

Ki Tisa – Making Shabbat

It happened every Friday night.

My sister Tatty and I would sneak off just before the Aleinu.

We would begin by surveying the oneg spread. The best nights were when Arlene was baking, because she made those peanut butter cookies with the Hershey's kisses in the middle - those were our favorites.

But even if nothing looked appealing to our five-year-old taste buds, there was always a backup: the sugar cubes that sat next to the coffee dispenser.

Crouched in the entryway closet, hidden by the blue choir robes that stood sentry all year round, my sister and I would eat sugar cubes and giggle as we listened to our parents search the synagogue in an attempt to get us home and into bed.

That was my Shabbat. Every single Shabbat, rain or shine, Tatty would light the candles, dad would say kiddish, and I would say hamotzi. After dinner we went to synagogue, and after synagogue we went home and to bed.

There were no negotiations - we were not allowed to sleep at friends houses on Friday nights, and if our friends wanted to sleep over at our house, they came to Shabbat services with us.

Period, end.

As I got older and "cooler", this became a burden - but apparently it stuck, because in college, though I wasn't a big fan of the Hillel community, I spent almost every Friday evening at services.

Ki Tisa, as you heard just a few minutes ago, contains words very familiar to us: *V'shamru v'nei Yisrael et ha'Shabbat, la'asot et ha'Shabbat l'doro'tam brit olam*. The people of Israel shall guard Shabbat, shall make Shabbat throughout their generations to come, as a covenant, forever.

But what does it mean to “make Shabbat”? The root of the word, shin bet tav, means “to rest”, and we know that God refrained from work on the seventh day and that this day of rest was God’s “Shabbat”, so making Shabbat must require a period of rest and a refraining from work.

But what should that period of rest look like? And what does it mean to refrain from work?

What is work anyway?

Throughout the Torah, a few tasks are explicitly listed as work to refrain from on Shabbat: gathering food, plowing and reaping, kindling a fire, and chopping wood. But the rabbis needed to know more. In order to practice a Judaism that was as correct as possible, in order to be the best Jews they could be, they needed to know what this *malacha*, this “work” was.

First they noted that on the very first Shabbat, the seventh day of creation, God finishes all of the work, all of the *malacha*, and rests. Since the first six days were all about creation, it follows that the work God was resting from was the act of creating. This is used to show that we too are to refrain from “creative” activities on Shabbat.

But how do you define a “creative activity”?

For this, the rabbis found an answer in our Torah portion: The commandment “*vshamru et hashabbat*” comes at the tail-end of a long, detailed complicated description of exactly how to build the tabernacle. In explaining the two topics’

proximity to each other in the text, the rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud decided that the creative work to be refrained from on Shabbat was all work involved in building the tabernacle. This is where the 39 Shabbat restrictions come from. They include but are not limited to (deep breath):

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| 5.1 Planting | 5.21 Tying |
| 5.2 Plowing | 5.22 Untying |
| 5.5 Threshing | 5.23 Sewing |
| 5.6 Winnowing | 5.32 Writing |
| 5.8 Grinding | 5.33 Erasing |
| 5.11 Cooking | 5.34 Building |
| 5.13 Laundering | 5.35 Demolition |
| 5.18 Making two loops | 5.36 Extinguishing a fire |
| 5.19 Weaving | 5.37 Igniting a fire |
| 5.20 Separating two threads | 5.38 Applying the finishing touch |

It's a long list, and one is left wondering at the end what in fact is ALLOWED after all of these prohibitions. The rabbis answer, of course, is study (and if you'd like to, we'd love to have you join us at Torah Study tomorrow!)

I do not list these items to poke fun at the rabbis of the Talmud, or even those who adhere to each of these prohibitions today. Those rabbis were merely trying to figure out what "*V'shamru et hashabbat*" means.

Now, "*V'shamru*" comes from the Hebrew root meaning to guard or protect. And so my next question becomes, what is it exactly that we're protecting Shabbat from? Is Shabbat in danger? What could possibly be threatening Shabbat?!?

The answer, I think, lies within the community itself. The only true threat to any holiday

is the possibility that it will cease to be celebrated. Shabbat, as a weekly holiday, is especially threatened, because it happens so frequently that it is remarkably easy to put off a Shabbat celebration by saying “Eh, I’ll light candles/bake challah/say hi to God next week.” The ancient rabbis, I think, were merely trying to firmly situate a check list around the holiday to keep it from disappearing.

And disappear it has not. As pre-state Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’am so famously stated, “More than the Jewish people has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people.” In my history class on Judaism in the Middle Ages, we are learning how true this is: the weekly rest period kept medieval Jewish communities close together and in communication with each other - no Jew could travel for more than six days straight, and when he arrived in a strange town on Friday afternoon, he was taken in for Shabbat as a rule. Without this weekly rest period, Jewish communities would surely not have remained as strong.

So what is your way of guarding, of protecting Shabbat? What does it mean for you to refrain from work? Most likely it doesn’t involve winnowing, and indeed some of the listed prohibitions, like sewing or writing, can be alternately defined as leisure activities that have a special place in your Shabbat rest.

I am not calling you to refrain from flipping light switches or baking (God forbid I ever call on any of you to refrain from baking!) I merely wonder:

What makes it Shabbat for you?

What moment signifies that you have moved from your six days of creating into a seventh day of rest?

It can be as simple
as eating
a sugar cube.

Shabbat Shalom.