

Jacob Who Loves The Sabbath

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

God has shown you, O mortal, what is good:
to walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8)

For ten years, I served as a congregational rabbi in the suburbs of Orange County, California, delivering many passionate sermons on the holiness of the Sabbath. I spoke of the need to reserve one day each week devoted to contemplation, to community, and to God. Quoting sources ancient and modern, I urged my congregants to abandon the headlong pursuit of elusive chores, of work never completed, and instead, on this one day, to savor the simple wonder of being. But despite all those years of preaching Shabbat, and even though I myself was Sabbath-observant, I don't think I truly understood my own message or felt the full power of the seventh day until after I left the congregation. It was only after my family moved to the city that my six-year old son Jacob showed me how to engage in the true soul-rest of the Sabbath.

Jacob gave me the gift of the Sabbath.

Jacob is autistic. His mind perceives the world in ways different from most people; his sense of timing and priorities follows its own inner schedule. The agendas that consume most of us simply don't exist for him. Jacob is indifferent to matters of social status. He loves what he loves, and he loves whom he loves. Jacob is passionate about his family, for example, cuddling in our bed early in the morning, sitting side-by-side as we read together, laughing as we chase one another in the park. And Jacob is passionate about the Torah, transforming a stray stick into a Torah scroll; he cradles the branch in his arms while he chants the synagogue melodies. Marching his "Torah" around the room, Jacob sings the ancient Psalms of David with same joyous intensity of the ancient singer of Israel. One of the insights – and challenges – of his autism is that unless Jacob loves it, it doesn't get his attention.

Now freed from my obligation to arrive at services early, to stand on the pulpit, and to lead the congregation in prayer once we moved to the city, I looked forward to savoring the early Shabbat morning walk to our new synagogue with my son. On our first Sabbath there, I tried to walk the way most other people walk. I wanted to arrive punctually. Jacob, on the other hand, was already where he wanted to be: enjoying a walk with his Abba. I cajoled, pulled, pushed, yelled, but Jacob would not rush. I told him we were going to miss services, and still he strolled. I insisted that he hurry, and he paused to explore a patch of flowers, or sat himself down in the warm morning sun. I tried grabbing his hand and pulling him by force. I tried walking behind him and pushing with my knees. Nothing worked. By the time we arrived at the synagogue, hopelessly late, my stomach was in knots. I was drenched in sweat, and far too frustrated to pray.

The second week repeated the aggravation of the first. We still reached services late, and I was so annoyed that I couldn't even sit still when we did get to the sanctuary.

This last week, I realized that something had to give. Jacob wasn't going to stop being Jacob, which meant that our walk would have to proceed his way, on his schedule. Resigned to slow frustration, I decided to make the best of it; I would learn to walk the way Jacob walked, but I would take a book. I chose as companion a medieval mystical text, the *Tomer Devorah, The Palm Tree of Deborah*, a meditation on Kabbalah and ethics by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. Book in hand, I abandoned any commitment to schedule or pace.

As Jacob and I and Rabbi Cordovero set out on walk number three, I tried paying no attention to our speed or direction. When I got to the corner, I didn't let myself look at the light – invariably green until right before Jacob caught up. Instead, I read.

It's impossible to read quickly while walking, to focus on how many pages are already finished. Reading while walking is a form of meditation: savoring individual words, you find

yourself delighting in phrases. To the prophet Micah's praise, "Who is like You, God?" Rabbi Cordovero responds *"there is no moment that people are not nourished and sustained by the Divine power bestowed upon them. Thus no persons ever sin against God without God, at that very moment, bestowing abundant vitality upon them. Even though they may use this very vitality to transgress, God is not withholding. Instead the Bountiful One suffers the insult and continues to enable the limbs to move."* The words on the page melded with my walk: I could feel life's vitality infusing my own, making this very walk a celebration. The sunshine streamed into my soul, God bestowing life and love without conditions or restraint.

As I walked and read, the stroll was punctuated by the intense fragrance of a colorful bouquet. The words of the *Tomer Devorah* reframed the morning song of a bird into an outpouring of creation's gratitude to God. The egglike flowers of the dogwood trees seemed to gesture the words of the psalmist, *"How manifold are your works, O Lord. In wisdom have you made them all."* In the towering palm trees we passed, I could feel the call of the prophet Isaiah, *"Before you, mount and hill shall shout aloud, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."*

From time to time, I just turned to relish my son's meandering. His joy was contagious: the pure delight of a little boy with his Abba and with time. And his joy was pure. My son cannot read, yet his very presence, I could now see, affirmed the words of Kohelet that *"there is nothing better than for one to rejoice in what he is doing."* Occasionally, I found myself slipping into my old apprehensions, worrying about what part of the service I was missing, or fretting about not proceeding quickly enough. But the allure of my book, the walk, the sun, and my son, restored me. Jacob's spirit had become infectious.

When we finally did arrive at the synagogue, the service was more than halfway over. They were already putting the Torah scroll back into the Ark. Jacob squealed with delight, "The Torah! The Torah!" and ran to the front of the sanctuary. Too excited to stand still, he bounced on his toes next to the person holding the Scroll, while the congregation recited the ancient praise: *"Hodo al eretz v'shamayim! God's glory encompasses heaven and earth!"* My spirit soared, for I had just borne witness to that glory in the flowers ablaze in color and light, in the delicate breeze swirling through the leaves. "God exalts and extols the faithful, the people Israel, who are close to God. *Halleluyah!"*

More than any sermon I've ever heard or given, I owe the fullness of the Shabbat to my son. Jacob taught me through his own example that we can't possibly be late, because, wherever we are, we are already where we are supposed to be. Our minds just have to acknowledge what our heart already knows. Jacob has taught me how to walk with God.

I learned that day that Shabbat is the cultivated art of letting go, letting be, and letting in. In that art, Jacob is my teacher, my master, my Rebbe.

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