

Stop, Look, Listen
Celebrating Shabbos Through a Spiritual Lens



Nehemia Polen

STOP

LOOK

LISTEN

CELEBRATING SHABBOS
THROUGH A SPIRITUAL LENS

Maggid Books

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CONGREGATION AHABAT SHOLOM

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From its founding in 1901 until its closing 120 years later,

CONGREGATION AHABAT SHOLOM LYNN, MASSACHUSETTS

*was the place where generations of people nourished their spiritual lives,
found friendship, and held closely to each other in times of joy and in times of
need – and where Kiddush after Shabbos services was simply unsurpassed.*

*To honor the legacy of this beloved Shul, to remember the dear rabbis and
rebbeztins, leaders, members, and friends who gave so much to create and
sustain this worthy, holy congregation – our support of
'Stop, Look, and Listen' is proudly dedicated.*

*May the warm memories of Ahabat Sholom remain in our hearts,
be passed on l'dor v'dor, and continually inspire all who seek
and all who cherish love of peace.*

The Carlebach Shul

in dedication

Some years ago, in response to requests made by visitors to The Carlebach Shul to provide direction on how to enhance their Shabbat experience, the Board of Trustees undertook a project to develop materials which could accompany our unique and uplifting Carlebach davening. Although Carlebach melodies are known throughout the globe, the many Torah teachings emanating from our humble abode have not been so readily available.

With the goal of unlocking some of the deeper teachings pertaining to Shabbat, we turned to Rabbi Nehemia Polen, a brilliant Judaic scholar who, together with his wife Lauri, has spent many a Shabbat as scholar in residence with us, sharing his uncommon and captivating observations with the Chevra. Nehemia is a “destination speaker” whose insights and commentaries are so integrated into Torah and Rabbinic texts that one wonders how one may interpret the text in any superior fashion.

We would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for enabling this great undertaking:

***The Covenant Foundation** for supporting our mission*

***Rabbi Naftali Citron**, our Rabbi and community leader*

***Leon and Karen Sutton**, tireless laborers on behalf of our community, who co-sponsored this work in memory of their parents, Murad and Adele Sutton and Sam and Toby Ehrlich*

***Shy and Tami Yellin**, pillars of our community, who co-sponsored this work in memory of their parents, Leonard and Florence Yellin and Rabbi Dr. Samuel and Miriam Stern, to whom they are eternally grateful for their example, love, and vision*

***Ilan and Debbie Richland, Oren and Mira Richland, Chana and Jeremy Kanzen, Rifka Meyer, Sora and Rafe Ibgly**, co-sponsors, in honor of their parents, Faye Richland (a former long-time member of The Carlebach Shul during the lifetime of Reb Shlomo), Dr. Paul and Beverly Weber, and Simcha and Shifra Richland*

***Liron and Talia David**, long-time members of The Carlebach Shul, who co-sponsored this work in honor of their parents, Rafi and Julie David z”l and Moussa and Shulamit Soleimani, whose love and respect for Shabbat, along with their values and warmth, have always been a guiding light. Liron and Talia follow in their footsteps as they raise their children with deep respect and appreciation for the Almighty, family, and community.*

***Libby Dreisinger and Barbara Meyer**, early enablers of this project*

For my parents

Rabbi David S. Polen ע"ה
and Nettie (Keller) Polen ע"ה

and Lauri's parents

Reb Noah Wolff עמר"ש
and Marilyn (Rudin) Wolff עמר"ש

who inspired us to cherish Shabbos

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Prelude

From its earliest days, The Carlebach Shul has been blessed with a beautiful tradition. The Shul is known not just for its spirited Shabbos davening, which has become quite popular, but for the whole Shabbos experience – Friday night dinners, *Seuda Shelishit*, Havdala, and *melaveh malka*. These shared Shabbosim bring the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid, along with their students and their students' students, to life. The Shul on W. 79th St. feels like an extension of Mezibuz or Berditchev.

