

One Thing at a Time
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Congregation B'nai Torah
Rosh Hashanah 5770, Day 1

Today is a very special day, really a very special confluence of events that (as our Rebbetzin to be, Staci Zemplak pointed out), will not be repeated again until the year 2020. It's Rosh Hashanah. It's shabbat. And, it's also international "talk like a Pirate Day." You may scoff, but it's worth noting that there may actually be more people in the world who observe "International Talk like a pirate day" than who are in synagogue for Rosh Hashanah. I've been thinking about ways to combine these observances, inspired by many:

Instead of "Good Yom Tov"- you could say Ahoy Vey Matey. You could make Kiddush over Rum. I don't know whether apples and honey are a cure for scurvy. You could blow the Shofarr. When you say the Shema, cover your eye patch.

For Tashlich, instead of throwing your breadcrumbs into the water, make 'em walk the plank. Another way to think about it: you wear a black hat, have a wild beard, like to dance, drink and sing songs with "Ay-yay yay" as the lyrics: being part of some Chassidic groups, you are most of the way there.

OK, perhaps I've gone overboard. So thus ends my observance of International Talk Like a Pirate Day, which doesn't really fit with the seriousness of the day. This little interlude is an example what happens when you try to do too much at once, when you try to mix things that don't go together. It's a reminder that sometimes you can only do one thing at a time.

I take today's other observances, Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah, very seriously. And you would think that they would be in harmony and alignment together. After all, Rosh Hashanah, observed once a year, commemorates the creation of the world and Shabbat, observed weekly, commemorates the completion of that process. Both are days on which we wear our best clothing and eat festive meals. Both are days in which many types of labor and activity are traditionally forbidden. We even find that in our prayers we have a single blessing that combines all of them. *Mekadesh hashabat v'yisrael v'yom hazikaron*- "God who sanctifies the Sabbath, Israel and the day of remembrance." And yet, we find them to be in conflict.

If you were to identify the most important ritual of Rosh Hashanah (other than comparing

and critiquing sermons with your lunch guests) surely it would be the blowing of the shofar. The biblical commandment tells us that today is *yom teruah*, the day of sounding the shofar. A whole section of the Amidah that we will say in a few minutes, is entitled the "shofarot" and takes as its core biblical passages about the shofar. The Ram's horn is referenced prominently in tomorrow's Torah reading, when Abraham's son Isaac is spared, and a Ram is substituted. The Ram's horn is a reminder, to us and to God, of Abraham's faith. Indeed, the mystics say that on this very day, when God is enthroned king over all creation, the sound of the Shofar causes God to rise from the throne of strict judgment, and instead sit on the seat of mercy. We expect to hear that sound: peals of prayer, peals of justice, peals of joy.

And yet, of all days, today the sound of the Shofar is silenced. Why would that be? Why should Shabbat trump Rosh Hashanah? You might surmise "well, of course blowing the shofar is work." but that's not strictly speaking true. After all, if it were work, we probably shouldn't be allowed to do it on Rosh Hashanah either. To come to an answer, we have to understand a little bit more about the shofar, about Shabbat, and about what it means to truly focus in life, to do one thing at a time.

We start, then, with Shabbat. You have perhaps heard that "work"- *melacha* is prohibited on Shabbat. The Torah says in several places, with slight variation, *kol melechet avoda lo ta'asu*- you shall do no manner of work. But that isn't very clear. There are many things that observant Jews do not do on Shabbat that don't seem like work at all, and conversely many more things that they **do** do that would seem to be totally out of line. Sure building a fire is work. Is it really work to turn on a stove or an electric light? Moving a refrigerator, or installing a microwave oven, perhaps. Playing a guitar, that ain't workin. Is walking two miles really less work than driving? For that matter, much of what we would consider work today (going to the office, sitting in meetings, reading on blackberries or screens) would not have been considered work by the ancients.

In fact, our Jewish tradition has a few different words for work... For instance there is *avodah* labor. *Amal* backbreaking, pointless labor. *Peulah*, sort of like activity. The list goes on. The point is, though, that *melacha* is not just any kind of physical labor. It is creative work, the work of an artisan, work which completes an object and makes it fit for use. It's work that is intentional, that has a constructive purpose.

