

What Can UU's Learn from the Jewish Sabbath?

Victor Ashear

August 14, 2016

Maybe you think it is odd that this fellowship is devoting an entire month to a Jewish practice. You may be wondering what possible relevance the Sabbath has to us? I hope to show that although much of the way the Sabbath is practiced by Orthodox Jews and some Christians may not be relevant to us, we have an opportunity to remake "*Shabbat*" into a practice both personally meaningful and in keeping with UU values and beliefs. In particular I think a version of Sabbath practice would be consistent with Principle 3: "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Also Principle 7: "Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are apart." Joseph Campbell said that meaning comes from the experience of life to its full. Sabbath is about experiencing life.

For background I will discuss the biblical references to the Sabbath, and review how Jews observe it now. Then I will expand on some of the value of the concept that I see for UUs. I want to share my understanding of the basics of *Shabbat* as it was conceived that I believe are still quite relevant today including for UU's.

First I will say a few words about my approach to the Bible. Growing up in the Jewish faith I was taught to believe that every word in the Bible was from God and was to be taken literally. In my late teens, realizing the absurdity of many of the stories and miracles, I rejected the Bible completely. More recently with the help of authors such as Karen Armstrong, Joseph Campbell, and John Buehrens I have come to realize the stories in the Bible are myths and they reveal perennial spiritual truths if we are able to understand them as myths. So this is the frame I am using for my Biblical references.

In the first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, at the conclusion of the creation story, the Bible states, "And the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had made and he rested...And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because that in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made." This image of God "resting" becomes the basis of one of the most important observances in Judaism, the *Shabbat*. A second meaning of the Hebrew word "*Shabbat*" besides "rest" is the "cessation of activity" and I think an equally appropriate translation in this context. The rabbinic interpretation here is that God is providing an example of the value of pausing from creative activity and work in order to reflect and appreciate what was created.

It is in the Ten Commandments that observance of *Shabbat* is declared most clearly. *Shabbat* in fact is the only holy day in the Jewish calendar referred to in them. The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Bible, in Exodus and again

in Deuteronomy, and interestingly with different wording. In the Exodus version the explanation for resting or ceasing on the *Shabbat* is as in Genesis, because God ceased from creating on that day. However in the Deuteronomy version of this commandment the explanation is Jews are to rest because they were slaves in Egypt until God redeemed them and on the Sabbath they are to recall this event. In both versions of this commandment the Sabbath rule is extended to the entire household including servants and livestock.

The oral rabbinic tradition provides clarity and guidance to observant Jews on how to practice the laws of Moses. It is certainly the case with the observance of *Shabbat*. Much of the practice regarding *Shabbat* includes activities one may not engage in. The list of activities that were prohibited in biblical times is 39 items long and includes, chopping wood, sewing, cooking and lighting or extinguishing a fire, carrying outside a perimeter, grinding grain, planting, reaping, shearing, writing and erasing. These activities were associated with building the tabernacle. Traditionally the rabbis have added further restrictions including spending money or engaging in commerce. In the past century rabbis have prohibited driving in a car, turning on or off appliances, including phones and devices, or lights. The rabbis view combustion in a car engine and electricity of any type as a kind of fire. Starting or extinguishing a fire is prohibited on the Sabbath. The idea behind all these prohibitions on the Sabbath is not that they represent toil but rather that they have an impact on the world or are in some sense “creative.” So the Jewish idea is that on the Sabbath instead of acting upon the world one takes the world in, one revels in and appreciates.

In the Genesis creation story each day is defined by the words. “...and it was evening and it was morning...” Thus *Shabbat* begins about 20 minutes before sundown on Friday and ends after dark on Saturday. The woman of the home lights *Shabbat* candles prior to sundown. Synagogue services occur on Friday evening, Saturday morning and late Saturday afternoon. Three special meals are eaten over the 26-hour period. A blessing on wine precedes the Friday evening meal and the Saturday lunch.

My memories as a young child of *Shabbat* are wonderful. I remember my father placing his hands on my young head and blessing my siblings and me after blessing the wine on Friday eve. I remember walking to synagogue with my dad and sitting next to him. I also remember reading the Bible in Hebrew with my dad on Saturday afternoons. We also sang hymns in Hebrew during the Sabbath lunch. So *Shabbat* was very much a family time for me growing up. It was truly a special day.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (noted for accompanying Dr. King on the Selma march) talked about *Shabbat* as a “cathedral in time.” Judaism he says is a religion that sanctified time and made some periods unique. And I quote, “Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent

stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies. It is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn.” Again in the creation story in Genesis, after God completes his six days of work it states, “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” I quote again from Heschel: “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

For Heschel, *Shabbat* is a reminder of our human place in existence. When we live in the “world of space” as he referred to it we feel powerful, we make things happen. In the world of space we create or repair things, whether they be software, cars, works of art, devices etc. In doing so we may lose our perspective in the sense that we feel more in control than we actually are. As we acquire more comforts and conveniences we may come to delude ourselves that we have conquered time. Again I quote from Heschel: “To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time 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 to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.”

Heschel may be overstating it but perhaps you’d agree that life loses balance when we don’t take a break from doing, creating and acting. We cannot fail to act in the realm of space because our survival and well being depend upon it. But it would be a mistake never to pause, to appreciate and to recognize our very small place in the scheme of the universe. In the words of the poet William Wordsworth: “The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours.”

