

I love asking kids when I meet them what they did at school. More often than not the answer is “nothing.” Of course, they know and I know that they are doing much more than nothing.

The idea of doing nothing is difficult in our society. We are pushed by an education system geared to getting a good job, by a capitalist economy based on profit and by a quasi-religious ethic of work to either to make or buy, produce or consume with seeming abandon. The idea of doing nothing is almost antithetical to the way we live our lives.

Yet doing nothing may exactly what we need to do. In his book *Work to Live: The Guide to Getting a Life*, journalist Joe Robinson critiques the harried, hectic life that so many have created for themselves. We have become a nation obsessed with programming our time - and it is particularly noticeable in families with children. I see it in the parents who spend their afternoon chauffeuring children from math tutor to soccer practice, then grab a quick bite of pizza before rushing off to an evening basketball meet or art class. Instead of spending time meeting friends in the front lobby, parents drop their children off to Hebrew school so they can rush to the supermarket to get something they can pop in the microwave.

Robinson offers statistical evidence to underscore his concern that people have forgotten how to relax and just do nothing. An August 2003 poll for the Center for a New American Dream, an organization based in Takoma Park, Maryland, that focuses on quality-of-life issues, revealed that although 60% of Americans felt pressure to work too much, more than 80% wished for more family time and 52% would take less money to get it.

Unlike European nations, where there has been a lessening in the hours of work, American workers have all but abandoned the 40-hour work week. In a community like ours “success” is almost defined as a commitment to working the longest possible number of hours. It is a model not unique to here, as 80% of men and over 60% of women put in more than 40 hours a week on the job.

How did we get to this point? Families started down this road in the 1980s, when after school activities were seen as a way to keep young people out of trouble. In earlier days, kids played outside after school, often going out for hours before coming

in for dinner. Worried about child abductors and juvenile delinquency, parents turned to structured programs to keep their children active.

The rise of a wider variety of home appliances and gadgets only accelerated the problem. Where my parents were happy with a television, today's families need three or more. When I was growing up who knew from computers. Today families with one computer have children fighting over it to do their homework and talk to their friends on MSN. While it is true that we have appliances that save time, we do not abandon what homes used to have. All we seem to be doing is adding more and more. And to keep up with all those purchases, people must work longer hours. The legitimate desire of women to enter the workforce, combined with the growing need from families to have two-income earners to keep up, has meant that people just do not have the time to work on keeping their relationships sound.

“Frantic families,” says William Doherty, a University of Minnesota professor of marriage and family therapy, “equal fragile families.” We certainly see it here. Many children feel, by their High School years, so stressed that the only escape is drugs or alcohol. Doctors see a growing number of children with sports injuries. Stress is wearing away at marriages. People have so little time for themselves, should we be surprised, then, that volunteer groups are struggling to find people to commit to help others?

In response to this hurried life a group in Minneapolis recently set up what they called the “Ready, Set, Relax” project. Its goals were to get teachers to assign less homework, to have clubs not schedule so many meetings and to encourage parents to come home to have dinner with their children. So successful has “Ready, Set, Relax” become, that it was recently reported in *Time* magazine (October 27, 2003).

The idea of giving oneself time just to be instead of to do, to relax instead of to run, of enjoying the restfulness that comes from doing nothing is not exactly a new one. Indeed, it is at the very center of the very first *parasha*, the weekly Torah portion that speaks of Creation.

Whenever I tell the story of Creation to religious school students, they are interested in how it can be reconciled with what they are learning in science. One precocious 10-year old asked me this week, “Do you think that Adam and Eve were

*Australopithecus?”* Our students are confused how Torah’s account of Creation fits with what they have learned about Darwinian theories of evolution. They want to know how the light could be created before the sun, moon and stars.

Their concerns, while interesting, miss the point. The goal of the Creation story is not some scientifically accurate account of how the world came to be, but an attempt to emphasize the central nature of Shabbat. Many cultures have creation myths. The uniqueness of Torah’s account is its emphasis on a day of rest as an integral part of the world’s order. The opposite of Shabbat - work and toil - is a curse, evidenced by the need to work as a punishment inflicted on Adam.

