

Hello friends. I'm glad you could join me. Pull up a chair.

It may not look like much, but for me, this is the best place in whole world; better than the beach in Hawaii, better than a suite at the Plaza Hotel. It's the best place because it's a magical place; a place where amazing things happen every week. This is our Shabbat table. And I would like to share its magic with you.

What is it, you might ask, that is so magical about our Shabbat table? It's not the most beautiful table in the world. And we don't have a Cordon bleu trained chef to prepare our meals. Yet, every week, something amazing happens when we sit down at this table.

Five minutes before dinner time on a Friday night, our house is usually filled with chaos. I am frantically trying to put the finishing touches on Saturday morning's sermon. Meanwhile, my wife Illyse is trying to get one last load of laundry in the dryer or figure out where we put one of the table cloths that can actually fit our dining room table. My son Yoni has just reached the height of his cranky time, near tears that he can't find his favorite toy or whining that he wants Gracie the dog to stop jumping up on the couch next to him. My sister in law Terese is tearing around the kitchen trying to figure out where I hid the salad bowl. And somebody is probably snapping at somebody—or trying really hard to avoid it.

Then, we gather around this table, take our seats, and, each week, an amazing thing happens.

Our house gets very quiet. We begin to feel calm descending upon us. Brows un wrinkle, muscles relax, smiles reappear. No one is snapping at each other anymore—the Shabbat table is a no snapping zone. Instead of tension, there is love and warmth all around. We conduct the Shabbat rituals with a mixture of joy, goofy humor and public displays of affection. And the food tastes better than it does the rest of the week—no matter who cooked it. We sit at the Shabbat table for a long time, if we can, just talking and enjoying the chance to be together. Even Yoni always sets his own personal world records for sitting at the table on Friday nights.

I would like to share the magic of Shabbat with each and every one of you.

I know you can't come over every week. But that's okay. You can take it home with you—or bring it to the home of a friend or relative. Shabbat is a gift to us that can be enjoyed anywhere. Not just on Friday night, but on Saturday too if you choose. Shabbat is one of the most important and healthy things we can do for ourselves and our families--and it's really easier than you might think.

Why is Shabbat so important for our lives?

At this time of the year, our tradition encourages us to do a serious *Cheshbon HaNefesh*; to take stock of ourselves and our lives, and identify those areas of our life where we need to make changes. My guess is that many of us would want to change the way we care for ourselves.

How many of us here today feel constantly overscheduled; caught up in a seven days a week routine of work, chores, errands, volunteer commitments that never seem to end? How many of us feel so overstressed by the obligations we have taken on or the goals we have set that we feel guilty anytime we aren't making full use of our time to get something done? How many of us just feel tired all the time? How many of us feel trapped by the constant barrage of cell phone calls, emails, instant messages that demand our attention?

I would guess, that for many of the same reasons, there are lots of us who would like to change the way we handle our relationships with the important people in our lives: our spouses, our parents, our siblings, our kids and grandkids. How many of us feel that we have to struggle to make sure we have any family time. How many of us put off alone time with our spouses week after week because something or someone else needs our attention. How often do we feel that, even when we are together, there are so many distractions during family time that it is hard to connect in a meaningful way to our loved ones?

I am sure that there are also many people among us who would like to find connections to something bigger than ourselves. That connection to something bigger might come from being a part of a community where we are valued members—a place where everyone knows our name. Such communities are harder to come by in a time when our traditional communities, workplaces and neighborhoods are in such flux.

And, finally, I wonder how many of us here today are feeling a sense of spiritual yearning; an instinctual need to forge a stronger connection with God?

The magic of Shabbat is that it can help us meet all these needs.

Shabbat offers us the gift of down time; away from our overscheduled lives. Shabbat offers us the gift of family time; free from the distractions that push us apart the rest of the week. For those of us who crave community time, Shabbat provides natural opportunities to get together to eat, to pray, to learn or just to schmooze over a thimble of scotch or a piece of herring. For those of us looking to feel a stronger sense of God's presence in our lives, Shabbat carves out time for us to nurture our spirituality whether that means taking a walk through the woods to admire the fall colors, or hearing words of Torah, or both.