Just after God commands the Israelites to build his tabernacle. God repeats the commandment to

observe shabbat: “*ach et shabtotai tishmoru*”- **however**, you should observe my Sabbaths as well, and forbids doing any *melacha* on Shabbat. The implication is that even building the Mishkan, the tabernacle, God’s home with all of its wonderful creative, constructive, artistic work, is to be limited by the observance of Shabbat. Indeed, the Rabbis came up with a list of 39 activities which were categorized as melacha. They were all creative processes which ordered the world, which had a place in building the tabernacle, and they were all forbidden on Shabbat. These activities run a gamut of human creative activity, but can be reduced to the fundamentals of civilization- making bread, creating fabric and leather clothing, and constructing a dwelling. On a micro level, it’s a dizzying list: planting, harvesting, winnowing, baking, painting, bleaching, building, weaving, writing, tying a permanent knot, hunting, lighting a fire, even carrying something through the street from one house or workshop to another, because bringing something to its proper place is really the last step in the creation and completion of something.

The fact is, physical labor is not always hard- I mean, you’re not going to catch me at it- but in our society- we reward other kinds of things- skilled craftsmanship. Even in sports, it’s often not just how hard you work, it’s how smart you work.

A favorite story of mine: a well-known surgeon was attending a dinner party and watched the host adroitly carve and slice the large turkey for his guests.

When he finished slicing, the host asked: "How did I do, Doc? I think I'd make a pretty good surgeon, don't you?"

"Perhaps," said the physician. "But anyone can take them apart.

Now let's see you put it back together again."

Melacha is the fine work of putting things together.

Does blowing the shofar fit into that category? Not literally. The rabbis hung their hats (rabbi's didn't wear black hats yet way back then, only pirates) on the prohibition against carrying- they were afraid that you would schlep a shofar from point A to point B to take lessons, and they used similar reasoning to prohibit the use of Lulav and Etrog, or the Purim Megillah, on the Sabbath.

Many thinkers, however, suggest that maybe there are deeper reasons. It's true that Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah are both about the process of creation, but in very different ways. Shabbat is about enjoying a taste of the perfected world, in which nothing need be changed. Rosh Hashanah is about asking God to forgive a world that is not yet perfected, in which everything must be modified and shaped with our efforts and intellect, including our very souls.

Those two things are incompatible with each other. We can't be doing and not doing, resting and working at the same time. We can't do two things at once.

We live in a society where multitasking has become the order of the day. You may have heard the story about the man who was driving on the highway when he saw a woman putting on her makeup while she was driving the car next to him. He was so upset, he dropped his cellphone into his coffee right in the middle of tweeting about it.

Many of us try to do lots of things at once: working moms and dads juggling carpool, work family, relationships. The boundaries break down. With blackberries and email, we are working when we are at home and on vacation, and we're on call no matter where we are. With changes in the economy and workplace, many of us are called upon to do more pieces of more jobs, each of them less well. Kids are overscheduled with activities- soccer on this day, karate on that, softball, tutoring, dance. I interview kids who are applying to Harvard, and it's amazing what kinds of activities kids are juggling during their high school years. Doogie Howser would have gotten waitlisted- (well, you hosted the Emmys too, ok, we'll let you in). It's no surprise kids today can be watching TV, listen to music, text, talk, and do work all at the same time. How well can you do any of them? And when they do have a spare moment, exhaustion and vegetation set in. Laurence J. Peter sums it up "Television," he says, "has changed a child from an irresistible force to an immovable object."

Can you really do more than one thing at a time? What happens when you switch from task to task? We know that computers do it with ease- your computer can have 10 programs running at once and handle them all fine (if you have a Mac, anyway). Some of the latest brain research shows that people who pride themselves on multitasking in fact do no one thing as well, that over time it builds up levels of stress hormones and leads us to have trouble focusing even when we are only trying to do one thing. You end up doing neither thing as well. A friend of mine had a basket of freshly laundered laundry, and a newborn, wanted to get them both upstairs at the same time. Wait, a brilliant idea. Put the baby in the basket with the warm, beautiful-smelling clothes. One noisy burp later, and baby was much more comfortable, but the clothes were on their way back down to the washer.

