

Sabbath
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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UUMSB

Reading: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel from *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, published in 1951

One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *kadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar?

It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *kadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.

This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place—a holy mountain or a holy spring—whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.

When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time. When at Sinai the word of God was about to be voiced, a call for holiness in man was proclaimed: “Thou shalt be unto me a holy people.” It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of [people] came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.¹

Sermon:

I don't know about you, but in this current phase of the pandemic, I am really struggling with time. Not the losing of time like back when many of us only saw a few people for weeks at a stretch, but for me, now it is more like a struggle to focus and manage all my “stuff.” I am not sharing this for atty girls or pity, I just want to be clear about the place that I'm coming from today when I talk about sabbath. In some ways we are supposed to be back to normal, firing on all cylinders, but of course, we aren't, not personally for me, and definitely not out in the world, that's for sure. My car was due for inspection in February, and I have tried four different days to get it taken care of and either the machine has been broken, or the line was three hours long, and I gave up. I gave up for the month of July and my car has been sitting in the driveway, likely turning again into a mouse hotel. Though, thanks to suggestions from folks after my first mouse drama, it is filled with peppermint oil soaked cotton balls, so maybe it will be okay, and it smells great. I went to rent a car to take my kids and some of their friends out on Wednesday for Abi's

¹ from *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, published by Noonday Press, 1951..
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-as-a-sanctuary-in-time/>

birthday. I needed six seats. I had to drive four hours round trip to find a car in all of western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut available to rent with six seats. Neither of these examples are a big deal, but lots of what we do these days takes longer and is more complicated than we might wish it was. In my day to day, I am holding more unknowns about the work for my day job and whether that work will be in person or virtual, and the picture today is more foggy today than it was even two weeks ago. When I add all that up, plus the much more important family and life stuff, work stuff, and you, know... a pandemic, climate crisis that is accelerating rapidly, racism all around us, and threats to democracy. I am crispy, as they say. I am struggling, just like most folks I know.

I was talking with a colleague this week about their experience going with their family to a Unitarian Universalist camp with other UU families. She said they all had a great time, but that folks were in rough shape. Many were exhausted. People of all ages needed a lot of naps. They needed to blow off steam. They needed to be gentle with one another in the face of a traumatic year. I have shared before Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker's words describing how keeping sabbath time is a radical departure not only from the day to day of life, but broadly from our culture. She writes, "I have come to understand that if I am to recover from violence, live in love, and contribute to healing and transformation, I need to engage in spiritual practices that preserve knowledge beyond what the dominant culture *tells me about who I am*."² Particularly right now, in the face of all the challenges before us, one of the most radical things we can do, it is to hold sabbath time.

Sabbath time is a time of holy rest, intentional rest, rest honoring our spirit. In many religious traditions a formal sabbath day is filled with spiritual practices like worship and prayer, and community, family, and food. Sabbath is an opportunity to turn both inward for reflection, and outward to connect with what we call holy and with community. As with any spiritual practice, Sabbath requires intention and attention, or it is something different, not bad, but not sabbath. In a time of pandemic, political turmoil, and justice-seeking, feelings, routines, and really everything have been turned upside down, again and again. So in the face of this, how are we attentive to our time?

In the *Tao te Ching*, the sage concludes Chapter 15 in the Brian Browne Walker translation:

...clarity is learned by
being patient in the heart of chaos.
Tolerating disarray, remaining at rest,
gradually one learns to allow muddy
water to settle and proper responses to reveal themselves...

Time is a force of change in the universe. When we are still, we can connect with that change, with the movement and rhythms of things inside and outside of ourselves in a different way. We can connect with a boundless sense of time--with the infinite and unknowable. A sabbath will look different for every person, but perhaps now, more than ever, is a moment to engage with the holiness of time and paying attention to rest, and not the muddy water around us.

We are living in a time when nations are in uproar, and the earth is shaken, and people need of refuge. We all need connection and compassion. What if we were to honor the holiness in time that Rabbi Heschel describes in Genesis? Time as part of the infinite power and mystery of the universe. What if we were still? What would an intentional pause look like for you? A day of rest? Maybe a little time in each day? Time with community or family? Solitude? If

² Parker, "Spiritual Practice for our Time" in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, 141-2.

your ways of engaging in spiritual practice have had to change, as worship surely has, maybe this is a moment to check in about that. What do you need, so that you can remember that you are not alone in facing whatever is before you? Hard decisions, loneliness, busyness, grief--you are not alone. An infinite stretch of time connects us to all that was and all that will be--and to all of the universe. When we pause, we can direct our attention, inward, outward, to time, the universe. We can seek new understanding and practice. And it starts with stopping--with honoring the holy in time, and holding time to practice and for sacred rest, whatever that might look like for you.

There is a love holding me.
There is a love holding all that I love.
There is a love holding all.
I rest in this love.

There is a love holding us.
There is a love holding all that we love.
There is a love holding all.
We rest in this love.³

In the face of struggle, injustice and grief, may we be met with compassion, and the open hearts of others. May we know that we are not alone, and may *we* be a compassionate presence for others. May we find moments of connection to the infinite, to the holy, to what feeds our spirit, and what challenges us to grow and deepen our connection to all that is. We rest in this love.

So may it be. Amen.

³ by Rev. Rebecca Parker, Music by Elizabeth Norton