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Happy Leap Year, everybody!!

I got an e-mail a few days ago reminding me of Feb 29th coming up, and it urged me to not treat this day as I would any other Sunday. This day only comes once every four years, it said, and I should use it to do something wonderful, to give back to the world somehow. Like many holidays, Leap Year is an example of time we've highlighted on our calendar for special recognition, for a purpose. By all measures of nature these are days just like any other– the sun will set and rise and set again, the tides will gently roll in and out of the shores making no distinction between them... and we human people have constructed a meaning around the day, and that meaning has the potential to move us to behave in certain ways, hopefully positive ways.

Truthfully, though, for the past few year at Stanford, I've had a heightened awareness of this interesting phenomenon, because of the weekly Jewish celebration of Creation, our sabbath– Shabbat. By any empirical measurement it's just a day, like the one before and the one after, and yet by sanctifying it, we create a space in which to worship God, revel in our gratitude for the gifts of our lives, enjoy the company of friends, and appreciate the natural world, unencumbered by the fast pace and technology driven mentality of the week-day work schedule. There are weeks when I know that Shabbat has, in some ways, preserved my sanity. Judaism has set aside a day on which we recognize God's work, and God's rest, and so we, too, are encouraged to step back and cease working, to take a much-needed chill pill, as it were. Again, a meaningful space has been formed out of what was once just another day.

As a Religious Studies major, I have to see this phenomenon as a human trait, certainly not particular to any one religious tradition or culture. To me, this human tendency to demarcate and separate can be a beautiful thing. It says something to me about God's presence within us trying desperately to become manifest through our modes of being in the world. It's not just that God hallowed the seventh day for rest– it's that we affirm the meaningfulness of that story, and discover the rejuvenation and community that such meaning creates. Indeed, those intangibles are actually the only thing we're allowed to create on Shabbat– we abstain from adding to the material world for 25 hours as we rebuild and refresh our souls.

However, this practice is not without its downsides. It removes me from campus life for a whole day. I've missed many a dorm ski trip, Friday night party or Saturday outing because I don't drive on Shabbat. I have often found myself having to defend and apologize for this and other practices, practices that create division between myself and fellow Stanford students. As celebrating shabbat is something I've only begun doing since coming to Stanford, it also alienates me from my family and friends at home. In

some ways, my practicing Judaism comes between myself and other people, creating fragments instead of unity.

Indeed I have found myself in many a conversation apologizing for religion's tendency, in general, to create artificial boundaries, sometimes so powerful that they drive people to commit terrible acts of violence, to injure others out of adamancy that their boundaries are the correct ones. However despite the many allegations that can be leveled against doctrines in Judaism that I have a hard time with, or against religion in general for its divisive potential, I still stand by my personal belief that at the core of every religious tradition is a place where words like truth, justice, freedom, equality, and oneness, have their place. It should be every religion's job to draw out and manifest those ideas in the world. I believe boundaries can actually help that pursuit.

At Stanford my involvement in the Jewish community has shown me how smaller groups connected by larger, overarching goals are often far more effective in achieving those goals. For instance, when dozens of thousands of people protested the war in Iraq a year ago, it was not just a mess of all those people in the streets— it was many, many affinity groups, as they were called: sub-groups united by something in common, acting in the service of a greater cause. I was in a group called Shalom on the Streets: Jewish Stanford students for peace, and we stood alongside affinity groups united by everything from the house they lived in to all having a certain haircuts. (I kid you not: mullets for peace walked right behind us.) We all shared a sense of transcendent moral truth, but it was our smaller collectives that made it possible to get the message effectively heard.

Shabbat is similar. We create a separate space to reaffirm values that should enter into our lives at all times with all people— gratitude, peacefulness, a return to the more important things in life, which are our relationships with people and with nature. After the day is over we return to the world of cars, cell phone, urgent e-mails... but I am better equipped to handle this world after having stepped back from it for a time, created a boundary around it, as it were. Indeed, after the sun has set on Saturday and shabbat is ending, we say a blessing over candles, spices and wine in the darkness of the new day, as we thank God for creating separations, between holiness and the mundane, between lightness and darkness, between Shabbat and the rest of the week, between Judaism and other faith traditions. These separations are actually what infuse our lives with meaning, and at its best, this meaning is capable of transcending the particular traditions which we all bring to the table. My time at Stanford has taught me not to feel ashamed about participating in a unique faith tradition because it sometimes creates separation. This, for me, has been a big step.

In closing, I thought I would share with you a thought from the Torah portion that Jews all over the world read in synagogue yesterday morning. It's, Parshat Terumah, in the second book of Exodus. The Israelites are now in the desert, and all the exciting stuff has already happened— already crossed the Red Sea, received the commandments. Now God is now instructing Moses on the minutiae of building a tabernacle in which to dwell among the Israelites. Actually, the Hebrew translation could be interpreted as "dwell within your midst," or even more personal, "dwell within you."

The words seemed to me a theological paradox: If God is, as I believe, the pervasive, unifying presence in the universe as well as the Creator and Sustainer of all life, then why construct this material thing to symbolically encase Him? How does it make sense to create physical boundaries in order to access something that is so universal? My answer comes in the form of a shoulder shrug and an incredulous smile in the direction of humanity— well, it seems that that approach just works better. We always are constructing limits, whether mental or physical, in order to create meaning and sacredness; such boundaries helps us remember it. In Hebrew we say that these constructions are "*l'ma'an tizkeru,*" so that you will remember God at all times.

As long as we keep that most basic awareness at the core of our separations, I am confident in Judaism, and in all of us, to make the most of them. I hope that this afternoon, we all find ourselves honoring this unique day on our calendar that comes only once every four years. It's just a day like any other, but then, as with all days and really all moments in time, it is totally unique and here for us recognize and to cherish.