Of course, I'm not one to talk here. I'm one of the worst offenders. I'm on email and cellphone at all hours of the day and night. They say you can't dance at two weddings at the

same time. Last year I went to three weddings and a bar mitzvah in a 3 hour stretch. On a given day, I might whiplash between teaching a class, attending a simcha, thinking about administration or fundraising, and counseling someone with tzuris. It takes tremendous effort to let go of what came before, not be thinking ahead to the next question or issue. When I'm davening at the synagogue to think just about God and not what is going on in all corners of the room. Or on a Shabbat morning, balancing my desire to get to that one person who is in pain, alone and needs their rabbi, with the other 200 whom I just want wish good shabbes.

I really realized it this past summer, had the experience of being in Cancun for a week to celebrate our 10th anniversary (yes, we went there and Camp Ramah. This summer, to save money, we only went to places that were having active swine flu outbreaks). One day I went on a group jet-ski trip out to a snorkel spot. Most of the group was two to a ski-doo, but I had my own, and I was getting tossed around pretty heavily in the surf at top speed. I was holding on and steering with every brain cell. There was no time to think about anything else. One thing at a time.

There are times in life when we have to be totally in the moment, totally engaged, to be able to do just one thing at a time. To really feel joy, love, grief 100%. If we are too far in the past, or too far in the future, we miss out. I'm reminded of the story of the man, we'll call him Morris, who was on his deathbed. The family was gathered, and he smelled the most beautiful smell. He called out to his wife "Sadie, are those your rugellach?" "Yes they are, Morris." "May I have one." "Morris, I'm sorry, those are for shiva." Sometimes we get too far ahead of ourselves. We have to do one thing at a time. In fact, there are times in life when we have to do exactly NO things at a time.

That's why Shabbat is so important, and that's why the sages had Shabbat trump shofar. Sometimes you have to put off even the incredibly important task of repentance in order to truly be with yourself. We are always so busy making the world. Building, boiling, burning, spinning skinning sewing sifting. We are on call 24/7. Shabbat is, if I can borrow a phrase, the pause that refreshes.

It's about taking a day to avoid doing those things that **seem** like they are so important to focus on the things that truly **are** important. We add by removing. The other 6 days a week, we are so focused on changing the world, that we do not focus on changing ourselves, or even just

being ourselves.

In the *Kiddush*, the prayer over the wine that we say on a regular Shabbat, we talk about how Shabbat reminds us of two things. First, it is "*Zecher L'ma'aseh Bereshit*" – a remembrance of process of creation. It reminds us that God rested on the seventh day. Is there really anything that's hard for God? Does God need downtime? God didn't say: "gee, I'm just plum tuckered out after making that platypus. Maybe I'll just take a nap." No! It's a statement for the rest of us, that the process of changing the world, of being responsible to others, has to stop. And that's why, in the *kiddush*, we also say that *Shabbat* is *zecher L'yetziat mitzrayim*- it's a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt. We were slaves and God made us free. Being a slave means that you are on call, at any place, at a any time. We don't have slavery like they did in the old days. Unless you have a blackberry. Being free means that no-one else can force you to do something.

Observing Shabbat, whether the most traditional way, or even in a more interpretive, picking-and-choosing sort way, means setting priorities, and saying that there are certain things that are off limits, that no-one else can make you do, even if they are tempting, or convenient, or profitable.

I've heard a story of the Mezibozzer Rabbe. He was visiting his brother and saw very humble candlesticks on his brother's table. The Rebbe travelled widely and preached (sort of a motivational speaker) and was able to furnish his home much more nicely than his brother, and asked his brother why he too did not take to travelling from town to town on the Sabbaths. His brother responded: "I would rather remain at home, and have the candlesticks elsewhere, than have candlesticks at home while I absent myself."

