

Part One - A Moment of Renewal

Sleep is one of God's most precious gifts to us. The sleep period is the time when we regroup our powers. When we're sleeping we can't, at the same time, be "up and doing". We can't be working or having fun or making love or playing tennis. In this sense, sleep deprives us of time for enjoying life but the truth is that without sleep we would never be in condition to do any kind of activity. Without sleep, we would be continually exhausted. Indeed, if we went many days without sleep, we would soon die out of weakness, we would be physically and emotionally depleted.

Most of us go to sleep at night. Some few of us work nights and sleep during the day. It is possible for us to split our sleep assignment into a few hours by day and a few hours by night, but most of us don't do that. We seem to need our sleep in one large segment. We renew our physical and emotional strength by turning aside from our regular activity routine and by yielding to the natural demand for rest and renewal. All mankind has this need, as does the animal kingdom. There is abundant evidence that even plants, flowers and trees sleep.

In recent days, many people in the Western World have discovered "Transcendental Meditation", an export of the Orient, which is a kind of technique which enables one to hypnotize himself into a few minutes of mind rest on an intermittent basis. Hypnotists and those trained in psychology have taught similar processes without claiming to have something "new" or "different". I have personally used this simple technique without the "T.M." phraseology or terms for twenty years, at least. It is helpful to us westerners because we stand in such great need of techniques for resting. Never has a culture so needed devices for breaking into its cycle of perpetual motion as does ours.

But "T.M." and self-hypnotic crutches only begins to solve the problem of our society. They are "naps" but not "sleep". They are helpful aids but not cures. We need something much more profound. Those of us who are overwhelmed by the demands and opportunities of our technological age need more than a palliative to save us from a moment's pain. We need a dramatic and intense counter-force that will fully claim our mind and heart and keep us from wasting away.

It is my conviction that Judaism can supply us with such a saving force. It is my experience that Judaism has precisely that philosophy and those techniques which are remarkably suited to the need for rest and revitalization in our society. What is that philosophy and what are those techniques that can give us peace of mind and soul (shalom) for our time? Part of the answer lies in the Hebraic concept of the Shabbat (the Sabbath).

It is a reflection of the genius of our Hebrew ancestors that they translated the universal need for sleep into spiritual terms. They believed that even as all living things need to withdraw from activity in order to regroup their physical powers, so they need a Sabbath, a fixed time to regroup their spiritual powers. Mankind, especially, our fathers taught, needs to withdraw from its cycle of getting and spending on a regular basis, and for a significant segment of time (one day a week),

in order to "sleep", in order to cleanse the mind of its tortured content and to link the spirit to its Source where quiet and peace and contentment prevail.

(In this column next week, we will discuss the philosophy and techniques of the Jewish concept of the Sabbath, and we will go on to other Jewish ideas that can enable us to live enthusiastically in modern times.)

Part Two - The Moment of Renewal

Last week we talked about the growing need in our time for moments of rest and renewal. The chaotic pace of our lives demands that we find ways to regroup our strength, both physically and spiritually.

The popularity of techniques like Transcendental Meditation, which is a kind of self-hypnosis, is the result of efforts to find moments of rest and renewal. Such techniques (TM is only one of such techniques, most of which follow similar procedures, using different words and phrases) are frequently successful, but only for short periods of time. They don't solve any basic problems; they don't give us a new outlook on life; they simply permit us to jump back into the chaotic stream once more to thrash around a little longer.

The real problem is deeper and demands a more thorough-going solution. That answer is to be found only in a philosophy of life that gives us a goal (not merely techniques), that gives us inspiration as well as rest, that gives us a cause as well as relief. If this philosophy also joins us to a heroic group which has for thousands of years striven valiantly to give meaning to the human dilemma, then it is all the more precious.

I am speaking of Judaism, that way of life so completely ignored by most Jews in modern times. Let us begin our consideration of what Judaism has to offer with an analysis of its "moment of rest", the Sabbath. First of all, we see that our "moment" is much more than a moment. While the idea of the Shabbat can be condensed to a technique spanning only a few minutes a day (like TM), its greater effectiveness lies precisely in the fact that it spans 24 hours. Our life is so hectic today that we need a total kind of withdrawal which endures over a long period of time. Our frequent resort to vacations is an indication that we recognize this need, but we usually return from a vacation unrested, and on edge. We usually need a vacation when we return from vacation. That's because it is not pragmatically oriented as the Sabbath celebration is planned.

How is the Sabbath Different?

The Sabbath is different from the usual vacation in several regards. First of all, it comes regularly, once a week. It is a vacation you must take in order to benefit most from what it has to teach. Since it comes regularly, you are compelled to withdraw from the dictates of your normal business. Like the discipline of a diet, the discipline of Sabbath observance forces you to help yourself. The only question is whether you will submit yourself to this discipline.

The Sabbath is different from other rest procedures because it works on the mind as well as on the body. It works on the emotions as well as on the intellect. It works on the individual and, at the same time, it brings him closer to his family, to his intimate family, to the Jewish family, and to mankind.