The late psychoanalyst Erich Fromm expressed a similar view to Heschel’s about the meaning of *Shabbat*. He says that lighting a match or pulling a blade of grass doesn’t require much effort but they symbolize human interference with nature. In contrast, “The Sabbath symbolizes a state of complete harmony” between people and nature and between each other. On the Sabbath we are “freed from the chains of time.... The Sabbath ritual is more than a day of rest in the modern sense; it is a day of salvation and freedom.” Fromm is picking up on the Deuteronomy version of the Sabbath here.

Author Lynne Baab, who wrote a book about Sabbath-keeping for non-Jews, pointed out that in contrast to Christian leaders and UU ministers, rabbis who observed the Sabbath did not experience burnout. Christians in emulating Jesus, she notes, “have a tendency toward idolatry of our own competence and energy. On the Sabbath we realize God is in control of the universe and we are not....we

are less likely to make the mistake of taking ourselves too seriously that we lose balance and stumble toward burnout.” One rabbi Baab interviewed said Jews don’t have a theology of sacrifice. Instead balancing among four priorities is encouraged: family, work, making a difference in the world, and rest.

For me *Shabbat* is similar to backpacking. When you go backpacking you spend a fair amount of time and effort planning where you will go, gathering what you will need, including food, etc. Then you hike to get to your destination and you set up camp. Finally you relax and take in the surroundings. You enter the realm of time and you leave the world of obligations behind you. You are being rather than doing. Similarly, observant Jews spend much of Friday shopping, cooking, house cleaning, bathing and otherwise preparing for *Shabbat*.

I stopped being a practicing Jew because I couldn’t believe in a personal God who monitored my actions and meted out rewards and punishments based on how faithfully I followed Jewish law. One of many practices that fell by the wayside was the Sabbath. Saturday became indistinguishable from Sunday. For a long time I confess I felt liberated. I could use electricity, drive, shop etc. Only recently have I come to realize that far from being a burden, the Sabbath is a gift. To observe the Sabbath just because a God I don’t believe in said so makes no sense. However, to see the Sabbath as a gift we give ourselves does make sense. The Sabbath is a gift of time, and time is the most precious thing any human being has. Time once it passes, cannot be regained. So taking time out at regular intervals allows one to appreciate and value our lives.

In the observance of *Shabbat*, Judaism shares a couple of things in common with Buddhism, as I have come to realize. The most obvious similarity that I see is the practice of meditation that is common to both. In both Buddhist meditation and *Shabbat* we leave the world of daily activities and worries behind. Also in Buddhism and in *Shabbat* the practice is commonly conducted in groups. In both there is awareness and appreciation of the “basic goodness” of creation.

Reform Judaism is the most liberal branch of the religion and it is characterized by the lack of strict observance of the laws of Moses. Reform Jews generally eat foods not considered Kosher, men don’t wear the phylacteries for daily prayer, and they drive their cars to the synagogue and elsewhere on the Sabbath. Most feel free to use electricity, to cook and so on. Their focus is predominantly ethical rather than sacramental. In other words Reform Jews are very similar to UUs. Their approach to the Sabbath is for each individual to determine what is most meaningful and to follow that. Reform Jews don’t observe laws and rules in order to please a personal God who rewards and punishes. My suggestion is that we take the lead from the Reform Jews in crafting a *Shabbat* that provides a personally meaningful experience.

Recently UU congregations have been experimenting with Sabbath observance. I heard a talk at GA given by the minister of First Unitarian Church of Brooklyn.

Four times a year their church has an all day Sabbath in the building. The minister observes a *Shabbat* at home weekly. I know of several other UU ministers who have spoken of personal *Shabbat* practice. Traditionally both Jews and Christians have celebrated Sabbath by as a combination of both home and communal practices.

Here are some questions to ask yourself if you are considering practicing a Sabbath: What would you like your *Shabbat* to be? What kind of experience are you hoping to have? Are you seeking a respite from work? Do you want to create family time? Are you seeking a spiritual experience? Will a special meal be part of your observance?

How long would you like it to last? How will you usher in it's beginning? It will be important to mark the start with a particular ritual. If this isn't done it might be too easy for you to slip out of it. Among Jews, the woman of the house lights candles and says a blessing on Friday evening to mark the beginning. Might you light a chalice? Also it will be important to be mindful of how you mark the end of your Sabbath.

What activities will you abstain from? For example will you avoid screens? Will you avoid phone calls? Will you spend money or not? Will you use your car? What activities will you engage in to promote your personal concept of *Shabbat*? Will your *Shabbat* be a weekly observance?

Based on advice I received at the General Assembly workshop I mentioned, I would suggest starting out with a 3 or 4-hour period. The thinking is it will be difficult to last a whole day without doing your usual things like shopping, driving, listening to news, using cell phones, tablets and laptops. Janet and I are planning to have a weekly *Shabbat*. We are hoping it will be a spiritual practice that brings us closer to nature, to each other and the people that matter most to us. We want to get started as soon as the remodeling of our house is finished. We are planning to begin with a half day. It might be helpful for all of us who are interested to compare notes. I wonder if there is interest in having a congregational *Shabbat* such as they do in the Brooklyn congregation?

I would suggest you try having a personal *Shabbat* for a few weeks in a row to see if it provides the benefits I have spoken about here. May you find increased sense of connection to nature and to your loved ones. May you feel a sense of wonder and appreciation for your life.