

**Harry Potter and the Order of our Lives:  
The Magical Power of Shabbat  
Kol Nidrei/ Erev Yom Kippur  
October 5, 2003**

A story, from a different tradition. *You know that churches handle their finances differently than do synagogues, by passing a plate during services . Now, in one church, the minister, going through the plate after the service, thought that there must be a practical joker in the congregation. For, in the plate one week, and then another, there appeared a small slip of paper with the letters I.O.U., followed by a dollar amount. But one Sunday night, weeks later, the collection included an envelope with bills equal to the total of the I.O.U.s.*

*After that, the pastor could hardly wait to see what amount the anonymous donor had promised. The amounts varied. And eventually the pastor figured out that the variable item was the donor's opinion... about the pastor's sermon. How did he figure this out? Because one Sunday, after the pastor himself knew he had written a poor sermon, and delivered it badly to boot, there came a note in the collection plate which read, not I.O.U... but "U.O.Me."*

My friends, this night I have something to say that I hope will be worth something to you. But it only might be. Because what I have to say is challenging, and it's different than the approach I usually take, and it's very, well, it's very *Jewish*. It can be just so many words. Or, perhaps, it can change our lives. It's up to us.

*Kol Nidrei*. "A whisper of wings, as promises are remembered." There is a power in this night that works beyond words. It is a mystery inside an enigma, a moment when we catch a glimpse of the veil which separates our world from another. There is something haunting here, a hint of possibilities, echoes of depths we cannot describe.

The origins of *Kol Nidrei* are lost in the mist of time. We know little of its original setting, its stated purpose. But we do know this: when it began to spread, it was strongly opposed by the rabbis of the time. They were alarmed; they felt the words to be an incantation, a formula. Worse, still: they thought it was magic.

Now, we all know the appeal of magic. It's the idea of getting what we want, as if out of thin air. Most of us even know a famous magical formula: wave a wand, announce an amazing accomplishment and say "*abra k'dabra!*" The words are actually Aramaic – the same language as the Kol Nidrei prayer, by the way - and they mean, basically, "I will create as I speak." I will make something out of nothing. I will imitate God, who *said* "let there be light," who *spoke* and the world came to be.

And, we all know that magic is popular. Just look at that latest British import. Who can resist the appeal? Who can't but root for Herschel Potts, I mean Harry Potter, to come out on top?

But if the fantasy of magic is the ability to do things in a flash, the yearning to do what we want beyond the mundane, the human grasping after what Freud called "the omnipotence of thought," well; you should pardon the expression, but the reality of it somewhat different.

So what strikes me as so... realistic... about the fantasy world of J.K. Rowling is this: that Harry Potter goes to school. That even magic takes work. There are rules and rituals, false starts and frustrations, curfews and classes, homework, tests and grades.

And Harry Potter's universe? Why, it's a whole world that co-exists with our own, overlaps it, just beyond the border of our sight... out there, if only you can look at life from a slightly different angle.

**My friends, there really can be magic in our lives. But it is going to take dedication, and devotion. It is going to take commitment. And work.**

**On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the original Jewish contribution to the world of ideas: an awareness of the oneness of God. This Erev Yom Kippur, this Sabbath of Sabbaths, I want to speak about the deepest and most ancient Jewish contribution to civilization: the ideal of Shabbat.**

**For, my friends, Shabbat can work its wonders for each one of us. It can be a magic moment, a weekly renewal in the midst of our hectic lives. It can be the greatest of God's gifts to us... if only we can explore its potential. Understand why it's not "happening" for us already. And if we dream, not of constraints and inconvenience, but of a promise, and possibility.**

**Imagine with me for a moment the industrialized world of the not too distant future.** A child, at birth, receives a single string of numbers. The numbers will serve as social security, a credit card, and a permanent phone number -- work, home, mobile, maybe even wired in at

the cellular level. A tiny implant near our eyes will allow for optical hard drives, infinite access to all the information, the raw data of the world. Libraries will be stored in our head, e-mail will be *literally* in the palm of our hand. We will blend the organic and the machine; we will be always and ever accessible. We will *never* be out of touch. Except with that which can touch us the most.

As against this new cyber-century, words of caution, from a spiritual leader of the last century. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was to me a real role model – a learned scholar and original thinker on the one hand, and a giant of social justice on the other. He wrote about the prophets of old, and he lived the prophetic ideal in his present. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr., and against the war in Vietnam. Rabbi Heschel spoke about the promise of Shabbat. He wrote about Jews making not castles in space, but cathedrals in time. And he described Shabbat in this way:

“To set aside one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have so easily been turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man’s progress than the Sabbath?”

