“Chop Wood, Feed the Dog, Fix the Pantry: Sanctifying the Ordinary”

Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon – Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

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There is a quiet in my house this week that’s unfamiliar. Sharon and the kids are away—some in New York, some at camp—and it’s just me and Mitzi, our dog. The house is still, the sink is less full, the fridge hasn’t been raided by a teenager in days. For the first time in what feels like forever, I’ve had time to notice things. A loose cabinet hinge. The pantry that’s long needed reorganizing. A wall corner that could use a little touch-up paint.

And so, between work and dog walks, I’ve tried to use the stillness to do those things I never quite get around to. To bring a little order. A little care. To tend to the space we live in.

At first, it felt like productivity. But then I realized—it was something deeper.

Judaism, I’ve come to believe, lives in the unremarkable. Not only in the dramatic or the transcendent, but in the deeply ordinary. In the daily routines. In how we care for things and beings that cannot care for themselves. In how we honor a space, even when no one else is there to see it.

Even when it’s just you, and the dog.

Each morning, Mitzi is already in the kitchen before I am—tail wagging, waiting for breakfast. And every time, I’m reminded of a deceptively small but deeply Jewish teaching: we are commanded to feed our animals before we feed ourselves.

It’s not just good manners—it’s halacha.

The Talmud (Berachot 40a) explains that based on Deuteronomy 11:15—"I will provide grass in your field for your animals, and you shall eat and be satisfied"—we are taught to place the needs of the beings who depend on us ahead of our own. The order in that verse is intentional, first grass for animals, then food for people. The rabbis noticed. They always notice.

And so twice a day this week, that mitzvah has grounded me. Mitzi looks up, trusting, certain that food will come. It's a small moment—but it echoes a large value: that love is built on responsibility. And that spiritual life is not found in grand ritual, but in faithful, regular, even unnoticed acts of care.

That awareness has extended beyond the dog dish. With the house quiet, I found myself folding the laundry immediately. Wiping the counters more often. Touching up the paint on a wall I usually ignore. The pantry? Finally conquered. The cabinet hinge? Repaired.

No one asked. No one noticed. But it felt…important.

This is what our tradition calls *Kavod HaBayit*—honoring the home. Not just the people inside it, but the structure itself. The walls. The doorposts. The feel of a place when it's been cared for.

The mystics taught that the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, rests in peaceful and intentional homes. Even our mezuzot mark this idea: this place matters. It's sacred space.

There's a midrash that teaches: "The presence of God does not dwell in disorder." Not that God demands perfection, but that God dwells where there is attention. Where people are present.

So what is cleaning the baseboards if not spiritual work?

What is reorganizing a pantry if not an act of care?

What is fixing a sagging door if not preparing your house as a vessel for peace?

As I shared earlier, the mystical angels that visit during shalom alechem, are predicated on our home being in good order, ready to welcome Shabbat.

This week I also remembered a Zen teaching I've taught before, it's one of only a handful of zen teachings I know:

"Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

In other words: even after spiritual awakening, your life still consists of ordinary tasks. You still sweep the floor. Walk the dog. Fix the hinge. The difference is how you show up to them. How you see them.

This Zen teaching speaks beautifully to Jewish spirituality. We don't believe in escaping the world for divine truths—we believe in infusing the world with them. Holiness doesn't pull you out of your life—it pulls you into it.

And so the mitzvah is not to escape from chores, but to elevate them. To feed your animal with intention. To fold the laundry with gratitude. To bring God into your home not with a trumpet—but with a broom.

This is the heartbeat of Jewish life: not big gestures, but small ones done with *kavannah*—intention.

We have blessings for waking up. For washing hands. For seeing a rainbow. For hearing thunder. There's even a blessing for going to the bathroom.

Because nothing is beneath spiritual attention.

The Torah gives us Mount Sinai, yes—but it also gives us instructions for mending clothes, and for how to return a lost object. The daily acts of care. The habits that shape a life.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said it this way: “The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to collect sacred moments.”

We find them just as much while walking Mitzi as while studying Talmud.

I’ve also learned this week that something powerful happens when we care for things with no one watching.

There’s a temptation to let things go when we’re alone—why bother folding if no one sees? Why organize if no one will use it? Why fix what no one notices?

But Judaism tells us: do it anyway.

Because the “audience” is not the point. The presence is. The act of kavod—honor—is its own reward.

Pirkei Avot teaches: “In a place where there are no people, strive to be a person.” I think this week I would amend that to say:

“In a house that is temporarily empty, strive to fill it with holiness.”

And now we enter Shabbat—the pinnacle of this idea. A day that is entirely about reframing the ordinary.

We stop working. We eat. We bless. We rest.

No fireworks. No pageantry. Just presence. Just peace.

Heschel called Shabbat a “cathedral in time.” Not made of marble, but of attention. Of people who are willing to see what is always there.

So if you have a messy shelf at home—go fix it.

If your dog needs a walk—take it.

If your kitchen needs light—light it.

And then rest. Light candles. Eat bread. Sing songs.

Let this ordinary evening be transformed by extraordinary attention.

As we enter Shabbat tonight, I offer you this:

May your life be made holy not only by what is remarkable, but by what is repeated.

May you feed the animals before yourself—and in doing so, remember your place in creation.

May your hands bless your home through the labor of care.

May your soul find joy in the pantry, the paintbrush, the leash, and the light.

And may you know that God is not only found in the synagogue, but sometimes in the dog dish.

Shabbat Shalom.