
Sabbath & Sunday: two days of holiness

Jewish observance of the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday evening and closes at sundown Saturday. On this day, work is suspended, families gather to celebrate and bless one another, a festive atmosphere prevails, candles are lit, bread and wine shared. At home and at synagogue God is worshipped, scripture is read.

Christianity grew out of Judaism, and, for as long as three to four hundred years, Christians continued to observe the Sabbath while also commemorating the death & resurrection of Jesus on Sunday. Over time, the focus on Sunday as a Christian day of worship eclipsed the Sabbath. Today, however, there is a gradually emerging recovery of a recognition of Sabbath and Sunday as two distinct days, each with its own meaning¹ (acknowledged, for example, in John Paul II's Dies Domini, 'The Day of the Lord').

If we think of the Sabbath as a celebration of creation, tied also to the liberation themes of the Exodus story, we can appreciate all the more clearly Sunday as a celebration of our 're-creation' through the liberating love of Jesus Christ. The Sabbath (Saturday) highlights God's creative act in bringing forth the world. Sunday (The Day of the Lord) recalls God's redemptive act in raising Jesus from the dead. Whereas Sunday is a celebration specific to Christians, the Sabbath, according to Jewish belief, is a gift to all human beings by virtue of their creation.

Today some Christians have taken to celebrating both days, appreciating the complementarity of the two and the deep spiritual links between Judaism and Christianity. Even for Christian households where the Sabbath is not part of the weekly rhythm, however, there is a great deal to be learned from Jewish Sabbath observance as illustrated by these Gathering Notes.

Icebreaker

When was the last time you just 'hung out' with each other without the pressure of 'must do' activity and work agendas?

Opening Prayer

Loving and creative God!

You have designed and made us in your image, unique and unrepeatable.

Teach us to honour this dignity in every person, most especially our spouse.

Amen.

¹ See Maureena Fritz, 'Sabbath and Sunday Worship: We are Entitled to Both' in *The Way Supplement* 2000/97.

A reflection for couples – January 2008

SABBATH WISDOM

Sabbath: a time for love-making²

Our lives, indeed the whole world it seems, are busier than ever. We need no convincing about the importance of taking 'time out' for rest and renewal, even if that 'time out' is difficult to achieve in practice.

Less known, perhaps, is that the experience of taking a 'breather', a moment of re-creative rest in contrast to our weekly work schedule, is divinely enshrined in our very make-up as human beings. Taking 'time and space' is not just a good thing to *do*, it is expressive of *who we are* as man and woman created in the divine image.

The Jewish people, in their weekly observance of the Sabbath as a day of holiness, rest, family time and prayer, have always grasped and modelled this wisdom. This observance is built upon the Hebrew scriptures, which of course are part of our biblical heritage as Christians. In the Book of Genesis, for instance, we read the account of God creating the world, day by day. On day six, God surveys his crowning creative achievement: man and woman. And in that moment, what does God do? We read:

Completed now were heaven and earth and all their host. On the seventh day, God had completed the work that had been done, ceasing then on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, and ceased from all the creative work that God [had chosen] to do.

(Gen 2:1-3)

After six days of creative labour, from which man and woman emerge as the highpoint, God rests, God blesses and God makes holy the seventh day.

Why would God rest? Because God is tired? Had enough? Lost interest in the project?

Not on your life! Rather, God's 'rest' is all about God's desire to enjoy, celebrate and marvel at the extraordinary beauty of man and woman created in the divine image. What scripture speaks of as 'resting' is all about 'revelling'!

The Jewish rabbis who pondered this passage put it in more intimate terms: the Sabbath was the *betrothal*

² This section on Sabbath as betrothal draws on lecture material by Maureena Fritz, NDS, Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem, 2007.

between God and the human person. Every Sabbath celebrated thereafter was to be a renewal of the *love-relationship* between God and people, between individuals, and involving the whole created universe.

Sabbath is all about love-making!

And how beautifully this theme weaves its way through Jewish ritual. As the Sabbath begins, the Song of Songs is recited: 'Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving is better than wine...' In synagogue worship, the congregation sings love songs, a popular one being *Lechah Dodi*: 'Come, my beloved, to meet the bride; the Sabbath presence, let us come.' In the *Shema*, a prayer central to the Sabbath worship, the congregation is exhorted to love God 'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deut 6:4-5) The love referred to here is one of passionate involvement, an obsession (In Hebrew: *shoge*, mad) like that of a love-sick lover!

The Sabbath table at home is laid with symbolic twosomes - two candles, two loaves of bread (*challah*) made from two intertwined strings of dough – all suggesting the intertwining of lives. The two candles can also symbolise the male and female aspects of the Divine, or husband and wife, united on the Sabbath. Then again, the two can represent scripture's two versions of the fourth commandment: to *remember* (Exod 20:8) and *observe* (Deut 5:12) the Sabbath. The Sabbath meal itself is a feast of love, filled with song, scripture, blessing, warm conversation and laughter.

Sabbath observance, then, is not just a 'day off' but a day for focusing on our most intimate relationships by which we experience God's love for us, and through which we reach out and share in the gift of our neighbours and all creation. Can we think of a better plan for restoring balance and healing to our world? And it's right there in scripture!

