

Sermon on the Importance of Shabbat

By: Rabbi Ahuva Zaches

As a rabbi, I think a lot about what message our community needs to hear in each week's Shabbat sermon and why people come to Shabbat services. I think most people come to Shabbat services for the same ultimate purpose, which is to keep their internal flame glowing bright.

Some people are looking for oxygen to keep their flames going. After reading terrible news all week, often on top of dealing with personal struggles, they need a break from hearing about the brokenness of this world. They just want to breathe and rest so that their flames don't burn out before the next week of challenges has even begun. They worry that hearing more about the ongoing struggles that our society faces when they desperately need a break may get close to snuffing out their already low-burning flame.

Other people are looking for fuel to keep their flames going. Their flames have already been ignited by a passion for Tikkun Olam. They are well-aware of the issues that plague our society, and they are already very engaged in the holy work of repair. They want their flame to be increased by adding fuel to the fire in the form of more calls to action, more demands for justice, and more reminders of the importance of what they have been laboring for.

Depending on the week, I could be either one of these types. Sometimes I need that fuel. And sometimes I need the oxygen. After dealing with the chronic crises of the pandemic, racism, natural disasters, and the political polarization in our country for months and years on end, tonight I so am grateful for the Jewish tradition of Shabbat being a communal day of rest.

Some of the hardest working people I know have this voice in their head that insists they must keep working no matter how spiritually exhausted they are. How can we take a day off, or even an hour off for Shabbat services, this voice whispers, when there is still so much work to do?

To quote Rabbi Arthur Waskow, an activist who works passionately for social justice throughout the rest of his week, right before he puts an away message up for Shabbat, he says, "The world will just have to save itself for the next 25 hours!" Then he rests and replenishes his flame through the restorative rituals of Shabbat.

Indeed, some of the most effective workers I know are so effective precisely because they know when to take a break. They know how important it is to pause, and breathe, and renew their source of energy. Otherwise, they'd be running on fumes and unable to do the work they need to do during the rest of the week.

So tonight, especially if you have that little voice that says, "Keep working! Keep working!" I encourage you to be kind to yourself. Give yourself a moment to breathe. The work will still be there when you get back to it. And you may find yourself able to approach it much more effectively after you have given yourself the gift of Shabbat.

As a result of showing ourselves this level of care and kindness, may we find the strength to do the demanding work of building a better world that is based on justice, love, and kindness. And let us say: Amein.