

Sermon: *Shavat VaYinafash: To Rest and Be Restored*
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“Take Me Out to the Ballgame: Undoubtedly, it is the anthem of baseball. Written in 1908 by Jack Norworth and composed by Albert Von Tilzer, it was originally intended only to be a highlight of Norworth’s vaudeville act. They could hardly have imagined its eventual popularity. The song’s more-than-well-known refrain is a call to be taken away from the hustle and haste of everyday and, instead, to be brought to a place of perfection – a place from which one doesn’t care if they ever come back: a place of ballgame and crowd....peanuts and Crackerjack. In a word, the song is an ode to escape.

For many, myself included, Fenway Park is such a place. And regardless of how the Red Sox are doing (and please don’t get me started on how the Red Sox are doing), the slower pace that baseball brings – along with the history of the park, the team, and the sport – help to instill a state of mind and being that is both welcome and needed.

Rightly, one could say that our need for escape has only increased since the days when “Take Me Out” was first sung. Today’s life tempo and a seemingly endless list of things needing to be done - combined with a technology that keeps us plugged in all-of-the-time - without question take their toll.

Stephen Leonard – a former CEO, self-described entrepreneur, pastor and avid blogger – expresses sentiments familiar to all of us.

“‘Busy’ - This word is on my lips everyday lately. Between work commitments and personal commitments, this time of year is busy. At work, we’re finishing our seasonal busy-ness, setting annual goals, finishing projects, and doing all the things that go into the end-of-the-year. At home, we’re preparing the house for relatives, finishing house projects, parenting, and keeping up with the mail, trash, and (everything else). Sometimes I go from 6:00 am – 7:00 pm – moving from one meeting to the next. Once I get home, I fall asleep next to (my wife,) Lisa on the couch at 8 – finally falling into bed, exhausted. Busy at work. Busy at home.”

It is a condition that is all-too-pervasive as we live in a culture that is constantly urging us to do more, to do it well, .and to do it now. Indeed, we have become so used to living in these rapids that we accept it as just the way things are - the way that they are supposed to be. Dr. Richard Swenson, author and former professor at the University of Wisconsin writes that: “Haste is a modern ailment. (And) it is also fashionably American. Our lives,” he continues, “are nonstop, lived at a breathless pace. We walk fast, talk fast, eat fast and then excuse ourselves by saying, ‘I must run.’ Time urgency is a national emblem.”

The truth, however, is that we do know better. Studies tell us that people do want to slow down. However, the gravitational pull to remain perpetually moving is strong.

“Project: Time Off” is a national non-profit organization created by the U.S. Travel Association. According to their recent study, while it is that 95% of those surveyed said that it was very important to use all of their paid time off, more than half – 55% - said that they did not.

Pastor Kirk Byron Jones, a noted writer and teacher, perhaps best describes our plight when he says that, today, we live “under the tyranny of too much” and that “by the thousands, people are overdosing on over-commitment.”

The consequences are evident everywhere: physical exhaustion, stress, anxiety, depression, and burn out. At the same time, marriages, families, and friendships are often paying an inestimable price.

The history of our relationship with work can help us to understand how we arrived here. Interestingly, in 1957, an article in the New York Times by columnist Erik Barnouw predicted that as new technologies were invented making work easier, the lives of workers would naturally shift in focus towards more leisure activities and family. However, the 1960’s brought about two important changes. First, this decade ushered in a new age of consumerism – a time when people began to place a greater emphasis on their own financial advancement. And secondly, the ‘60’s were a time of more widespread use of television and of other forms of passive entertainment. Combined, these societal shifts helped move people away from social activities, moving them, instead, to double-down on their professional lives and the rewards that they brought.

Today, one of the greatest challenges to confronting this “tyranny of too much,” is the fact that we have made ‘being overloaded’ not only socially acceptable, it is celebrated. In many corners, the one who sacrifices themselves for the sake of one’s work is rewarded with praise, promotions, and increased pay. And, as a result, many come to see the toll taken on one’s physical health, emotional well-being, and relationships as an acceptable price to be paid for success.

At the same time, there are also many who proudly wear on their sleeves just how busy and overworked they are. As one extreme example, journalist David Leonhardt notes that on more than one occasion he has heard of people who intentionally sent work-related email on either their wedding day or while in the hospital on the day that their child was born.

This proclivity to immerse oneself in ‘getting things done’ is not new. In 1899, American philosopher and psychologist William James observed that: “Americans have become accustomed to...living with an inner panting and expectancy” – bringing their ‘breathlessness and tension to work’ and “to even ‘(wearing) stress and overwork like fancy jewelry.”

Indeed, one could go back much farther, about 2,800 years in Jewish history. At that time, the prophet Amos preached with disdain of the many who would declare: “If only the Sabbath and the holiday were over so that we could start selling our wheat again!”

There is, though, yet one other important sacrifice that many make in a work-centric world.

The Distinguished Careers Institute is a nationally-renowned program for adults who are mostly in their 50's and 60's and who are in the process of retiring from their careers. Hosted by Stanford University, the program was created in order to help imminent retirees consider what the next stage of their lives would look like. Columnist David Brooks writes of the challenges experienced by those who had come to overly define themselves by their careers.