What can we learn from all this? How can couples integrate some of this Shabbat wisdom into their lives? We might distil some of this wisdom in these terms:

A time for holiness. Whether it's the Sabbath, the Sunday or the seasons of the church year, in both Jewish and Christian belief, time is infused with a sacred rhythm. Far from being slaves to a clock or a work schedule, we are called to build our lives around a cycle of 'sacred-moments', reminding us that all time, and our lives, belong to God.

Action tip: in planning your year, go through the diary and mark off sacred and relational dates (e.g. Ash Wednesday; 20th wedding anniversary) as conscientiously as you would important work commitments.

A time for letting God be God. For the Jews, the Sabbath is a day set apart. At sundown on Friday, work ceases, whether it's finished or not. A powerful message is communicated: nothing we can 'do' is more important than our relationship with God who alone provides for our needs. Just as God can stand back from the divine creativity, caring for it but not enslaved by it, so do we find freedom by stepping into 'sabbath time'.

Action tip: Do you find yourself coming to the dinner table, or to bed, late and distracted because you just *had* to answer one more email? Set a time limit and stick to it. Learn to be comfortable with loose ends, unfinished work.

A time for choosing life.

*You shall keep the Sabbath,
for it is holy for you.*

One who profanes it shall be put to death...

(Exod 31:14).

What can sound harsh to our ears starts to make sense when we remember the deathly effects of *not* heeding Sabbath rest: burn-out, lack of energy, susceptibility to illness or accident, alienation from loved ones... We pass a death sentence on our own divinely-imaged identity when we fail to imitate God's example of sanctifying rest.

Action tip: Ask the kids to tell you when you are becoming too tired, too snappy and irritable to be any fun. They are great barometers of marital peace, or the lack of!

A time for belonging. For the Jews, the Sabbath is not just a relational plan for individuals, it is a sign of their peoplehood. It is linked to the covenant, to their betrothal to God. Similarly, when Christian couples celebrate the Sabbath or simply take 'time out' to renew their love, it is never for their private benefit alone, it strengthens the Church. Like the Jews, we Christians live as part of a people; everything we do impacts upon our people. When we see a couple passionately in love, we take heart that our Church can be a passionate lover!

Action tip: At Mass, in the silence after communion, pray for your unity as a couple, conscious of the influence your love can have on the people around you.

A time for delighting. Giving thanks, affirming goodness, celebrating beauty, refraining from negativity, blessing each other... all these qualities are part of Jewish home life on the Sabbath. They are also fundamental to a healthy Christian marriage. By setting aside time, be it an hour or a day, to consciously focus on these qualities, our week starts to become infused with lifegiving habits that allow our relationship to grow and heal.

Action tip: During mealtime conversation today, focus on praise and affirmation, avoiding all negativity, even as a

joke. If it helps, use a table-topic: 'The nicest thing that happened to me today was...'

Couple Exercise

Reflect

*I shall betroth you to myself for ever,
I shall betroth you in uprightness and justice,
and faithful love and tenderness.
Yes, I shall betroth you to myself in loyalty
and in the knowledge of Yahweh. (Hosea 2:21-22)*

Write

In a love letter, write a prayer or blessing for your spouse (or elaborate on the passage above), noting especially how he/she shows you the face of God.

Share

1. Unclutter with a long hug. Breathe deeply and release any tension. Bring your focus onto your spouse.
2. Decide who will share first. Read your letter to your spouse. Then swap roles.

Group Exercise

1. Refer to the sections titled: "A time for..." (holiness, choosing life, belonging, delighting, etc).
2. Taking each section, one at a time:
 - a. What is my reaction to this point?
 - b. In what ways do I/we take time for in an average week?
 - c. What 'action tip' helps (or might help) me/us in this area?

Closing Prayer

Intention:

For the gift of 'holy fun': that our love will be rich in moments of loving spontaneity, delightful surprises, simple pleasures.

Reflect:

Where do you need to grow in order to be open to the gift of fun? What barriers (e.g. control, fear, 'kill joy' images of God) do you have to receiving this grace in full measure?

Pray:

Pray in small groups for your specific needs in this

area. Then, open spontaneous prayers. Close with the *Gloria* – 'Glory to God in the Highest...'

Take Home Exercise

A blessing for one's beloved

I love the light in your eyes, the smell of your hair, the sound of your voice. I love the goodness in your heart and the kindness of your deeds. I love our conversations, our home, the family we have created together. I love you. You are a blessing from God.

May God bless you, as you have blessed me, with joy and light and love. Amen.

— Naomi Levy (From *Talking to God*)

Quoted in Noam Sachs & Shawn Fields-Meyer, *A Day Apart: Shabbat At Home* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2004),59.

Making time for 'us'

One couple, married over thirty years, has a regular 'date'. Each Saturday night, bottle of wine in hand, they arrive at their local BYO pizza-pasta restaurant where they are greeted warmly and ushered to 'their table'. There they review the week together...

This week: Invite your spouse out on a date!

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Scripture passages are from W.G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York, 2006), except the Hosea passage which is from *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London, 1985).