**I couldn’t possibly come up with a better description. This is what Shabbat can be: an oasis in time, a sanctuary of the spirit, a refreshment and renewal and repose.**

**What prevents it? It is our attitude, and expectations.** Maybe it's even the thought that Shabbat is supposed to work for us, "on" us, like a magic wand, with no training, no practice, and no effort on our part. And we are alienated or simply puzzled when it does not.

If we come to services and expect entertainment, we are going to be disappointed. There may be moments of drama, but for sheer performance value, we can't compare to television, or the stage, to a concert, or a game.

If we approach Shabbat as a spectator sport or treat prayer as passive participants we may find something in the experience, but it won't be what it is meant to be. If lighting candles at home or coming to services on a Friday or Saturday is one option among many, it can't work its power; it can't touch the soul the way it is supposed to, because it is not *supposed to* work like an occasional thing. It's a prescription whose potency builds up over time. It is a formula in which the familiar breeds comfort. *The power is in the pull*, not the panoply of infinite options.

And if we always act as if we are in charge of the world, we can't, well, we can't "get it" that there are times we are supposed to let go. Even the way we schedule services in a Reform synagogue – and I am as guilty of this as anyone else – even the way we schedule services reflects a kind of ironic arrogance, a human attempt to dominate nature, to impose our will on the world. We schedule services to start not at sunset, but whenever we want them to. This, on a day whose central message is

*supposed to be* the appreciation of nature, a respite from the artifice of the human endeavor, an awareness of the sun and stars and sky.

Our battle for convenience continues over holidays as well. I once heard from a woman who was going on a ten day vacation beginning just before Pesach. I asked her if she if she wanted me to lend her some *haggadot*. She said, no, they'd do their seder when they came back home. When they came back. Nine days after the start... of a seven day long holiday.

Look, I *am* a Reform Jew. I understand the notion of accommodation between the tradition and the modern world – I benefit from the balance, I actually believe that building a bridge between yesterday and today is the key to Jewish survival and not an automatic threat. And, as I hope you will soon hear, I believe in a great deal of Jewish creativity.

But, friends: if a four thousand year old tradition is *always* last in a list of priorities, if soccer is *always* more important or you expect the entire Jewish calendar to rotate around your personal convenience it's no wonder the tradition is in trouble. As I say to the students in our Confirmation class, to a great extent, what you get out of the experience is going to depend on what you put into it.

**As the Cat in the Hat once said, “it’s fun to have fun, but you have to know how.”** To give credit where it’s due, traditional Jews put a *lot* of work into the observance of Shabbat. There are calculations and invitations, the hustle and bustle of Friday to pave the way for a peaceful Shabbat. To properly prepare for Shabbat is, well, it’s the storm before the calm.

I’ve heard a lot of people make comments about the logistical maneuvers surrounding Shabbat in the Orthodox world. That lights can stay on if they were on beforehand, that you can use a pre-lit pilot light on a gas stove to continually cook your *cholent*, that coffee-makers can be pre-timed to go on at just the right moment, that elevators can be programmed to continually stop at every floor for 26 hours in a building with many Orthodox Jews. I’ve heard criticism of the legal fictions, and I don’t agree with the criticism. Because there *is* an internal consistency to the Orthodox Shabbat. Even the legal fictions preserve the main point: that we *think through*, in advance, what is needed, that we do the *preparation first*, and then go with the flow. We rest, as the story we tell says that God rested.

**So there is a great beauty in the traditional, the Orthodox observance of Shabbat. But, to be blunt: what can this mean, really, what does this have to do with us?**

**This point is so important that I want to state it another way, lest it be misunderstood. I have respect and admiration for the traditional practices surrounding Shabbat. Nevertheless, I know... that this observance will not work for me. So the question is: how can we describe an authentic, viable observance of Shabbat... as Reform Jews?**

Last year, I shared with you that we were supposed to be free to choose, we Reform Jews, *within the context of* basic Jewish commitments, not *about them*. Here is part of what I meant: it means that nowhere in Reform Jewish history, theology, philosophy or ideology was the observance of the Sabbath – for all Reform Jews -- ever seen as an *option*. No, what free choice in the context of Reform Judaism means – what it was always supposed to mean – is that *how* we observe Shabbat is in our hands. *Whether* we do so... is not. *What we do* is a matter of choice. That we do *something* to honor, to revere, to celebrate Shabbat... is not.

