The Sabbath Habit - Ki Tetzeit 5786
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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Two weeks ago, I downloaded an app on my phone called **Sabbath**.

The app is designed to help people step away from their phones for a period of time. I realize the inherent contradiction, an app for your phone so you won't use your phone so much. But once you get past the rational hypocrisy in that idea it makes sense. Anyhow, I decided I would begin with Friday night.

I was not primarily trying to stop myself from answering work emails. I already try not to do that on Shabbat. I was trying to confront something more ordinary: the habit of retreating into my phone when I could be retreating into people, relationships, rest, or even my own thoughts.

Most nights after Sharon and I say goodnight, I often turn on my phone for a few minutes and tune out.

Sometimes I catch up on the news. Sometimes I read a blog or an article I didn't have time to read during the day. My particular guilty pleasure is watching Facebook Reels of people cooking.

Other people apparently use social media for political arguments and conspiracy theories. I use it to learn twelve new ways to roast a chicken or how to make lo mein just like chinese take out.

I watch the recipes, save the good ones (I have another app for that), and sometimes try them during the week. So there is even a family benefit. My phone may be stealing my attention, but

occasionally it gives everyone an excellent tofu stir fry.

None of this is terrible. Some of it is useful. Some of it is educational. But I have begun to wonder whether it is how I want to end every day.

Last Friday night was my first experiment. I activated the app. My phone was restricted. Everything except phone calls and text messages was blocked. I was observing a little digital Sabbath.

We said goodnight at 10:30pm, by 10:37 I had turned off the sabbath app and turned on the recipes.

So tonight is my second attempt. As I stand before you, I do not know how it will go. My modest goal is

to make it until tomorrow breakfast; the time of day not the menu items.

This week's Torah portion, Ki Teitzei, contains more mitzvot than any other portion in the Torah. Seventy-four commandments governing nearly every part of ordinary life.

What do you do when you find something another person has lost? How quickly must you pay someone who works for you? How do you treat an animal? What responsibility do you have for hazards on your property? What kind of weights may you use in business?

These are not commandments reserved for the synagogue or the great spiritual moments of life. They govern roofs, roads, animals, wages, clothing and property.

Torah seems to understand that a human life is shaped less by the dramatic decisions we make once than by the small decisions we make repeatedly.

“Build a parapet around your roof,” Torah commands, “so that you do not bring bloodguilt upon your house if anyone should fall from it.”

Do not wait until someone falls and then feel terrible. Arrange your home so that falling is less likely. Make safety part of the architecture.

I understand this mitzvah perhaps a little too well.

I cannot walk past an open cabinet door without closing it. The same is true of drawers, chairs that have not been pushed in, objects left on the floor,

lights left on and almost anything hanging slightly crooked.

My family sometimes finds this helpful.

They also sometimes find it deeply annoying.

I will put away a bag of chips someone has left on the counter, only to learn that they were not finished eating them. I will close a drawer someone has left open because they were still using it.

In my mind, I am restoring order and preventing injury.

In their minds, I am interfering with lunch.

But I genuinely cannot relax when I see an open drawer. I imagine someone walking into it. I feel responsible for closing it.

Is that a good habit? A minor compulsion? A mitzvah?

Probably all three.

Habit is morally complicated.

A good choice repeated often enough can become a virtue. A sacred act repeated often enough can become mechanical. And a seemingly harmless choice repeated often enough can begin making choices for us.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler, one of the great teachers of the Mussar tradition, offered a remarkable way of understanding this.

He called it the ***nekudat habechirah***, the point of choice.

Rav Dessler imagined human life as a battlefield. In a war, most of the territory is not being actively contested. One side controls the territory behind its lines. The other side controls the territory behind theirs. The actual battle takes place along a narrow front.

Rav Dessler taught that the same is true within each of us.

We like to imagine that every action we perform is freely chosen in the moment. But much of what we

do is governed by upbringing, personality, environment and habit.

There are things you would never seriously consider doing. There are good deeds you perform without any internal struggle. And there are behaviours you repeat almost without noticing.

Your real freedom exists along a much narrower frontier, in those places where you could genuinely choose either way. That is your *nekudat habechirah*. That is your present point of choice.[1]

My phone is standing on that frontier. Hopefully it's plugged into a charging cable.

[1] Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1, *Kuntres HaBechirah*, chapters 2–3; see also Rav Assaf Bednarsh, “Free Will (3),” Yeshivat Har Etzion.

