

Rabbi Steve Cohen
 Yom Kippur evening, October 1, 2006
 Congregation B'nai B'rith Santa Barbara CA

Tomorrow morning we will hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah calling out to us across the centuries: "If you proclaim the Sabbath a delight...then you shall be a delight to the Lord, and I will set you atop the high places of the earth." Isaiah wants us to call the Sabbath a delight, but since he's not here this evening, I would like to begin by touching upon some of the grief that Shabbat has caused me and my family over the years!

How can I forget the many Fridays when we worked like dogs to get the house clean, the table set, with silver Kiddush cups and candlesticks polished and a meal on the table, and then when we tried to give our young kids the traditional parents blessing, a simple and beautiful expression of love, they would squirm away from us, and reject outright our attempt to ask God to bless and protect them. How well we remember the arguments over whose turn it was to light the candles. And the weeks when the chicken was too dry, or the whole meal cold. Over the years, it feels like we have experienced all of the one hundred ways in which the beautiful perfection of the ideal Shabbat could disintegrate before our weary and jaded eyes.

Isaiah would have us call the Shabbat a delight, and yes, there have been many beautiful Shabbat experiences; but in reality, too many times over the years I have found myself confused and conflicted on Shabbat: torn between wanting to make Shabbat holy, on the one hand, and the limitations and demands of my real life, with my real family, here in Santa Barbara—which just is not all that well set-up for Shabbat observance.

For some people, I know, the answer is easy. Stop worrying! If Shabbat is a problem, then just declare yourself "very Reformed" and let it go! But I think that more and more of us are coming to understand that we need the wisdom and sanity of Shabbat in our lives. Fifty years ago, we thought that technology and a host of labor-saving devices would make life more relaxed. But now we see that life has not become easier, but faster. Yes, our computers, cell phones, email and pagers have made us much more efficient, but they have destroyed the open spaces in our lives. We are pushing ourselves to run faster and faster and faster, like hamsters on a wheel. And we desperately need someone to say "stop." That voice is Shabbat, a wise old teacher, urging us to spend twenty-five hours each week with the people we love, and with God, not accomplishing anything...but simply being together. Who could have imagined that this ancient, religious idea, conceived of thousands of years ago, would suddenly acquire such new relevance in the 21st century of the Common Era?

We need Shabbat, but in this time and place, it does not come naturally. We get home late from work on Friday. It's virtually impossible to have Shabbat dinner AND get over to Temple for services, and many of us often do neither. Little League and AYSO dominate Saturdays. And even religious school here at CBB conspires against Shabbat observance, consuming Sunday morning with Jewish learning and activity, and making Saturday morning even less likely as a time for doing anything Jewish.

So we experience a rupture between the wise and beautiful Shabbat ideal, and the tattered and thread-bare Shabbat reality that is all most of us can manage here in Santa Barbara.

For me, at least, it does not help much to read nostalgic descriptions of Shabbos in Eastern Europe. I will sometimes torture myself with a passage like this by Elie Wiesel: “I will never forget Shabbat in my town.....” Wiesel’s eulogy for that world, which may or may not have been as perfect on Shabbat as he remembers it, pulls at my heart, and intensifies my yearning for that experience, but it doesn’t really help me know how to create it here in Santa Barbara.

I find it more helpful to look at the story of the first Shabbat recorded in the Torah. The time is immediately after the departure from Egypt, and the Israelites are just beginning their journey through the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. At that stage in our story, all of our needs were provided for, miraculously, by God. We were like babies nursing at our mother’s breast, and for nourishment we ate a mysterious substance called “manna” which means “What?” They didn’t know what it was, so they called it “what?” Whatever it was, it would appear on the ground at dawn every morning, and the Israelites would go out and gather it before it melted in the heat of the rising sun. God told Moses to tell the people to gather twice as much on Friday, and not to gather on Saturday, the seventh day, because the seventh day is a Shabbaton, a day of rest, a Sabbath for God. This is the very first time in human history, as far as we know, that there is any report of human beings observing a holy day of rest.

Now, bear in mind that this was a time of miracles and wonders...God parts the red Sea, Moses sweetens the bitter waters of the Oasis at Marah, now we get the miraculous manna...food direct from heaven, direct from the breast of God. And in that wonderful and miracle-filled reality, what do our ancestors do? They go out and try to gather on Saturday! They just couldn’t resist trying to get a little bit more! And God says, for the first time but not the last: “How long will you refuse to observe my commandments and my teachings?” This is the very first Sabbath in human history, and already it is breaking down. Now that makes me feel better.

