

On Rosh Hashanah, we reflect on our lives. We repair our relationships. We re-focus on what's important. It's beautiful, isn't it? Surrounded by community, friends and family, we are so blessed to share this sacred space; to have arrived at this moment together.

And yet we know how much the world needs repair: a burgeoning and wrenching refugee crisis, a contentious and polarizing presidential election, crumbling international economies, the list goes on.

Yet, we are here. And I am inspired to look around this room and see you today, a part of the community called the extended Jewish family.

Mishpuhah, we say. Family goes beyond blood relationship. It's something much deeper that binds us to each other.

Mishpuhah. . .it reminds me of the story of a middle-aged father from Marin, who calls his son, Jake, in N.Y. and says: "Your mom and I can't stand each other, we're getting a divorce. Don't be shocked when I move out." Dad hangs up. Jake calls his sister in Florida and tells her the news. She immediately calls her father, "Dad, Dad, please, don't do anything, until Jake and I get there. We'll be there for the holidays." Dad says, "OK," hangs up, calls out to his wife, "Marilyn, don't worry, we're all set. The kids are coming for Rosh Hashanah."

Yes, I know, it's not easy being Jewish.

When I look out and see more than 800 of you, on a Monday, I'm moved by the sense of commitment and, yes, the sacrifice you made, to be here and celebrate together.

Many local school districts are open today. Families counting a student or a teacher, took school off. If you work part-time and could arrange your schedule, you did. If you work full-time, it was probably trickier. It often means extra work before or playing catch up after the holiday. Or for those who are retired, you may remember taking vacation days for the High Holy Days – sometimes it is just easier that way.

It's not always easy being Jewish, even in Marin. After all, we are still small in numbers. Some of us are comfortable with our Jewishness and our culture. But, let's face it, we don't live in N.Y. or Florida, or even L.A. where being Jewish seems much more part of the culture. We pretty much out ourselves as Jews during this time of the year, to make it to shul, especially on a weekday.

In fact, many people ask me, "Rabbi, you moved from LA. What's the difference between Jewish life in LA and Marin? Do you miss it? I think what they're really asking me is, "You are so Jewish, Rabbi – are you doing ok here?"

The short answer, of course, is I love it here. I love my Jewish community in Marin and I'm grateful for the warmth and Yiddishkeit we share. I wouldn't trade Marin for all the bagels in Brooklyn, or kosher tamales in L.A.

But recently, someone asked me one of those New York/L.A./Marin questions that really made me think.

“What about Shabbat, Rabbi? Friday nights? How are Friday nights different here from L.A.?”

Interesting. They didn't ask, “What about the High Holy Days?” They asked about Shabbat. Why?

For thousands of years, Jews have taken a break on Shabbat from the give and take of daily life. We separate from the everyday. We create a space that is holy.

And today, this holy, yet joyous day of Rosh Hashanah, reminds us of the rest of our lives, when it is NOT Rosh Hashanah. It asks us:

Do we carve out time that is holy, that's meaningful, that's distinct from all the other things we do more often?

Do we safeguard ourselves, our families and our friends, from letting life simply pass us by?

Do we enjoy each moment with those we love, feeling gratitude for what we have?’

Do we slow down? How do we slow down?

In an age of unprecedented freedom, the answer is Shabbat.

Judaism offers three ways to help us do this:

The first is to stop, literally to stop. The Hebrew word “Shabbat” comes from the verb לִשְׁבּוֹת meaning “to stop.”

On Friday afternoons, we battle the traffic, we navigate kids’ extracurricular activities and get home. We pick up our phones. We grab something to eat. The day is gone. How do we actually stop?

Jewish rituals like lighting candles, Shabbat dinner, are meant to help us stop. The Friday night prayer service, Kabbalat Shabbat, means to “receive Shabbat.” We can’t transition from weekday madness and stop on a dime to feel Shabbes. So the rabbis gave us this musical and meditative foyer, to

release the events of the week. We come together in community, soothed by the chanting of psalms and spirited singing.

Stopping is different from recreation. Recreation means to re-create– it’s the hobbies and activities we love. But recreation is also busy-ness. Stopping means renewal because we cease to create, cease to master our surroundings. Torah says at the end of creation, “God stopped – שבת- and was renewed – וינפש. It’s the Hebrew word נפש– meaning “soul”. We are literally re-“souled,” when we stop. We get the soul back that we lost touch with during the week. On Shabbat, we get an additional soul, a neshamah yetirah, that comes into our body. Even God the creator stopped and so should we. Shabbat, or stopping, is a tool for perpetual self-renewal.

Most Jewish holidays are described like this: They came, they tried to kill us, we defeated them, let’s eat. Eating is clearly a big part of being Jewish. But Shabbat dinner is different. It’s about being grateful for creation, releasing the work-a-day tensions and being with those we love. It is deeply universal and deeply personal at the same time. This second tool is Shabbat dinner.

My teacher Joel Grishaver taught me about Shabbat dinner: Be together with family and friends. Stop and sanctify time. “Be” and don’t do. “Be” and don’t do. Shabbat dinner doesn’t have to be elaborate or place a burden on the family. Yes, we want to honor Shabbat with beautiful food and dishes, but if

that is our sole focus, we miss the point. The important thing is to do it. Or as another teacher of mine said, “Do the right thing, vs. doing things right.” “Do the right thing, vs. doing things right.” Do Shabbes dinner -worry later if you did things “right.” There is plenty of time to learn more about Shabbat, after you do it more often.

One thing we learn over and over is to be grateful. Gratitude – Jewish tradition says: whoever eats without saying a blessing is like someone who robs from the God. The Torah say: when we have eaten our fill, we bless God. Many of us gather for Shabbat dinners most weeks or on occasion. But if we eat without a blessing before, and without thanking God after, we let life pass us by. We are, in the language of the Hasidic tradition, spiritually asleep. The Jewish mystics say that blessing before and after we eat, brings tikkun olam, the repair of the world.

Stop. Eat together. Bless - three tools to ensure that our Friday nights are a break from a busy week.

Despite families being spread out, and all kinds of challenges, Shabbat **IS** happening around Marin. In some homes there are white tablecloths, beautiful china, the finest wine, home-baked hallah, matzah balls, and guests in the double digits. That’s great, but sometimes we Jews can be so judgmental. We feel others fail or we feel we fail if the hallah is from Trader Joe’s. Or dinner is take-out pizza and Kiddush in a paper cup. What if it is dinner for

two or three instead of the masses? If Torah is shared, if laughter is heard, if hugs and kisses abound, Shabbat **IS** in the air. Each of us can plan, anticipate and yes, juggle to make Shabbat happen.

And for those who want to learn more, I offer you a gift: a beautiful book about Shabbat book entitled, “A Day Apart.” There are one hundred copies in the lobby, please take one. If we run out, please email me after the holiday to get yours. Invite me over on a Friday night that we don’t have services here. I want to celebrate Shabbat with you.

On other Friday nights, we gather as a community for services, either here, or for the sweet monthly service at Drake Terrace in San Rafael.

The great theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a simple and magnificent book entitled, “The Sabbath.”

I close with his words:

A great pianist was once asked by an ardent admirer:

“How do you handle the notes as well as you do?”

The artist answered:

“The notes I handle no better than many pianists, but the pauses between the notes – ah! That is where the art resides.”

In great living as in great music, the art may be in the pauses. Surely one of the enduring contributions which Judaism made to the art of living was Shabbat, “the pause between the notes.”

I wish you a Shanah Tovah filled with fifty-two Shabbes pauses that enrich and refresh you, sustain and nurture you, and most of all, remind you what life is really all about. Shanah Tovah.