Brooks tells the story of one soon-to-be retiree: 'On the first day of the program, Phil Pizzo, who had been a dean of Stanford's medical school before founding the Institute, told the group to throw away their resumes. 'That's no longer who you are,' he said. 'And it's not going to help you.' Most of those in the room had been wildly successful in tech or finance or in some other endeavor. And, now, they were being told to imagine what it will be like to no longer run anything. In between sessions, one of the program's participants was described as not being able to speak. As he more fully grasped the reality of his retirement, his classmates said that he was hyperventilating.

According to one expert on work: "When we define ourselves by (what we do), by our dedication and effectiveness and willingness to go the extra mile, then it's easy to see (stopping) as the negation of all of those things. If your work is yourself," he concluded, "(then) when you cease to work, (in a sense) you cease to exist."

Adding a social dimension to this dilemma, Tom Schreier, the Director of a similar program at Notre Dame, is quoted as saying: "When these people ran an organization, they thought they had 200 great friends. Now, suddenly, only five are as responsive as they used to be."

To help program participants cope, Brooks explains, they are asked to reflect upon and then respond to some of life's foundational questions: Who am I? What is my purpose? What do I really want? Consistently, Brooks concludes, those who participate in programs like this not only express appreciation for the experience, but they also say that they wished that they had asked these questions more seriously...sooner.

The complement to work, of course is rest. Judaism, embracing the importance of both, places them side by side in the opening chapters of the Torah. Here, we read of God, first engaged in the creation of the world for six days and then, as we know, there is rest. Later in the Torah, in the Book of Exodus, this image is recalled. However, this time, we find an additional detail. After having rested – *Shavat*," in Hebrew, we then read that God was "refreshed" – *VaYinfash*. If these words taken together sound familiar, it is because they are sung at the end of the prayer: *V'Shamru*: We sing: *Shavat vaYinafash*.

Now, to say that God was refreshed following divine labor is, in fact, a curious statement to make. And, truth be told, it would be easy to overlook it as we continue to read through the narrative. However, if we pause for a moment to consider what it means to say that God was refreshed, we realize that the text seems to be implying that the work that God had done during those first six days had apparently taken its toll. Somehow, all of God's creating and doing had left God significantly diminished, making rest a necessity – even for God.

Tellingly, the specific word used in the Torah to describe God's restoration is the Hebrew: *vayinafash*. Coming from the word, *nefesh*, or "soul," the text seems to be telling us that *vayinafash* – "rest" – had the capacity to re-energize God's labor-lessened *nefesh* – soul.

Indeed, the truth is that all of us – through our own episodes of good, healthy rest – know what it is to experience just this sort of soul restoration.

Reverend Kirk Byron Jones movingly write how taking the time to be alone, taking a walk, listening to music, being with family or friends, exercise, reading, a hobby, going to a ballgame are, in truth, more than simply utilitarian pursuits, making it possible for us to return to our work. They help to shape us as more full and more fulfilled human beings. In Jones's words: It is through rest that we 'are reminded who and whose we are. It is through relaxation that we receive a refreshing of mind, body, and spirit...and that we may be at peace, regardless of life's circumstances.' And, he says, it is through restorative rest that 'we find delight not in what we produce, but in what we can, if only for a moment, open ourselves to receiving unconditionally.' When we live this way, Jones concludes, we "nurture (our) well-being from the inside out."

And, lest we find ourselves drawn to the notion that work and rest oppose one another – that "good rest" is the enemy of "good work" – we might be surprised to learn that, in fact, the opposite is true.

In 2008, Malcolm Gladwell published his bestselling book, "Outliers: The Story of Success." The text explores the factors that led people to achieve high levels of success. One of the most well-known statistics shared by Gladwell is that it takes 10,000 hours of practice for a person to become an expert at something. His data emerged through scientific research. A fascinating detail from that study, one that is not nearly as well-known, is that not only did the most successful test subjects put in the requisite 10,000 hours of practice, they also had engaged in 12,500 hours of deliberate rest and 30,000 hours of sleep. In other words, this study revealed that taking time off on a regular basis increased the likelihood of achievement.

Observational work done by other scholars has also found this to be true. Alex Pang, in his book, "Rest," notes how "some of history's most creative people, people whose achievements in art and science and literature are legendary, took rest very seriously." He continues: "So (m)any of us are interested in how to work better, but we don't think very much about how to rest".....Pang concludes: "Modern science has validated what the ancients knew: work 'provides the means to live, while it is rest that 'gives meaning to life.'"

On this Yom Kippur, we are called to consider how we keep the very rhythm and flow of our time. Interestingly, according to the Torah, this day is not only known as the "Day of Atonement," it is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*, literally, a "Sabbath of Sabbaths." As such, we are taught that it is especially on Yom Kippur that we are urged to consider how our natural urge for work – for creating and accomplishing – must be complemented by an equally powerful drive to rest.

And so, as we make our way forward in the year that awaits, a prayer inspired by the Japanese poet, Toki Miyamina:

Holy One of All, help us, in our lives, to set a more healthy pace -
and to refrain from rush.

Provide for us images of stillness which help to restore our serenity.
Lead us in ways of efficiency and grace -
through calmness of mind
and guidance that brings peace.

Though we have a great many things to accomplish each day,
give us the perspective to not fret.
Move us to find balance.

May harmony and effectiveness be the fruits of our hours.
And may our lives in the year ahead be blessed through
regular intervals of authentic rest -
restoring to each of us the fullness of our *nefesh* – of our very souls.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this God's will.