

Moses' Father-in-Law Would LAW Would NOT Have Advised "Inbox-Zero"

Sermon – Parashat Yitro 5784

Rabbi Dara Frimmer

Friday Night Shabbat Services – February 2, 2024

Shabbat Shalom.

First, words of thanks.

It has always been a blessing to serve the community of Temple Isaiah and to share my life's journey with all of you. I am midway through my 17th year, which means I was 30 when we started together. And the grace and generosity and love you have shared with me over the years has been an incredible gift.

And then, on top of all those gifts, to honor the tradition of a clergy sabbatical - to offer several months of time, every 7 years, to help clergy rest and reflect - to make all the necessary changes and adjustments to allow for a leader's absence...truly, this is an extraordinary offering. As if the small presents given on each night of Hanukkah would have been enough, and then you walk into the driveway and see a new car with an oversized red ribbon. That's sabbatical. :)

I want to thank our incredible clergy team, Zoe, Jaclyn and Randall, our ED, Deb Moses, our educators, our administrative team, our Temple President Suzanne and the Board of Trustees...everyone who took on extra work or who adjusted their role in recent months to ensure the Temple endured and excelled, as we knew it would. I am truly grateful.

And while I loved my time away, I am also excited to return.

I wanted to share a few highlights and insights tonight - brief - *none too revelatory or shocking...* Please consider this a start to a larger conversation as we catch up and share stories in the days and weeks to come.

Many of you know, I did not leave Los Angeles and set up shop in a new community or country. There were no arks or bat-poetry (LOL) though I did read a lot of fiction, which was not my genre of choice, but in many ways it did transport me. However, I did leave social media (and have no interest in returning) and I did achieve what might be my biggest, most surprising goal, which is that I did not check my work email for 3 months.

As I offer this minor/less-dramatic revelation, I want to thank everyone for their patience as I catch up because I also made a critical choice not to spend my final days of sabbatical going through the emails I had missed. *How many emails you might be wondering?* Yesterday, as I arrived to the office, there was a bet posted on the wall as to how many emails were waiting for me. My team members, if they wanted to play the game, added their best guesses. I'm pleased to say Julie was the closest without going over - Just over 3000.

I share this information in part to ask forgiveness if you wrote and did not receive a reply (please do reach out again - I'm slowly going through the 3000 but I would welcome the chance to connect and catch up in person) or if, rightly so, you assumed that I would at least be scanning the inbox...after all, previous to this sabbatical, on every vacation or day off, *I WOULD skim my emails and respond to texts.*

After all, I told myself, what's the big deal? If I'm in line at Starbucks or Trader Joe's...if I'm waiting at a restaurant and my friend has not yet arrived...if I'm putting my kids to bed and they are involved in brushing their teeth but not yet ready for me to read to them...what's the big deal if I check throughout the day, and night, and on weekends, and on vacations, or my day-off, or while escaping to the bathroom...and you can see how the slippery slope gets even steeper.

Before sabbatical, yes, driven by the intensity of the war, but also the steady expansion of how we communicate in the 21st century, and ALSO wanting my rabbinate to be accessible and inviting and responsive on all platforms, **I was on screens, responding to email and texts, all. the. time.**

Look, none of us know the answer as to *what role email, and by extension text messaging and social media, should play in the modern rabbinate.* So, it's easy to think, "this too is part of my job and an important way to keep members connected and informed."

But, I want to be honest, there is also the dopamine addiction of sending off 100 emails (Look at my productivity!) or clearing an inbox (I am so attentive!) and feeling a sense of pride, god help me, that though I am a *mere mortal*, with a little extra caffeine and the Indigo Girls playing loudly on Alexa, I COULD answer EVERY question and read EVERY article...ideally within a day or two of receiving them.

OY!

In reflection, I think I had entrenched myself in what I would call A Tale of Two Pulpits - in person and online. And my sense, leading up to sabbatical, was that my online or digital pulpit had taken over my best hours. Not just during the day when I was at the office, but while preparing dinner for my family: I could chop vegetables and compose a reply in my head to the email I had just read before washing the carrots. While showering or drinking my first cup of coffee in the morning or exercising, I could multitask (after all, who would know?) and assure myself there was no harm in rehearsing different approaches to challenging requests or concerns - and then grab my phone and type out the response while walking from one room in the house to another.

And here is where I knew it was a problem, and that I needed sabbatical for a hard reset...I would be reading to the kids, and when I got up in between chapters to get more tea, or refill a glass of wine, I would check my phone for emails or texts... Why?? Because I could. Because the kids would think I was just taking too long adding honey or hot water. Because the inbox was never empty. Because the texts continued to populate...and before I checked out of social media...there was always the possibility that something important had just happened online and maybe I would need to know and respond.

And the story I had told myself, and you know I'm a good salesperson so I think I was very convincing, is that "this was fine" and "how else would I get the work done" and "everyone else is tethered to their phone, too, right?"

Not good.

So sabbatical, for me, was about breaking the pattern. And I wasn't sure I could do it. I've told myself, as many of us may have done in the past, about the important role I play in a family system and how could it function without me? But I also prayed that it COULD survive...and that it WOULD survive. Can you imagine...a prayer that you would NOT be terribly missed or needed? LOL. But, if that were true, that a system could function for a limited time without my contributions, without my hyper-vigilance, then I would have the best evidence to reflect back for myself, "Look! Two things can be true - the system can work without your constant attention AND you are healthier and happier and more focused and present once you have broken the habit of checking email all the time."