The term for the observance of Shabbat in Jewish tradition is “*Shomer Shabbat*,” one who “keeps” the Sabbath. Now, as a Reform Jew, there is much about Jewish tradition that I wish to adopt, to alter and adjust, to change before I can incorporate it into my life in a way which works for me. I would love to re-form the term *Shomer Shabbat*, and bring it into my own life.

I would love to. But I can't. Because in this case, the term is too specific to too many things I just don't do. It really means not using electricity – by our choice, not Pepco's, it really means not driving, not using money. I just don't think I can use the term properly without these implications.

**What I propose, then, is a new term altogether. I invite us all to consider ourselves not *Shomrei Shabbat*, but *Ohavei Shabbat*. Not “keepers of the Sabbath,” in the traditional sense, but “lovers of Shabbat.” In doing so I believe that we can transform our lives, be faithful to our tradition, and still be part of the world around us.**

What does it mean to be *Ohavei Shabbat*, lovers of Shabbat? It means that we will do *something* to make Friday night and Saturday different from the other days. It might not mean worrying about all the details of the tradition, but something as simple as the man who was my Senior Rabbi when I started out as an Assistant in Boca Raton, Florida, Merle Singer, refers to as “don't do the have to's.” Let the dishes stay. Let the laundry lie. And now that the world is open 24-7 [I love that phrase. You know what they're saying about Joe Lieberman, right? They say he'll work for us 24-6]... now that the world is open all the time, now that blue laws are no longer on the books, let the chores fall to Sunday. Don't let the world tell you that “Sunday is family day.” For us, it's Shabbat. It's Friday night, and Saturday.

It means that, even if you find that you *have to* work on Saturday, do it, but do it with a difference. Even the Talmud acknowledged that, for some people, the gap between getting by and not might be the income that is brought in by doing business on Shabbat. Well, if you *must*, then do it. But, the Talmud says, do it “*derekh shinui*”, do it... somehow in “a different way.” Don’t count the money at the end of the day. Put off the part that *can* wait. Do *something different*, to remember and mark the day.

It means that we don’t have to feel like it’s all or nothing, like if we can’t get the perfect challah and gefilte fish and chicken soup and brisket on the table, (or grilled tofu for vegetarians), that we should forget the whole thing. It means that we can start with a sixty-minute Shabbat, that what it takes is to *remember* Shabbat, and to *do something* about it. If you are coming home from a child’s game at nine at night and you grab Dominoes for dinner, you can *still* say the motzi. You can still find a candle or two. You can still review the week, hug your children, hold them tight, bless them and make them feel special on a Friday night. You can say a prayer from your heart even if you can’t say a prayer from a book. You can still make this day different, even in your own way.

It means that you feel a pull, you hear the call, you know that there is a moment to pause, to rest, to breathe, to be with family, to connect with your community. To look inside, and look outside, and see the world in a brand new way. Every single week.

Rabbi Shira Milgrom: “It’s all a question of how you choose to look at the world. When the sun sets on Friday evening, it doesn’t look any different than if it were Tuesday or Wednesday, but as Jews we assert that it is different. It’s all a question of how we choose to see the world.”

The magic works if you picture yourself on a Friday morning in Israel, with the crowded markets, the frenzy of friends and the last-minute shopping. The magic works at a Jewish camp, when everyone dresses in white, and the campers from the highest bunk set out first, singing, picking up the kids from the other bunks on the way down the hill. The magic works in dancing for joy, in singing with our hearts, in a new insight on an ancient verse, a new sense of inner purpose, a moment of introspection, a memory of the past, a promise for the future. The magic works in a walk through the woods, Havdalah at a campfire, holding a friend’s hand, letting the smell of the spices slowly slip away. The magic works when you want to do something because you know that others are counting on you. The magic works when we tell a tale from long ago and see it as the story of ourselves. The magic works when we look at Friday night and call it Shabbat.

The magic works when we remember that great music is made not just by the sound of the notes, but in the pause between the notes. Shabbat is, indeed, a show about nothing.

What’s it *worth*, to produce nothing, to make nothing, to do nothing? Maybe everything. Maybe not. It’s up to us. *L’shanah tovah.*