



## Slowing Down on Shabbat: Rejuvenating Ourselves and Our Planet

By Rabbi Yonatan Neril<sup>1</sup>

In modern society, we are running, speaking, and thinking at an exceptional rate, and oftentimes we continue all week long without slowing down. Constantly doing, always mobile accessible, habitually multi-tasking.

If being too busy is a malady of modern man, slowing down on Shabbat may be a key remedy.

The Torah teaches, "These are the things that the Divine commanded to make. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to G-d..."<sup>2</sup> Achieving sanctity and complete rest is the stated goal of Shabbat. Yet how can this happen?

The Prophet Isaiah says, "If...you call the Sabbath a delight (oneg), ...and you honor it by not doing your habituated ways, by not pursuing your affairs and speaking words, then, you shall delight with G-d..."<sup>3</sup> According to the Talmud, 'not doing your habituated ways' means "that your walking on the Sabbath shall not be like your walking on weekdays."<sup>4</sup> The intentional weekly practice of walking slowly can help a person to focus their attention on how he or she feels while walking. Based on Isaiah's continuation, "by not...speaking words," the rabbis forbid speaking on Shabbat about work activities one might do in the future.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, on Shabbat we are encouraged to free our mind from its incessant preoccupation with *thinking* about doing. Encouraging this mindset, the great commentator Rashi (1040-1105 C.E., France) teaches "When the Sabbath arrives, it shall seem to you as if all your work is done, that you shall not think about work."<sup>6</sup>

Every week, Shabbat can remind us that we are first and foremost human *beings*, not just human doers. Rabbi Daniel Kohn, who teaches at the Sulaam Yaakov rabbinical program in Jerusalem, states that "Our natural soul state is one of rest. By our spiritual nature, we are one with God, who is total Presence and Being. Shabbat is the place of constant access to the quiet, to the perfect rest in the bosom of G-d."<sup>7</sup> In addition to conscious movement, speech, and thought, Rabbi Kohn encourages the spiritual practice of meditation and quieting on Shabbat as a means of reaching true oneg.

Imagine such a reality: one day a week totally free of mundane work thoughts. How can one achieve such a state of being?

### Remedy for a Fast-Paced World

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 35:1-2

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 58:13-14, translation adapted from Judaica Press translation

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 113a-b, Soncino translation

<sup>5</sup> Shulchan Aruch 307:1, and Shemirat Shabbat KaHilchatah chapter 29:59.

<sup>6</sup> Rashi to Exodus 20:8, commenting on the Torah's instruction in this verse to "perform all your labor" in six days. Thoughts are also significant in another area of Shabbat observance. In Jewish law, an object becomes defined as 'off-limits' (Muktza) to a person when a person's mind has been removed from that object (hesech hada'at).

<sup>7</sup> Oral class given September, 2009 at Yeshivat Hamivtar.

Today we live in a society which is constantly doing without sufficient regard to being, and at the same time, transforming the natural world without taking time to reflect on the long-term consequences. A *New York Times Magazine* article commented about lifestyles in the United States, “A nation of remarkably productive, often well-paid workers... are becoming increasingly reluctant to pause from their labors and refresh their souls.”<sup>8</sup>

The society that rests and reflects the least is the same society that extracts and consumes the most. This mastery of the earth without sufficient contemplation of its consequences has extirpated species, altered the climate, and polluted the air.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, comprised of executives committed to sustainability from major international corporations, notes that global consumption levels and patterns are primarily driven by three factors: rapid global population growth, the rise in global affluence and associated consumption, “a culture of 'consumerism' among higher income groups, who account for the greatest per capita share of global consumption.” The report continues that “global consumption is putting unsustainable and increasing stress on the Earth’s ecosystems. 60% of the Earth’s ecosystem services have been degraded in the past 50 years. Natural resource consumption is expected to rise to 170% of the Earth’s bio-capacity by 2040.”<sup>9</sup>

Shabbat offers great potential to reduce consumption and thereby benefit the natural world. The act of shutting off a computer or car for a day contains environmental meaning far beyond the energy saved from not using these devices for one day. The deeper significance of the act centers on the reorientation that can occur from outward focus to inward focus, from reading from screens and Blackberries to reading from scrolls and books, from communicating via technology to communicating face to face.

Shabbat can create holy space in our lives and inner peace in ourselves to reveal the sanctity that can get hidden by the stress of day-to-day life. By moving us from incessant doing to the pleasure of being present with the Source of all existence, Shabbat can transform our lives. We will then become more aware of our surroundings, and take better care of G-d’s creation. Let us connect to this potential for renewal and rejuvenation and help bring tikkun olam, repair of the world, to ourselves -- and our planet.

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<sup>8</sup> New York Times Magazine, “Vacation: All I Never Wanted,” Walter Kirn, August 5, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> “Sustainable Consumption Facts and Trends: From a Business Perspective,” online at [http://www.wbcds.org/DocRoot/I9Xwhv7X5V8cDIHbHC3G/WBCSD\\_Sustainable\\_Consumption\\_web.pdf](http://www.wbcds.org/DocRoot/I9Xwhv7X5V8cDIHbHC3G/WBCSD_Sustainable_Consumption_web.pdf)