Here's a great example: Reading with my kids, one of my great delights, especially when we agree on novels of substance (we're on book 5 of the Percy Jackson series and I'm pleased to share that they can attend Camp Half Blood this summer at Cheviot), reading looked different on sabbatical because there was no competition for my attention. I knew no email or text was waiting for my reply.

Dinners with friends, watching the kids at their taekwondo studio, visiting my mom, traveling to Mexico for a rabbinical retreat...all of it was done with more focus and attention than I've given in years. And it felt good...and it felt different...and I wondered if this was a luxury of sabbatical - to be able to give this much to the moment or the person...and what would be sustainable upon return.

Because it's not just me. It's not unique to Isaiah. It's everywhere and everyone. Our attention spans are damaged by screen time and social media and all the ways our time and focus can be requested. Our identities are all too often built up on what we produce - and the more we give and respond and create - the better we feel about a day well spent, and a life well lived.

The timing of my return on Shabbat Yitro feels, as it often does in Jewish time, like the perfect parasha to come home to...you might remember Moses was in high productivity mode, answering every concern and question brought by the Israelites, from morning until evening. And his father-in-law, Yitro, arrives, observes, and immediately says, "what is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"

And Moses explains what's obvious to him: This is my job! The people come with questions and queries and disputes, and I decide and reply and make known the laws of God...that's what I do. (Pause.) Why do you ask?

And Yitro replies, "The thing you are doing is not right, you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."

Parker Palmer talks about functional atheism, and I think about his teaching all the time - to be in the business of serving God, but to secretly believe we handle the challenges of life on our own. I think about our identity as a Jewish PEOPLE, so much more celebrated than our identities as Jewish individuals. I think about why we work so hard to teach our kids the value of friendship and family...and then we end up carrying too much of the burden on our capable shoulders forgetting to turn to others to say, "can you help carry some of this weight?" And I think about ego, and how in the absence of an alternate philosophy or theology, we are left to believe that what we do (and apparently how many emails we reply to) defines who we are.

So what can be done to mitigate or mediate bad habits and societal norms that encourage radical individualism and overdeveloped reactions/responses to technology? How can we bring in the sound of shofar today, not just on the High Holy Days, to wake up and take stock and disrupt old habits and re-examine the stories we tell ourselves.

Not surprisingly, Judaism has an answer: There is **Shabbat**...the same root as the word sabbatical...which, when activated/deployed, could lead a person to seeing the world anew and making a different set of choices. But, *and this is a big but*, a person has to choose to take a true break and not pretend to pause while scrolling in secret.

Shabbat's offer is sincere: A 24-hour reset, every 7 days, is waiting for us all. Look at what's possible when you pause. When you slow down. When you breathe. When you call instead of email. When you allow others to respond. When you return to yourself and rediscover your value not based on what you produce but, just as God intended, simply because you exist. A beautiful reflection of the Divine. A creature capable of walking in God's ways - showing kindness and generosity and compassion and grace. A human being capable of mistakes and also of reflection, apology, and repair.

So, now, my challenge is to return to work and to email, and not allow old patterns to reform. To not let old insecurities make decisions. To spend more of the hours of my day offline, bringing my full attention and concentration to the moment, and leaving space for breath between the meetings and activities. Not moving as fast. Not talking as much. Not typing a text message while walking down the hallway as I search the Temple's kitchen for leftovers...

I'll let you know how it's going, and I welcome your inquiries as to what looks different in the days and weeks and months to come. Please ask me so I have a loving community to help hold me accountable!

And, I promise to share more stories in the weeks to come -

About what it felt like to experience the war in Israel without a pulpit - to read the news, absorb the pictures, talk with my children about the hostages, and feel the FULL range of emotions...and not have to think "and how will I contain and process all of it in time to fit into a sermon or a teaching?"

One quick anecdote from my time away, I was on the computer at the kitchen table a lot during the hostage exchange and at one point, when Emily Hand was released on November 25, Maddie was looking over my shoulder at her picture and said, as only an 8 year old can while also dressed in a

princess costume holding a ninja sword, "Is that one of the hostages who was released? She looks like me." And Maddie was right...and all I could say was, "she does."

How is it that we can hold the brokenness alongside the joy? How do we hold the stories of devastation and heartbreak and also the necessity and banality of day to day errands? How do we hold the shattered pieces of our imagined future and generate the will to return and, in partnership with others, begin to dream again?

In the weeks to come, I promise to regale you with stories of Disneyland - where I never need to return - and how it is possible to experience the highest of highs, the magic of fairy tales, the wonder of technology and brilliance of design, and then, while shoving cotton candy in your mouth, also declare "I'm bored. And there's nothing else to do here."

I can't wait to tell you about my journey through fiction: my curiosity if all books today either touch on race or climate change, or both (or maybe it's just what I kept selecting). About my certainty that if, while you are away at boarding school or college, there is a tragic murder of one of your best friends...be advised, 25 years later, you will be dragged back into the mess and the killer will NOT be the person who has been sitting in jail all this time. And, how science-fiction might be the best genre for breaking us out of our depression and malaise as we struggle to imagine a different future.

But for tonight, I wanted to start and end with my thanks. For the 17 years and counting of journeying together and God-willing, many more to come. For the time away. For the permission and encouragement to grow and change and rediscover what I knew, and had temporarily forgotten, or lost sight of along the way. For the possibility that every 7 days, we all receive the invitation to sabbatical...to step into Shabbat...and to be transformed.

Shabbat Shalom.