

Labor, Leisure and Longing  
(Ex. 20:1-18; Ps. 92)

Last night, as I do every Saturday night, I bid farewell to the Sabbath with a ritual called Havdalah, separation. It is brief, comprised of blessings over wine, spices and a braided candle, each easing us from the sanctuary of the Sabbath, the seventh day, into the labor of the six days of creation. According to tradition, wine invites us into sacred time, the spices transport back to the heavens the special soul we have enjoyed during this temporal taste of the world to come and the candle, shining brightly with more than one wick, helps us to discern the distinction between holy time and ordinary time.

As we gather on this Sunday of Labor Day weekend, our bittersweet surrender of summer conjures up a similar feel. My REI catalog says, “Summer is not over if you can still hear the crickets.” Summer, that time of vacation, leisure, rest and relaxation is nearly in our rear view mirror. We honor the labor of the other seasons, the academic year, but we want to have a taste of those lazy days of summer, even as we bid it farewell.

Fortunately for us, even those of us who happily enjoy our work, we mark our lives with a pause to the workweek—the weekend. But how much of a pause are our weekends actually?

Richard Swerdlow considered this question on the Perspective Series on public radio when a checkout clerk offered him the greeting, “Have a nice weekend.”<sup>i</sup> He reflected on his weekend plans—washing clothes, cleaning the garage, going through the mail, changing the oil in his car, returning library books, washing windows, putting out the recycling, changing a burned out bulb, working out at the gym, fixing the leaky faucet, visiting the bank, cutting his hair, answering emails, picking up the dry cleaning....

“So, much as I’d like to follow her advice, I’m just too busy to have a nice weekend,” he reasoned. I suspect each of us could compile a list like Swerdlow’s, ever-expanding and exhausting.

“Honestly, it’s a statement about our culture that running in a marathon can be considered a leisure time activity. Weekends are so tiring, I’m beginning to feel

relieved when Monday rolls around. When did weekends become the new weekdays?” Swerdlow continues, “That clerk’s comment has me realizing what I’m forgetting to add to my ever-expanding, never-checked-off, must-get done-this weekend list: relax.”

Some of you know, attended, or perhaps sent your kids to one of the best summer camps in Palo Alto, Jefunira Camp. Silicon Valley professionals love it for their kids, even though or perhaps especially because it is not a place to learn computer skills, start a pint-sized company or burnish a resume. Copious testimonials of the camp explain over and over that what makes the experience so special is it’s a place for kids to have good old-fashioned fun.<sup>ii</sup>

There are too few places for kids to just be kids. And where can adults have good old-fashioned fun? Several years ago, architecture professor and Renaissance man Witold Rybczynski wrote an essay in the *Atlantic* called, “Waiting for the Weekend.”<sup>iii</sup> He noted that many people are as obsessed by recreation as they are by work. Our preoccupation with current athletic fashion, authentic terminology and the latest equipment in our recreation leads us to professionalize our play. Rather than enjoying our recreation, we can be enslaved by it. But then he explains. Once our work was the setting in which we could be competent and creative, but, he says, “Technology has removed craft from most occupations. And so, for many of us, weekend free-time has become not a chance to escape work, but a chance to create work that is more meaningful—to work at recreation—in order to realize the personal satisfactions that the workplace no longer offers.”

G.K. Chesterson identified three kinds of leisure—“The first, being allowed to do something. The second, being allowed to do anything, and the third, being allowed to do nothing.” Leisure meant personal and idiosyncratic pursuit, not recreation. He thought that, “Free time was to remain that: free of the encumbrance of convention, free of the need for busyness, free for the ‘noble habit of doing nothing at all.’”

How do we, living and working in the heart of Silicon Valley, home of the next big thing, residing next to some of the most active and busy people on the planet think about the “noble habit of doing nothing at all?” Perhaps you are familiar with the story of inveterate diary keepers Charles Francis Adams and his son Henry Brooks Adams. When Brooks was eight, he wrote in his diary, “Went fishing with my father today, the most glorious day of my life.” That day was so glorious that Brooks continued to talk and write about it for the next thirty years. And then, he read his father’s diary. His father,

Congressman Charles Francis Adams, Ambassador to Great Britain appointed by President Lincoln, grandson of President John Adams and son of President John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary of that day, “Went fishing with my son. A day wasted.”<sup>iv</sup>

There is a distinction between leisure—free time to do something, anything or nothing and recreation—the continual participation and improvement in an activity, which encourages the development of proficiency and skill. The father was seeing through the lens of recreation. The son was appreciating leisure, and, of course, precious time with his busy dad.

This summer, we had the unhappy experience of a queen bee taking up residence in our newly constructed house. She was accompanied by an entourage of thousands. We noticed the honeybees on a Saturday morning. We were quite certain they hadn’t been present before that and took all the measures we could think of to deter their activity. When the beekeeper removed the hive on Wednesday morning, they had already built an impressive beeswax structure in the walls, the equivalent of three shelves worth of a three foot-wide bookcase. I’ll never use the expression “worker bee” in the same way again.

But zoologist Dr. Joan Herbers explains that our impressively busy bees were only on the job for about 20% of their day. She notes, “If you follow an organism in the field for extended periods of time and catalogue every type of activity for every moment of the day, you can’t help but come to the conclusion, by George, this organism isn’t doing much is it? Being lazy is almost universal.”<sup>v</sup> Animals are lazy for many reasons—conserving calories, improving digestion, staying cool or warm, being camouflaged, guarding territory. But diligent human beings that we are, we spend anywhere from two to four times as many hours working as being lazy. We override the impulse to slow down. Squirrels will collect what they will need to make it through the winter, while we are worrying about college bills, the mortgage or, back to Rybczynski, paying for the state of the art equipment we use in our feverish free time.