Shabbat really is easier than we think.

Part of the magic of Shabbat is that it can meet so many of our deepest needs. As we are looking toward making changes for better for the coming year, making or deepening our commitment to Shabbat seems like a no-brainer.

Yet, I get the sense that many of think of Shabbat not as a gift but as a burdensome obligation. I understand where that kind of thinking comes from. Some of us grew up in homes that were strictly observant. Other grew up with observant grandparents. Still others have family members who have become Orthodox *Baali Teshuvah*. Our experience of Shabbat comes mostly from these settings. Shabbat in these traditional settings can be a thing of beauty; a truly inspiring day of rest, renewal, joy and spirituality.

But in traditional settings, Shabbat can also sometimes seem claustrophobic and even downright oppressive; with so many rules about what we can't do hitting us at every turn. Many of us, these days, don't want to allow a set of seemingly arbitrary rules restrict our activities so severely for one-seventh of our week. We don't necessarily believe these rules came from God. And so we don't consider making Shabbat a part of our lives.

Personally, I enjoy incorporating many of the elements of a traditional Shabbat observance in my life. But the traditional way is not the only way. Shabbat does not need to be an "all or nothing," "My way or the highway" commitment. We can choose instead to make Shabbat our own; to embrace the gifts of Shabbat on our terms without being hyper-focused on the rules.

To make Shabbat our own, we need to look at the forest—the big ideas that make Shabbat such a rich experience—and not worry about the trees—the details of observance that bog us down or drive us away. We need to assert our freedom to customize and personalize the experience for ourselves and our families; to make the concept of Shabbat work for us on a very basic level.

Is it heresy for a Conservative Rabbi to be dispensing this kind of advice?

No, it's simply an affirmation of what many of us who want Jewish tradition to play a significant role in our lives are already doing. Even I have gone through different phases of my own Shabbat observance. There was a time in my life when, I observed Shabbat very strictly. I did not use electricity on Shabbat. I did not drive anywhere on Shabbat. I even tore toilet paper in advance. After moving to California, I found myself gravitating to a more liberal version of Shabbat observance that included driving to synagogue, using electricity and even letting my kids take part in some extra-curricular activities. In the last few years, since I returned to the East Coast, my observance has settled somewhere in the middle.

I freely admit that my decisions have been based on not only Jewish law, but also on what I thought was possible and what would make Shabbat most meaningful in my life. I believe my experience illustrates the way that Conservative Judaism should be seeking to make an impact in the 21st century. We have very little need any more for Law Committees to meet and deliberate about what is the Conservative approach to Jewish law. It's an interesting exercise, but nobody is listening. What we want and need Conservative Judaism to do for us is to help us explore the ways that Jewish tradition can enrich and add meaning to our lives. Or, to put it another way, Conservative Judaism should be focusing on helping us to make our own personal Jewish journeys richer and more meaningful, and not worry so much about where these journeys will take us.

With that said, let's explore and envision some of the possibilities.

First of all, while Shabbat can be an entire twenty five hour day—as our tradition describes—it doesn't have to be. Even an hour of Shabbat can yield significant benefits. Remember, Shabbat is not an all or nothing deal.

Second, keep the focus on how Shabbat can enhance our lives, and keep the rules simple. By definition, Shabbat has to be a time set apart from the rest of the week; a time in which we live differently. Shabbat should be a time when we are not doing our paid work, or working around the house. Shabbat should be restful and stress-free. Shabbat should be a time when we enjoy the company of family and friends, and enjoy good food.

Shabbat does not have to be much more complicated than that.

In fact, this year, Reboot.com, a group of Jewish artists, launched a “National Day of Unplugging”, designed to promote the idea of a weekly Shabbat experience that could be enjoyed by anyone. Reboot suggested the following ten rules for the day—most of which focus on the positive.

