SHABBAT VERSION 2.0

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area I used to listen to a morning radio show called 'Frank & Mike in the Morning.' Mind you this was not by choice, Frank & Mike were on KNBR 680 AM and that was the station that my Dad would listen to when he drove me to grade school and junior high. And if there was one rule in my family growing up, it was the person who was driving the car controlled the radio station we listened to. My Dad liked Frank & Mike, so that is what we listened to every morning. It was an old time radio program, with different voices, crazy contests, and sketch comedy. To my classmates it was radio for grown ups, and it was AM radio to boot, therefore inherently uncool, but Dad liked it, and Dad was driving.

Frank & Mike really weren't that bad, in fact some of their stuff was pretty funny, I don't remember much of it thinking back on it now, except for one contest they used to play every Friday morning that would always drive me and my Dad nuts trying to figure it out.

The radio duo would put two objects inside a shoe box and shake them on the air. The first listener to call in and correctly identify the two items based on the sound they made would win a prize. My Dad and I would always try and guess, he may have gotten a few of them right, I never did.

With your indulgence, we are going to play the Frank & Mike Shoe Box game, close your eyes and see if you can identify this sound. I will give you a hint, nearly every family in this room, including mine, has at least one of these at home.

(Shake Chanukah candles in box)

Did you guess what it was? It's a nearly empty box of Chanukah candles. Emphasis on the nearly empty. This may come as a shock to some but the company that makes these puts the exact amount needed to light candles for all eight nights Chanukah in each box. Unlike the gifts that we receive on Chanukah, the ones that come with the warning "some assembly required", Chanukah candles do not come with extra parts. The only way to have candles leftover at the end of the holiday is to not have lit them at some point during the holiday. This is my box of Chanukah candles! Rabbis miss nights of Chanukah too! Kim and I have two or three more at home just like it. Its like a Subclub card at subway sandwiches, in a few more years, we get a free year, because we can use all of our left over candles instead of having to buy a new box.

Why do we have extra Chanukah candles at home? Why do we buy boxes of Shabbat candles and only run out after a power failure, not because we used up all the Shabbats that are in the box? I have a good friend, a Rabbi, his family celebrates Chanukah at Thanksgiving, in fact as I recall our family did that last year as well. Why, because that is when we are all together. We celebrate these Jewish holidays when we can, when they fit into the busyness of our lives and the rhythm of modern American life. Our tradition may be based upon a Jewish calendar, but our lives are lived in accordance with the American calendar.

Passover is the most celebrated and observed holiday in the Jewish year. More American Jews attend a seder, than belong to a temple or even attend high holy day services. Why? Because Passover fits with the rhythm of American life, it is the Jewish Thanksgiving, it is culturally accepted, so much so that our non-Jewish friends call us up

every year wondering when the Seder will be so they don't miss it, or my mom's matzah balls. It is part of the financial basis of the American holiday economy, go and look at all of the Passover food in the aisles of the super markets, Passover is big business in America today, last year their was a shortage on brisket because of Mad Cow disease and it made the front page of the New York and LA Times. Passover is universally accepted because it also makes rational, even theological sense; as a people we may not understand why we build a hut and wave branches and citrus fruit during Sukkot, but a holiday celebrating freedom from slavery, that makes sense. Even the matzah for all its symbolism, has at its genesis a plausible explanation, our ancestors were in such a hurry, their was no time to wait for the bread to rise. Kinda like the cold poptarts we eat as we commute to work.

In the calendar of social events that makes up the Jewish year, Passover and Chanukah are successes because they have legs, they can stand on their own amidst the assault upon Jewish tradition that modernity wages from every corner. Shabbat and Sukkot, as well as many other Jewish holidays and observances, for them the confrontation with modernity is much more precarious. Their relevancy has not been established in many American Jewish homes. Many, if not most in our community observe Shabbat, Sukkot, even Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, not out of a sense of commandedness, the voice of God telling our people to get to temple or light candles. But rather it is more often the voice of their Bubbe or their Zaydde, the power of collective Jewish guilt that commands, with far more authority than God: "Don't let this tradition, this custom die, keep it alive in memory of me! But friends that is not enough, it is not enough to observe out of guilt, out a sense of obligation to those who came

before us. That is not why Bubbe and Zadye lit the candles, that is not why they made homemade gefiltte fish, why they laid tephillin in the morning, belonged to a shule, read and studied our sacred texts. Our grandparents were not the models of Judaism we hold them up to be out of some obligation to their own grandparents. That diminishes their *zachot*, their honor and it's simply not true. Our grandparents were such *Tzadikkim*, such righteous Jews, because they believed in what they were doing, it was an authentic expression of their Jewish identity, and it therefore defined their Judaism. The same must be true for us, we must find an authentic expression of Judaism in our own lives, and if it is not Friday night services, and homemade gefilte fish, if it is not silver shabbas candle sticks and fine linen table clothes, then we must determine what being Jewish is for us, not for our kids, not for the generation before, those are just excuses to motivate us toward doing something that is not really us. We can't be Jewish for the sake of others, we must be Jewish for the sake of our selves, the question before us, the one me must confront in this New Year is how do we go about being Jewish for ourselves, how do we make these tradition relevant and holidays relevant in our own lives, authentic expressions of our own Jewish identity.

The great Jewish philosopher Ahad HaAm taught that as much as the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath itself has kept the Jewish people. By this he meant that Judaism has survived as a culture and a religion because we live by a Jewish calendar, because we celebrate the cycles of our year and our life in accordance with the formula and sequence laid out in the Talmud. He made that proclamation more than a hundred years ago, and a hundred years ago, for the Judaism of his day he was correct, but now, in our time, in the Judaism of our day I am not so sure. In fact it may be the the

opposite is more true, that the Friday Night Shabbat service itself with its low turn outs, and lowering of intellectual, theological and spiritual standards could bring about the undoing, or to be more exact, the un-Jewing of the Jewish people. And I am not the only Rabbi who thinks this way.

