

Rosh Hashanah 5787 - Night 1

"When Life Doesn't Go to Plan"

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

It's always a bit strange when a holiday coincides with Shabbat, to be here on a Friday night, but not have any of the liturgy of Kabbalat Shabbat — no Lekha Dodi or Tzadik Katamar.

And tomorrow will be strange as well. Whenever Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we don't blow the shofar, or sing Avinu Malkeinu, or recite the 13 Attributes when we open the ark at the start of the Torah service. It just doesn't feel like Rosh Hashanah without these key components. But — as a consolation — at least we'll get them on Sunday.

It's never easy when things don't go our way. In particular, when it's not just a preference we have for one thing over another, but when it feels like a great disappointment, like we've been robbed of something meaningful, impactful, something we've been hoping for and looking forward to, as that thing would usually provide an anchor in an otherwise turbulent world.

As summer holiday has only just come to an end, I imagine many of you might have felt this sort of disappointment rather recently. Maybe plans got scuppered by unbearable heat or an unexpected downpour. You might have arrived at an AirBnB only to find out it looked nothing like the photos in the listing. Maybe an exhibit you were most excited about at a museum was closed for refurbishment, or a private event. Not only do such developments throw a spanner in the works of your efforts and expectations, but they can also put you in a foul mood — one that taints all other aspects of what otherwise was a wonderful experience.

But sometimes, when things don't go exactly as planned, when we are forced to recalibrate and chart a different course, we can find ourselves unexpectedly — and pleasantly — surprised.

Quite recently, I had the honour of officiating a wedding in Rome for a congregant. It was a gorgeous event, and the family were absolutely amazing in making numerous arrangements with the synagogue office, and for including my wife, Rose, as my plus-one. Because the ceremony was on a Sunday, and there was no way to fly out after Shabbat, we instead had to arrive on Friday, which afforded us a couple days to wander around before the event. I hadn't given much thought to the plans as they were unfolding, so I just assumed we would be in the city, and in walking distance to many of the wonderful sites and experiences Rome has to offer. So you can imagine my surprise when we arrived and realised it would take about 20 minutes by taxi to get into town. Normally, this wouldn't have been an issue, except it was almost Shabbat, and the only way back to the hotel was on foot, in 32-degree heat, and crazy humidity, (as it had rained that afternoon), and the entire walk was uphill, and took just over an hour.

But that sweltering slog of a walk happened to take us through an absolutely gorgeous park: the Villa Doria Pamphili, the largest public park in Rome. Instead of zooming through narrow roads in the back of a taxi, we were able to perambulate through beautiful gardens, gasp in awe at numerous baroque fountains, as well as the Casino del Bel Respiro. We even came across an owl, perched on a branch just a few feet over our heads, turning its head 180-degrees to get a better look at us in the dimming twilight.

The next morning, being Saturday, we decided against making the same trek through the midday sun. So instead, we spent the entire day sitting by the pool, reading our books, discussing High Holiday sermon ideas (we are both rabbis after all), and enjoying the peace and quiet afforded us by the exceedingly rare gift of not having our children with us. It was heaven, even if it wasn't what we had been expecting. That's the thing about any misalignment between our desires and reality: it doesn't have to be a loss. It can be an opening.

It's never easy when things don't go as planned, or when we find ourselves unable to exercise much, if any, control. But there are many aspects of our tradition which ask us to do just that: to relinquish our need to be totally in control at all times, even though we rarely ever truly are. For instance, we might want to eat whatever it is we want, but the laws of Kashrut come in and tell us to pass on the Carbonara, and go for the Cacio e Pepe instead (no great sacrifice there). We might want to say whatever is on our mind about someone, but the laws of Lashon Hara tell us to pause before we speak, even when what we want to say is true. We might want to go wherever and do whatever we want, whenever we want to do it, but the laws of Shabbat tell us to act differently, just for 25 hours.

When I was a child, I always thought of Shabbat as a type of prison. While my friends were going to football games or parties, I was having dinner with my parents, and often going to synagogue with them as well. While my classmates went skiing on Saturday mornings, I had to go to B'nei Mitzvah class. To me, everything about the day felt like an unnatural restriction on the very natural desires of any normal kid. But as I grew older, and even later, when I started on the path towards becoming a rabbi, I began to see things differently.

The Torah's account of the Creation Story is quite fascinating. In fact, with the one exception of the Sun, Moon, and stars being created on the fourth day, everything else in Genesis seems to mirror our modern, scientific understanding of evolution: from the Big Bang — let there be light — to humans being the most recently evolved species in the animal kingdom.

And then the Torah comes to the seventh day, the day that God stopped creating, even though things weren't perfect, even though God could have done more, and probably wanted to do more. God took a step back, looked at everything as it was, warts and all, and didn't just say: meh — it's fine for now. But rather: pshh — it's very good — VeHinei Tov Me'od.

So while the first six days are defined by Divine creativity, power, and control, Shabbat is defined by Divine restraint — not just allowing things to be as they are, but seeing the

beauty in things as they are. And so Shabbat isn't a prison intended to shackle us and make us miserable. It's a liberation, saying we don't have to be defined by our labours, and permitting us simply to enjoy life as it is.

