for the extra hours we work. We must be the ones to choose sabbath, and that is profoundly difficult! Stopping is often the last thing I want to do. I worry that stopping means failing at something because to stop makes no sense amid the rules of competition and the culture of progress. Tricia Hersey, the creator of the Nap Ministry, describes rest as a form of resistance, because it pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy. “Our bodies are a site of liberation,” she explains on her website. Her work counters the narrative that we are all not doing enough and should be doing more. To stop work forces us to play by a different set of rules, just like Felix and his Camp Grounders did. Our inner perfectionist must die just a little every time, and the death can be painful, humiliating even. But the promise of rest, of new life, of a world transformed holds true every time. I often say to myself that the work is not done, and yet it is still time to stop.

Ultimately, a sabbath of some form or another is necessary for connecting with ourselves. The great writer and monk Thomas Merton wrote in his book *No Man Is an Island*, “We do not live more fully merely

by doing more, seeing more, tasting more, and experiencing more than we ever have before. On the contrary, some of us need to discover that we will not begin to live more fully until we have the courage to do and see and taste and experience much less than usual.” Merton urges us to find our real self, even if that simple dignity is wrapped up in “elemental poverty,” as he puts it. In sabbath time we get to know ourselves as we are. And with that comes great self-compassion. Sabbath gives us perspective. It reconnects us with our imagination. We can envision new ways in which the world might work. “Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms,” writes theologian Walter Brueggemann.

Sabbath time will look different for each of us. Much depends on the caring responsibilities we have and the rhythm of our lives. But even if we can't be alone, we can come to share time differently by simply creating a small ritual with a candle or a piece of music. We can sing or paint or sleep with a spirit of surrender. We can return to an inwardness, where we befriend our silence and solitude. By keeping a sabbath, we can remember that all is well and that we are part of the invisible kinship of all things. That we are beloved and beautiful. Sabbath helps us connect with ourselves by reminding us that we are profoundly good enough—just as we are.