1. Avoid technology
2. Connect with loved ones
3. Nurture your health
4. Get outside
5. Avoid commerce
6. Light candles
7. Drink wine
8. Eat bread
9. Find silence
10. Give back

So what can we do to bring the magic of Shabbat to our lives. Here are a few examples.

Use Shabbat to create some designated family time. A family dinner on Shabbat—or another meal—is a great way to bring family together. Make sure that it's a meal where everyone can sit together without interruption. Turn off the TV and the cellphones. At this Shabbat meal use or modify the traditional rituals of blessing our children and our spouses. During the meal, take time to check in with each other and talk about what happened during the past week in each person's life. Serve foods that make the meal seem special—wine and challah, for sure. And don't forget dessert.

We can also use Shabbat to create some designated couples time. It's well known that our tradition encourages us to set aside time for intimacy on Shabbat. Intimacy is one of the things that keeps our marriages healthy. Beyond that, though, Shabbat is a time when, if we are willing to turn off the distractions for a while, we can simply experience “being together” with our partners. Illyse and I often find that with the TV off and the phones quiet, Friday night is a great time for us to check in with each other and have those long conversations that are just not possible the rest of the week.

On an even more basic level, Shabbat can be the time that we finally get some rest, both physical and mental. On Shabbat, make sure to block off time not to do errands, housework, or yard work. Make this also a time when we don't check our work email or do any online shopping. Then, we can try using some of the time we suddenly have to enjoy one of Shabbat's greatest pleasures—the Shabbat nap. As for mental rest, let's try making our home a *Shalom Bayit* zone on Shabbat—let peace reign: no fighting, no complaining, and no insulting—just a day when everyone gets along.

Of course Shabbat can also give us time for appreciating being a part of a community. Shabbat can be a great time to go to the synagogue and connect with each other. But Shabbat can also be a great time for having friends over, for walking the neighborhood, or for meeting at the playground.

And finally, Shabbat can give us the gift of spirituality.

Shabbat is a time to remind ourselves of the important role God plays in our lives. It is only fitting to invite God to share our experience of Shabbat. Creating a sense of God's presence is a good reason for including some of the traditional Jewish rituals at our Shabbat meals. Creating a sense of God presence is also a good reason to open up the Torah, at home or in the synagogue, and listen to the words of God. And finally, creating a sense of God's presence is a good reason to take time to appreciate the beauty of the natural world by taking a long walk or at least a long relaxed gaze out the window.

I realize that by encouraging us to focus on the basics of Shabbat and on making Shabbat work for us, I am taking--if you pardon the expression--an un-Orthodox approach. Those of us who take up the challenge I am offering may decide to do Shabbat differently from the traditional models. Some of you might light candles when everyone is finally home. Some of you might have Friday night dinner in a restaurant. Some of you might study Torah on the computer on Saturday afternoon. Some of you might even drive to a nearby park and take in the grandeur of the waves lapping onto the shore or the leaves turning to gold, orange and red.

I'm not worried

Yes, there is a lot to be said for the wisdom of the generations, the ways our traditions has developed to create a meaningful Shabbat experience. But our challenge, and our opportunity, is to take the gift of Shabbat and make it our own. We owe it to ourselves to embrace this opportunity, to be creative, to take some risks, without worrying whether we're doing it exactly right. I will be happy to hear about your experiments and encourage you along the way.

Finally, just because making Shabbat a part of our lives makes so much sense on its own doesn't mean that God isn't involved. Our tradition teaches us that on this very day, 5771 years ago, as the sun was setting, God gave the first humans, Adam and Eve, who were created on Rosh Hashanah, the gift of Shabbat. God made the seventh day holy, and presented it to us as an opportunity each week to bring its magic into our homes.

Tonight and every Friday night, it's up to us to make the magic happen.

See you around the Shabbat table.