How does the Sabbath do all this? Through the following procedures:

1. The ritual of change (ushering in the new spirit) - the candle-lighting, the Kiddush, the Sabbath meal.
2. The moment of group-linkage (service attendance on Friday nite or Saturday morning or both) - this features both individual and group prayer.
3. The study period (either alone or with a group in which the deeper meaning of life is explored and relived).
4. The moment of diversion - this can be sleep, a visit to a nature reserve, or even athletic participation (depending on the individual's tendency and need).
5. The moment of dedication - this is the period ending the Sabbath when one does that kind of soul-searching and sets that frame of mind which hopefully will endure the rest of the week.

We will continue to discuss these specifics in future columns as we demonstrate in detail why the Sabbath idea is as revolutionary today as it ever was.

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From the Rabbi's Desk

THE MOMENT OF RENEWAL (Part Three)

The Ritual of Change

The Rabbis have said that on the Sabbath we are asked to rehearse "The World to Come - Ha-olam Ha-bah". We are asked to practice how it will be on that day "when the Messiah comes", when there will be peace and justice in the world.

We are concerned, then, on the Sabbath, with trying to achieve a real change in our lives. You are urged to ask forgiveness from those whom you have wronged during the week. You are asked to forgive those who seek forgiveness. You are asked to withdraw from your pursuit of security, from your business labors. On the Sabbath, you don't do the things you do on other days. You don't go shopping, you don't cook, you don't clean house, you don't engage in commercial transactions, nor do you engage in a recreational program which is itself a new kind of stress. You are to avoid stress on the Sabbath. You are to dream of "the world to come", the better world, and you are to try to live it on this day.

The first step in the ritual of change, then, is TURNING ASIDE FROM ONE'S REGULAR PURSUITS. Unless one is able to accomplish this, one is not in the position to direct oneself towards the positive aspects of the Sabbath. To help us make this shift, our tradition supplies several ceremonies. We must understand that a ceremony has no power in itself. It has meaning only if we bring something to it. What we bring to it depends on the depth of our resolve and our sensitivity.

A) The candle-lighting (discussed several weeks ago in this column) is one of the rituals which help us to redirect our minds. We are urged to think here of our family, of our loved ones. The mood is one of forgiveness and love. We form a tight circle around the lights. We embrace. We say words of affection. If your loved ones are not at home, then this is the time for you to be thinking of them. Since they can be lighting the candles WHEREVER THEY ARE and at the same time (sundown), you can each be lighting and thinking of each other AT THE VERY SAME MOMENT. Make this arrangement with your children as a bond forever. Let the arrival of the Sabbath be the moment when love flows between us and when we think about each other. It must then be a quiet moment. We cannot be concerned about other things. It must not be done perfunctorily. There must be what the Hasidim call "kavanah", intention.

In our occupation with the routine of the week, we sometimes overlook those we love most, our spouse or our children. We may have argued about a small matter and never completely resolved it. The candle-lighting is the time to bring the family together.

B) The kiddush provides us with a second opportunity for turning off the thoughts that occupy our mind throughout the rest of the week. As we raise the cup of wine, we should think of our people. This is the ritual which asks us to link ourselves to those who were enslaved by Pharaoh, to those who died in concentration camps, to the Israelis, and to non-Jews who are oppressed

around the world today. We are asked to think of suffering and redemption, of the escape from slavery, of the victory over oppressors, of the hope that is always present because God's power is ever with us. The past and the future are blended together in this symbol. Drink the wine and be reminded of who you are, as a Jew. Drink the wine and think of what you have to do, as a Jew. (Copies of our suggested ritual are available at the office.)

- C) The Sabbath meal is also a part of the ritual of change which helps us to usher in the spirit of the Shabbat. The challah is present on the table as a symbol of all things that grow from the earth. Through the divinely ordained miracles of nature, the grain that made possible this bread emerges from the planted seed. (The blessing over bread is sung. Read it, if you can't sing.) All present get a slice of bread and taste of it. In some families, all present take a part of the same slice, as a sign of togetherness.

In our affluent world, it is difficult for those of us who are so well-fed to experience the emotion of gratitude. The symbol of the challah, and the blessing over it, is designed to remind us that all we have is but a by-product of God's creation. We are all receivers. If we can remember that, life seems a little less boring and shallow. The Sabbath rituals remind us of our tie to something greater than ourselves. They remind us we are not alone.

- D) As a part of the meal, and at a convenient time, the father of the house blesses the children. (See our article, "A Recipe for Young Lovers"). No matter how busy he may have been throughout the week, he is asked now to touch the children and to express his love for them. In the tradition, the sons are blessed, "May God make you as Ephraim and Menasseh", the sons of Joseph. The girls are blessed, "May God make you as Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah", the matriarchs of early Jewish history. These traditional blessings need not be used if the father has words of his own which might be more personal, or his individualized words can be added to those of the tradition. The important thing is that the father manifest his affection for the children especially at this time.

In former days, it was assumed the mother was with the children all day, so there was no prepared ritual for her to come close to the children. In today's world, where mother, also, may be away part or all of the day, it is wise for her, too, to participate in the blessing of the children in such a way as she is able.

Some of us are imaginative enough and creative enough to use ritual to dramatic advantage. If one understands that the ritual is only the point of beginning and that we are free to amplify it, he can come to the true meaning of the Sabbath.