But while Shabbat is about pausing temporarily from our work, there's another practice in our tradition that is explicitly about letting go. The word Shemitah, which refers to the Sabbatical year, when the land is to lay fallow, literally means release or letting go. The idea is that every seven years, we stop working the land. We stop tilling, sowing, planting, and harvesting, and we just let the land rest, like a Shabbat for the natural world.

But the thing is, if we can't work the land at all in the seventh year, that means there won't be any produce that year, so we have to set aside some of our harvest in the sixth year, to get us through the seventh year as well. But also, because we can't till or prepare the soil in the seventh year, that means the land won't be ready for planting at the start of the eighth year, so we actually have to set aside that much more produce in the sixth year. This is a pretty terrifying demand to make on the people, to trust not only that there will be a good harvest in the sixth year, but that there will be sufficient harvest to sustain us for nearly three years.

But despite the fears and worries that the Shemitah system might have raised in the minds of our ancestors, they still observed this commandment, and records seem to suggest that their trust held up remarkably well: according to Josephus, it's possible our ancestors only ever faced a famine during the Sabbatical year on three occasions, and he intimates this is because they occurred when Jerusalem was under siege, meaning the famine was the result of war, not of the Shemitah cycle.

There's a word for this trust our ancestors had in the Shemitah system, for their faith that God would provide, and that things would work out, even after they relinquished control over the land: Emunah. The word Emunah is translated as faith, but is connected to some other words which, at first, seem unrelated. For example, Amen — every time we say Amen, what we're really saying is Amen: I believe, I have faith. And the word LeHit'amen, which today means to exercise or work out, actually means to practice — the idea being that faith is not just something you have, but rather it's something that only comes from practice, a muscle you must exercise regularly if you want it to be stronger.

This, I believe, is where Shabbat comes in. The reason our ancestors had enough faith to practice Shemitah was because they had a lot of regular practice developing their faith through their observance of Shabbat. In many ways, Shabbat is like a mini-Shemitah. While Shemitah asks for a massive leap of faith once every seven years, Shabbat asks for a much smaller act of trust once every seven days. The stakes might be lower, but the exercise is the same: letting go of control, and trusting that we'll be alright. And that seventh DAY is a lot like that seventh YEAR. Whereas with Shemitah, you can't till the soil or harvest your crops, with Shabbat, you can't cook over a stove or nip out to the shop to pick up an ingredient you lack.

So, in anticipation of those restrictions, we spend Thursday evening and Friday making sure we're ready for Shabbat. We check our cupboards and pantries to make sure we have

everything we might need. We do a big shop to replenish anything missing or running low. And we tidy the house and prepare our meals, so that once Shabbat comes in, there's nothing we need to do except enjoy the calm and relaxation that can only be experienced when we've prepared accordingly.

Of course, there's always a chance that you might go to the fridge on Saturday, and realise you forgot to buy something, or didn't realise a container was nearly empty. But it's okay, because you have plenty of other things on hand, and so you simply recalibrate and course-correct by eating something else. Sure, it's not what you had been planning on eating, but neither is it the end of the world. It might be a relatively minor and insignificant inconvenience, but that one little exercise in being okay with things not going exactly as planned is how you build up that spiritual muscle, so that when something bigger, something that really matters to you, doesn't come to fruition as you were hoping it would, you'll be okay. You might be a bit disappointed, but you'll know how to pivot, and make the best out of an unexpected situation. This is precisely what enabled me to have a truly pleasurable Shabbat experience in Rome, even if it wasn't what I originally had in mind.

There is so much beyond our control these days: from climate change to fluctuating markets, job scarcity and insecurity and the rise of AI, and the threats of nascent populist movements and surging antisemitism. So it makes perfect sense why so many of us feel the need to be in complete control whenever possible. But what if there were another way to remain strong and resolute in the face of uncertainty, without setting ourselves up for even more disappointment? What if you were to find your own way to embrace the idea of Divine Restraint or Release through some form of Shabbat observance? This doesn't have to mean keeping Shabbat like your friend in Hendon, or your cousin in Stamford Hill, or even like me or Cantor Heller.

What if you were to find one thing that you can just let be each Shabbat? Maybe it's to avoid social media, or not read the news. Maybe you could give up checking or responding to emails or texts. Maybe it's not doing any household chores, like laundry or cleaning the bathroom (doing dishes and making the bed doesn't count). Maybe you could avoid spending money. Any one of these things is actually much easier to practice on its own, rather than worrying about taking on Shabbat as a whole. And you might find that this regular practice will begin to strengthen that spiritual muscle that will allow you to feel grounded in the face of the strongest winds.

Yes, it is a bit disappointing to come to synagogue for Rosh Hashanah services and not get to hear the shofar or sing Avinu Malkeinu. But maybe this Rosh Hashanah in particular, and Shabbat in general, can offer us something greater instead, and can be its own small act of Emunah — a chance, once again, to exercise our Emunah, to practice the trust that can carry us through whatever life brings our way.

Shanah Tovah