The Sabbath app can make my choice more difficult. It can place a fence around the behaviour. But the app cannot make the choice for me.

I know this because the app has a pause button.

And I found it remarkably quickly.

That does not mean the experiment failed. It means I located the frontline of the battlefield.

Rav Dessler's insight is that the line can move. If we make the same good choice repeatedly, what was once difficult can eventually become natural. The territory is conquered. What required great effort yesterday becomes simply what we do.

But the line moves in the other direction too. When we repeatedly surrender a choice, the behaviour

also becomes easier, until eventually we no longer experience ourselves as choosing.

How often do we say, “I just checked my phone,” as if our hand acted independently of the rest of us?

This is the danger of habit. We make a choice, repeat it, and then one day discover that the choice is making us.

But habit is also one of God’s great gifts to us.

In our home, we feed our dog Mitzi before we sit down to eat. Sometimes we forget. We begin serving dinner, see her watching us, and someone gets up to feed her.

Jewish tradition teaches that a person should feed their animals before feeding themselves. The

Talmud derives this from the order of a verse in the Torah: God first provides grass for the animals and then food for human beings.[2]

I cannot claim that each time we feed Mitzi we are engaged in profound theological reflection. Mostly, we imagine how it must feel to watch everyone else eat while your own bowl is empty, and your paws have no opposable thumbs.

But perhaps that is exactly what the mitzvah was meant to accomplish.

We begin by observing a commandment. We repeat it. Eventually, the mitzvah becomes empathy, and empathy becomes habit.

[2] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 40a, interpreting Deuteronomy 11:15

The action may become automatic, but that does not mean it has lost its moral value. Rav Dessler teaches that conquered territory still reflects the choices that brought us there. A good habit is accumulated moral effort. It is yesterday's choices living inside today's character.

That is a crucial distinction as we enter the Hebrew month of Elul and prepare ourselves in less than three weeks for the High Holy Days.

Our task is not to eliminate habit. We could not function if we had to make every decision for the first time every day.

Our task is to become more deliberate about which habits are shaping us and which person those habits are helping us become.

There are sacred habits that may need to be awakened.

I can put on my tallit automatically. I can lead a service and know exactly which page comes next, which melody to sing, when to stand and when to sit. Familiarity allows prayer to flow, but it can also allow the person praying to disappear.

Then I notice someone watching. A child learning the prayer. A person saying Kaddish for the first time. Someone who needs these words tonight.

Suddenly, the familiar act becomes a choice again and I do it with more intention, to better model for them and to better model for myself.

And there are habits we may need to interrupt, not because they are wicked, but because they are keeping us from something better.

Reading another article is not wrong. Watching another recipe is not wrong. But perhaps Friday night can ask something more of me.

Perhaps Shabbat is not only about what I refrain from doing. Perhaps it is about what becomes possible when I stop.

A conversation that lasts five minutes longer. A physical book held in my hands. A little silence before sleep. The realization that the day has already contained enough information.

The shofar blast that Bobbie will sound at the end of our service tonight is there to wake us up, to remind

us that we are now in the month of Elul, a time of introspection, *Heshbne HaNefesh*, the accounting of our souls. Judaism does not ask us to remake our entire lives before Rosh Hashanah. Rav Dessler asks us to locate the frontlines in our internal battles.

Where is one habit making choices for you?

Where is one value you want to practise until it becomes habitual?

We cannot answer those questions for anyone else. We do not know where another person's battlefront lies. What is effortless for you may require enormous courage from someone else. What looks like a small achievement from the outside may represent a great victory within.

That knowledge should make us less judgmental of others and more honest with ourselves.

Tonight, my frontier is very small. It is a phone beside my bed and an app with a dangerously accessible pause button.

I may not make it through all of Shabbat. This week, I am trying to make it through tonight.

Because perhaps that is how change actually happens. One choice. Then another. Then another, until the choice becomes a habit and the habit becomes a life.

Shabbat Shalom.

Sources:

1. Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1, *Kuntres HaBechirah*, chapters 2–3.

2. Rav Assaf Bednarsh, [“Free Will (3),” Yeshivat Har Etzion](https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/free-will-3).
3. Mrs. Sharon Isaacson, [“Is Judaism an All or Nothing Proposition?” Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim](https://mevaseret.org/is-judaism-an-all-or-nothing-proposition/).
4. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 40a.