I know people who spend more time being a human doing than being a human being. But if there’s not an app for that, at least, there’s a cure for that.

I started by sharing the ritual of Havdalah, but I’d like to concentrate for a moment on what went before it—on Shabbat, on the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath is the bible’s answer to our impulse to professionalize our play, to

indulge in our need for leisure, to acknowledge our profound, but too often ignored call to slow down.

The seven-day work week entered Western culture through the bible. “The heavens and the earth were finished and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work, which God had been doing and God ceased on the seventh day from all the world which God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation which God had done.” One way to look at this is if animals rest, and God rests, why can’t we? Or, as Jewish texts teach, if God rests, then we are obligated to rest because we must imitate God. The first of the Ten Commandments teaches, “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Eternal Your God. You shall not do any work, you, your son, or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Eternal made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, and God rested on the seventh day, therefore, the Eternal One blessed the Sabbath and hallowed it.”

Now I realize that Jews and Christians count differently and that the Sabbath for me is Saturday and the Sabbath for you is Sunday, but whether or not we time-shift, the message still holds true. Saturday or Sunday, Shabbat or the Sabbath, reminiscent of the animals whose nature it is to rest, helps us to override over very human impulse to do and to overdo.

Celebrating the Sabbath is not about improving your tennis game. It is not a time for recreation, indeed, the concept of the Sabbath is to let creation rest, so recreation or “re-creation” would be perverting its meaning. Sabbath is about rest. One of the all time brilliant traditions, which when our kids were little we all practiced in our family and I’m sorry to say I no longer do was to take a nap on Saturday afternoon.

I worked for eight years with a man dogged by time. He was late to everything, took several phone calls simultaneously, often with a line of people out the door of his office while on the phone, got far too many speeding tickets and raced around, as my father would say, “like a bat out of hell”. We studied together regularly, teaching one another Torah and building on one another’s insights. Without shame, he told me that the most important thing he learned from me in the eight years of sharing our rabbinates was the shortcut I discovered between his house and the freeway. But he was an observant Jew.

On Shabbat he put on a different watch—he couldn't quite relinquish wearing one—his Shabbas watch, walked slowly to synagogue, spent several hours in worship, study, conversation rest and renewal. What could be more refreshing? He taught me through his behavior about *Shabbat vayinafash*, about being given a fuller soul on the Sabbath.

I remember a conversation I had once with a Jewish marriage and family counselor. She told me that regardless of their religious tradition or their level of observance, she encourages all of her clients to keep the Sabbath. She wasn't interested in whether they worshipped or what their theology was. She wasn't proselytizing. But there was one particular practice for which she was an evangelist—making time each week for a family dinner. Having that family time, she maintained, could keep families healthy.

Rybczynski offers a fascinating history of the weekend. It began in England when Sunday, instead of being properly observed as the Lord's Day for Christians, came to be a time of strenuous self-indulgence. There came to be the practice of "keeping Saint Monday", as a way of recovering from the drinking and merriment. Religious groups, middle class reformers and entrepreneurs, all opposed to Saint Monday, joined together to propose a half holiday on Saturday afternoon to replace Saint Monday. They reasoned that if the partying and consuming took place Saturday afternoon and evening, then Sunday, the Lord's Day, could be properly observed. The Saturday half holiday became common in the 1870s. In a New England spinning mill in 1908, a factory expanded the half holiday on Saturday to a full day off in order to accommodate Jewish workers. And so supported by Jewish workers, community leaders and employers, the five day work week—and the weekend was born.

The concept of a sacred day and then the expansion to two days off gives us a way to balance the various ideas of the weekend. It is time to return to the essence of the weekend. Let one day be a day for recreation—for showing off the latest equipment or shopping the malls, for running errands and working out at the gym. Let the Sabbath, whichever of those two days is sacred to you, be a day of rest, of leisure, of family, of renewal, a day for God, a day for human beings. Let the Sabbath be the space between the notes, which creates a true harmony and fullness.

This week we lost a master scientist and storyteller in Dr. Oliver Sacks. His last essay in the New York Times was an evocative description of his childhood experience of Shabbat. He had an orthodox upbringing in a vibrant

Jewish community in England observing the rituals with a large and close family. Yet, he lived most of his life estranged from Jewish practice, largely because of an unforgiving reaction to his homosexuality. Last year, for the first time in 60 years he traveled to Israel, accompanied by his lover, in order to share a hundredth birthday celebration with a cousin. Encountering a very different reception, he once again shared Shabbat with family.

He writes, “The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, something akin to nostalgia, wondering what if: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?”

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.”<sup>vi</sup>

Dr. Sacks taught us to use our senses in new ways by his work. By his thoughtfulness in the last days of his life, may he teach us, as well, to live our lives appreciating both labor and rest. *Zecher tzadik l’bracha*. May the memory of this righteous man be for all of us, a blessing. And may this Labor Day weekend be a time of rest, of reflection, of counting our blessings. And as autumn begins, may your weekends be filled with Sabbath peace. Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Swerdlow, “Lost Weekends”,  
<http://www.kqed.org/a/perspectives/R201504160643>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://jefuniracamp.com/about-jefunira-camp/testimonials/>

<sup>iii</sup> Witold Rybczynski, “Waiting for the Weekend” *The Atlantic*, August 1991

<sup>iv</sup> <https://historytech.wordpress.com/2010/04/12/finished-a-day-of-teaching-a-day-wasted/>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/30/science/busy-as-a-bee-then-who-s-doing-the-work.html>

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&_r=0)