Shabbat comes from the Hebrew word *לשבת* meaning “to sit” or “to rest.” It is, in essence, a day in which we are not asked to make, do or produce. A day of nothing is not an empty day. Rather, it is a time to refresh and reinvigorate ourselves. It is a time, as it were, to catch our breath.

That nothingness is not the same as emptiness is reflected in a term the mystics use for God - *אין*, which literally means “Nothing.” In this way the kabbalists teach that the utter emptying of oneself - not imposing one’s will on another, not producing or buying - touches us to a sense of the divine.

This particular Shabbat immediately following the Jewish holidays is also one that traditionally ushers in a month of nothing. The coming Hebrew month of Cheshvan, which begins tomorrow is, in fact, the only month in our calendar with no observance connected to it. It is, in essence, a month of nothing. As we recover from being “over-yuntifed”, the quiet weeks ahead allow reflection on the themes and messages of the holidays.

Having a day and month of “nothing” has much to teach this frenetic generation. We run ourselves ragged, fill up our days with activities, and then we wonder, “How come I’m so unhappy? Why is it that my children are so stressed?”

Shabbat - a real day to rest - is, therefore, an important antidote to the hectic pace of our age. Why, then, have so many Jews abandoned Shabbat? Rabbi Harold Schulweis argues that it is fear - specifically a fear of leisure. The dread of having a single day away from the office produces in many people what psychologists Ferenzl and Karl Abraham call “Sunday neurosis.” Perhaps there is another fear at work - the

fear of intimacy. With time to be alone with family and friends, we are forced to confront our relationships. How much easier it is to be in activities, where conversation is limited. People go to work because they find greater satisfaction there. As difficult as the office may be, it is not nearly as hard as the unresolved crisis at home, the quarrels and testy teens. We run away from Shabbat, then, because we are afraid. And so we addict ourselves to work and a busy schedule. But at what cost? It is not only the Jewish community that suffers from people who have no time to rest. It is we who suffer, and our families. Shabbat, with its challenge to sit leisurely at a meal, challenges us to engage in conversations that are more than was the score in last night's game or what new stock offering is in the offing. Shabbat is, says Rabbi Schulweis, "a cry for sanity, for freedom from the omnivorous monster that eats at our soul and robs us of our family, our friends, and the gentleness in us."

Shabbat asks us to take one day out of seven to slow down, to connect deeply with people who matter, to reflect on the values our traditions teach and to live with the "nothingness" that gives back more than you can imagine. What can you do to allow Shabbat into your life?

- First, give up whatever your regular routine is on this day. Shabbat is a day to focus on what matters in our lives. It urges us to seek something deeper to our days than having fun or making money. But to do that means getting out of the habit of treating this day as ordinary. It is a sacred, holy time ... but only if we make it so.
- Second, do not take an 'all or nothing' approach to Shabbat. Shabbat observance can seem overwhelming - a series of proscriptions and restrictions. A Reform Jewish approach emphasizes what we do rather than what we do not do. We teach that Shabbat is not simply a day of restrictions, but a chance to do things in a joyously different and refreshing manner.
- Third, understand that giving up on soccer games and shopping, running at the gym and running to do errands can be replaced with enriching activities. Read a book. Try the spiritual uplift that comes from communal prayer. Open the

Torah or some other book of Jewish wisdom. Come to our weekly Torah study for intellectually stimulating discussion about eternal principles.

- Finally, remember that Shabbat is not only Friday night and not only in meant for synagogue. Even if you do not come to pray, take time to appreciate the world. Hike on the beach. Read a Jewish book. Listen to what is happening with your family.

Our days are full. Our lives a rush. But in the headlong attempt to fill each moment, to do everything, we are robbing ourselves of a deep appreciation of the Eternal, of a chance for spiritual renewal and of the time to connect in a loving way to those who matter to us.

The great lie of our age is that we can do it all. The truth Shabbat teaches is that if you really want something worthwhile, it can only come through appreciating a day of "nothing."