In 1985, while speaking to an International Convention of Reform Rabbis, Rabbi Gunther Plaut, President of the organization, and author of the Torah commentary that sits right now in the aisles of our sanctuary, made the following observation in his keynote address:

> Our prayer services have become worship exercises demanded by traditional habits, but with rare exceptions that are neither filled with drama nor intellectual acuity, and instead feature set rituals which the rabbi dreads and the small congregation in attendance endures.

Rabbi Plaut continued by further stating the obvious consequences of continuing as the primary product of a synagogue, something many endure, but few, if any really like, "No business, not even the spiritual business can last for long when it appeals to only 6 – 10% of its constituency."

Friends, the High Holy Days of all times, let us at least be honest with each other about this, if you wanted to come to services on Friday nights, more of you would. We make time, even in the busyness and crazyness of our lives for those things that are a priority, soccer games are never missed, new movies are always seen, dinner parties and social events are attended. Most modern Jews attend Friday night services about as often as they go to the dentist, every 4-6 months, and many with about the same enthusiasm. Oh, afterwards we are always glad we went, we know it was good for us, but like the dentist we don't rush back unless there is a problem, a crisis, something hurts, we are in

pain. Otherwise, we come back again only when they send us a card and remind us they haven't seen our pearly whites in a while.

This, by the way is not a new problem, 150 years ago, the Reform Movement made many of these same observations, their response was to do away with Friday night services all together, and they held them instead on Sundays, when the rest of the non-Jewish community was also in their houses of worship. But people didn't come then either, Sunday was already busy with other things, and it just didn't feel like Jewish time.

So what do we do? How do we save the Jewish people, how do we free ourselves from the compounding of Jewish guilt that builds up at this time every year. How can we make Shabbat an authentic expression of our Jewishness? We need a new version of Shabbat, we need to upgrade our operating systems, we need I like to call Shabbat version 2.0.

Our lives are crazy, we live in a 24/7/365 world, with high speed, always on, always open, drive up window access to everything but our own souls. If ever a generation and a society needed Shabbat and what it has to offer us in terms of a quality of life, a view of the world from the inside out, then it is this generation, this society, we need Shabbat

Our only challenge is making it relevant to our lives. I trust that we can find the time for it, no matter how hard we work we seem to find time for those things that are important to us, we found time to be here today, we can find time for Shabbat, it just may need to be at a time we determine, not one determined by a Jewish calendar set 2000 years ago, when the primary industry was agriculture, when Jews all lived in tightly knit

villages, when the Temple was the shopping mall, the multi-plex and the country club all in one..

Shabbat is the answer to our prayers, well at least to those who have time to pray, it is for all of us a solution to this problem. But not Shabbat as has been defined for us throughout the generations, we must envision a new Shabbat, Shabbat version 2.0 enhanced and upgraded, for the realities of modernity, made relevant for who we are and reflective of what we truly need and believe.

To do this we need to accept a more accurate definition of what Shabbat really is. Shabbat is not about coming to temple that is part of it but not the most important thing. Most Rabbis would tell you that we would rather our congregants not come to temple nearly as much, if it meant instead they were making Shabbat at home. Shabbat is also not about denying oneself the pleasures of life. It is not about the can't do's, that we so often associate with a Traditional Shabbat: can't turn on lights, can't go out with friends, can't drive. First we are Reform Jews and we don't subscribe to most of those traditions for many good ideological reasons, and second the gift of Shabbat in our lives is not a day when we can't do things we might enjoy, it's a period of time when we are required to only do things that we will enjoy. It is *zman kodesh*, it is sacred time. Shabbat can be a walk with you spouse along the beach, it can be playing a board game with your kids, it can be, as it has become for me, the one day of the week that I don't go near my computer, the one day I unplug from the world and plug into my soul. It can be whatever we define it to be, also long as we consider that thing, or that time to be holy and sacred. Shabbat is about taking care of our soul, checking in with our spiritual and emotional self so that we are centered and prepared for the week ahead. It is a time to be selfish, it is a

time to put our needs and our families needs above all others. It is *zman kodesh*, it is holy time.

And so here it comes, here is the big idea, what is Shabbat version 2.0, what is this new approach to Shabbat, it is the individual autonomy to decide to make Shabbat whenever we want, whenever it is possible, whenever it fits in, as long as we make sure to do it at least once a week. We have the freedom, particularly as Reform Jews, if not the obligation to ourselves to make Shabbat happen at least once, if even for a few hours in our crazy, and hectic week. If not Friday night, then how about Wednesday? Saturday day doesn't work, then try Sunday night. Does it matter which day, yes it does, but that does not matter more than Shabbat itself.

Would it be better for Judaism if we all did it together on Friday Night and Saturday, certainly, and that is without a doubt the hidden agenda here. But the bottom line, is that the value of doing Shabbat in a manner that is authentic to who you are as a Jewish individual, in a way that connects you with your spiritual center, and reconnects you with the relationships you love and cherish in your life, that value trumps them all, we must not let a little thing like the Jewish calendar get in our way, Shabbat and what it can do for us, our soul and those we care about is to important.

It is time for an upgrade, it is time for a new Jewish operating system, the old one is just not compatible with our modern lives. I urge you to go home from these services and sit as a family and honestly talk about how you can make Shabbat part of your Jewish experience, how you can fit it into your lives, no matter the conditions, or the terms. Let us at least start with something and build on it from there. Let us at least start

to make Shabbat in any way that we can, rather than excuses as to why can't, we may indeed find that it was just what we have been missing all along.