Now, it's one thing to talk about Shabbat as a day off from the tyranny of work, or even of chores. But what about hobbies like gardening, sewing, or sports leagues? A favorite movie of mine is "*The Big Lebowski*" The movie's hero is a slacker named "The Dude" for whom Shabbat wouldn't mean very much because he doesn't seem to work much the other six days a week either. His friend, Walter Sobchak refuses to bowl on Shabbat. The movie fans in a room know that I can't quote his bullheaded refusal in this context. But why not? Because even while sports and hobbies are an escape, they are still very much doing something. The pressure that even "amateur" sports and hobbies place upon people is unbelievable. What does it mean to devote a single day to the spirit, free of the pull of hobbies and leagues?

Shabbat builds the ability to do just one thing at a time. I can only speak for myself. Even though one might claim that I “work” on Shabbat, even if I'm here at the synagogue, I don't have meetings. I don't set appointments. I'm in the moment. And when I'm not here, I have real downtime, with my kids, with my wife. I can read a book or magazine without the pressure of chores. For me, it is a tremendous gift. 25 hours when the cellphone, the email, don't exist. Unless it is truly life and death, it will wait until sundown.

Steve Goodier put me on to a Greek legend: in ancient Athens a man noticed the great storyteller Aesop playing childish games with some little boys. He laughed and jeered at Aesop, asking him why he wasted his time in such frivolous activity.

Aesop responded by picking up a bow, loosening its string, and placing it on the ground. Then he said to the critical Athenian, "Now, answer the riddle, if you can. Tell us what the unstrung bow implies."

The man looked at it for several moments but had no idea what point Aesop was trying to make. The moralist explained, "If you keep a bow always bent, it will break eventually; but if you let it go slack, it will be more fit for use when you want it."

We need to be slack sometimes so we can be sharp the rest of the time.

Earlier this year there was an incident here in Atlanta where the national Mock trial competition was being held. Students from the Maimonides school in Boston petitioned to be able to schedule their matches so that they would not have to compete on Shabbat. It was a bitter fight, played out in the press and the courts. Even though they ended up not advancing, they won. These teens know that they are masters of their own destiny. When the time comes as adults, when they are pulled in a zillion directions and have to make a choice of conscience, maybe they will choose wisely.

What does it mean, as an adult, to insist that there is one night a week that you will spend with your husband, or your wife? What does it mean that there is one night a week when you will have dinner with your children- no-one running back from an event or off to a game? What might it mean to have one day a week when the laundry, the shopping, all go on pause?

Shabbat is a tradeoff- After all, I miss out on college football. I don't often get Friday night dinner and a movie. This year it means giving up the sound of the shofar. But I'll take it. It's a

refuge. Think of the person who spends on little things here and there, a cup of coffee, a magazine, an extra tie or pair of shoes, as opposed to the person who saves that money and buys a vacation home. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us that the while many nations build cathedrals in space, we build monuments in time. Shabbat is such a refuge. It's a time share that's available to us 52 days a year. It's the power to say stop. It's the power to turn off the sirens, the horns, the ringtones, the beeps, and listen to the still small voice.

The Sabbath is the culmination of the week. You eat your vegetables, then Sabbath is the desert. Sabbath is the spice and seasoning. And let me tell you- dude, that day really ties the week together.

So, one Shabbat this year, will you do one thing at a time?

So, one Shabbat this year, will you connect more deeply to family, to friends?

So, one Shabbat this year, will you connect more deeply to God

So, one Shabbat this year, will you turn off all of the distractions that compete for your attention, and focus on things that are eternal.

So, one Shabbat this year, will you turn the week-end into something holy.

Perhaps it's too much to ask to drop our daily multitasking- to always and only do one thing at a time. I know that it's going to be an ongoing battle for me, no matter what the efficiency experts say. The world has changed, and we may not get to go back to simple times. But then again, if we can do it for 25 hours a week, if every now and then, we can do one thing at a time, or no thing at a time, maybe there is hope.

Shanah Tovah, Shabbat Shalom, and May you be inscribed in the book of life. And not in Davey Jones' locker.