It makes me feel less badly about this time and place, Santa Barbara in the Jewish year 5767, and frankly it makes me feel a little less badly about my own lack of discipline and commitment to Shabbat. Apparently, there is something inherently difficult about Shabbat, something that tends to break down, wherever we are...not just in Santa Barbara. Whenever we try to live up to the Shabbat ideal, we find ourselves falling short. It has been going on since the beginning.

That story helps me feel less guilty, but it doesn’t give me much confidence or optimism about the future of Shabbat in our town. If Shabbat is always tending to fall apart, then how are we going to build it into a significant component of Jewish life here...with all of the competing pulls and pressures? There is hope, and there is reason for optimism. I find hope in a comment a friend once made, over at the Isla Vista minyan. The minyan is a group of friends that gather every Saturday for song and prayer, study and food, and that was our family’s Shabbat community before I took this position at CBB. This friend declared one day after the minyan had been going for about a year, that she had become a “Shabbataholic.” All of us knew what she meant. Shabbat has an addictive quality. Once it becomes a habit, it becomes necessary. One wants more, and suffers when one doesn’t get it.

That gives me hope, because I see many members of our community taking small tastes of Shabbat...and wanting more. On our trip to Israel this past summer, for example, we spent Shabbat in Jerusalem. I began fantasizing about that Shabbat as soon

as we started planning the trip. I dreamt of a glorious, 25-hour, celestial Shabbat experience. That did not happen. We took a bus on Friday evening out to a Reform synagogue in the suburbs of Jerusalem, in Mevasseret Tzion, where we had been told we would have dinner at home with families. Well, the services were all in Hebrew, of course, and there were some very long speeches, and some of our group fell asleep...OK, I fell asleep. Anyway, the home hospitality dinners did not happen, and we ended up having dinner back at the hotel, in a freezing room with the air-conditioner blasting. I had pictured us all singing together after dinner, but most of the group politely excused themselves to go warm themselves up in their rooms. Then the next morning, almost our entire group got up at 5:30AM for what we had been told would be a fascinating and beautiful sunrise walking tour of the streets of Jerusalem, but the rabbi who was to lead the tour never showed up.

So we walked instead early in the morning, over to the Old City...and had our first glimpse of Jerusalem of Gold, in the early morning sun, on Shabbat. And that was beautiful. For the rest of the morning, we broke into different groups, and went in different directions. And then at lunchtime, we all took the lunches that we had bought in the wild and wonderful open air market the day before, and went into a park and spread out and just ate, and talked, and the kids played. The hours went by. Slowly I realized that this was the Shabbat moment about which I had dreamt, and then one of the guys on the trip...I think it may have been Randy Glick or Michael Baker...said "why don't we do this in Santa Barbara?"

It never fails; that addictive quality. Once you get a taste of a real Shabbat, you just want more. Even in Jerusalem, Shabbat has the other tendency, as well, to fall apart...and our Shabbat in Jerusalem fell apart in more ways than one. But that Shabbat afternoon in Jerusalem planted a seed in each one of us. The same thing happened, by the way, on our family retreat last year at Camp Hess Cramer, and happens even in services right here, on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. *Ani maamin*, I believe in the power of Shabbat to grow, and to become more and more important, in each of our lives, and in the life of our community.

Week by week, month by month, more and more of our members are finding ways to make Shabbat dinner on Friday night. For some, it is as basic as take-out pizza with candles, wine and challah. Others are learning to carry on the classic Shabbos in the tradition of Judy Meisel. In more and more homes in Santa Barbara, Friday night is becoming once again an occasion for hours of relaxed conversation, and even song.

I think that more and more people are going to make Shabbat services a regular part of their week. On either Friday night or Saturday morning, one by one, two by two, people are discovering the pleasure of a regular opportunity to join together with other human beings, in the flesh, to hug and shake hands, and to kiss each other...and to be warmed by music and words from God, the spiritual fire burning in our souls.

I do not think it will be long before we see groups of families, or singles, meeting in each others' homes or outside in the parks, or down at the beach, for Shabbat afternoon picnics, like our Shabbat afternoon in Jerusalem...in which the hours roll by and no one feels the need to jump up and run to the next scheduled activity.

And when the end of the day comes, and the shadows grow long, and the stars come out, we will all take out our spice boxes, Kiddush cups and braided candles...and all over Santa Barbara, we will see people with their arms around each other, singing the

havdalah melodies, bidding a sweetly sad farewell to Shabbat, and listening carefully for the approaching footsteps of the Messiah.

Ken yhi ratson.