Over the years, we have hosted many wonderful guest rabbis and teachers. One of these teachers, Rabbi Dr. Nehemia Polen, stands out for his exceptional ability to conjure up the hasidic masters in an articulate way, drawing from the deep wells of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, the Rebbe of Chernobyl, the Sefas Emes, and the Piaseczner Rebbe. This book is about more than sharing ideas. It is about helping people share Shabbos with each other. The ideas in this book will taste better with gefilte fish and chicken soup (or their vegan alternatives).

We would like to thank the Covenant Foundation for their generous grant, allowing us to share our Shabbos experience with others. The mission of the Covenant Foundation is to uphold the verse in

Stop, Look, Listen

Isaiah (59:21): “This is My covenant with you The words which I have put into your mouth shall not depart from you, not from your children, not from your children’s children henceforth and forever.” We would also like to thank Nehemia for his outstanding scholarship and his warmth. As a professor of Jewish studies and a rabbi who is passionate about his students and who loves Torah, he is uniquely able to marry a rigorous academic approach with a warm, inviting, and uplifting teaching style.

We hope that in this work you will be able to appreciate not just Nehemia’s scholarship and depth, but also the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov and his followers and the vibrancy they brought into Judaism.

Rabbi Naftali Citron

October 11, 2021

The Carlebach Shul

Preface

My father was a heavy smoker. If my childhood memories are accurate, his habit exceeded a pack a day. He was not proud of this fact, but there was, so he said, nothing he could do about it. He had started in his teens, during a period when, as he recalled, smoking not only had positive social cachet but also the endorsement of many medical professionals. Advertisements featuring physicians would tout smoking as a healthy practice: “Reach for a Lucky Strike instead of a sweet.”

On Shabbos, my father didn’t smoke. This was not surprising, since our family was *shomer Shabbos* (Sabbath observant), as we called it. What was remarkable, however, was the fact that my father did not feel the urge to smoke on Shabbos. With the welcoming of Shabbos came a release from the incessant desire to light up another cigarette. Shabbos freed my father from enslavement to tobacco. I recall him once expressing dread of the moment when, just after Havdala (the liturgy of bringing Shabbos to a close on Saturday evening after nightfall), the ache for nicotine would reappear. What was it about our family’s Shabbos observance that supplanted, if only for a day, his intense physiological need and psychological dependency?

It is the experience of Shabbos in my childhood home that motivates me, in part, to write this book.

There are many books that present Shabbos as an opportunity for celebration, for sanctifying time, for deepening family ties, and, of course, for rest and relaxation, a necessary respite from the weekly grind. Each of these perspectives captures an aspect of the day's significance. Together, they highlight beneficial outcomes of Shabbos observance, but they do not reach the core of Shabbos – Shabbos's sheer *palpability*, heft and presence, felt so strongly and so tangibly that addictions are pushed aside, making room for air in body, love in heart, grace in spirit, light in soul. To be touched by Shabbos's richly vibrant and animate personality is to be transformed, liberated. How does this come about?

I recall the sounds of my father's review of the weekly Torah reading every Friday afternoon. He had been chanting Torah since his bar mitzva many decades earlier, and he knew the entire Torah nearly by heart, but discipline and reverence led him to review the following day's synagogue reading. This was sacred preparation, and the fact that he used an old, tattered *Tikkun* (Bible specially designed for cantillation practice) only added to the sense of noble vocation. Friday also brought the smells of my mother's cooking and, close to sunset, the sight of her candle-lighting with tenderness and devotion, beseeching the Almighty for blessing upon her household.

A particularly strong memory is that of our family coming home after Shabbos morning services. One could feel the joy of arrival when my parents returned to their modest residence, offering refuge from the noise of street traffic and the frenzy of weekday life. My father would open the door and pronounce in a hearty Yiddish, "*Gut Shabbos!*" But who was he saying "Good Sabbath" to? The house was empty! It dawned on me that he was addressing the house itself – the house as person, as living being with agency and presence, having achieved that status by my parents' work of preparation that culminated at sunset on Friday but was in fact unfolding all week long.

Shabbos's presence is invited and made palpable by purposeful cultivation. It exists in space as much as in time, and it involves a thousand preparatory thoughts and acts that transpire before the onset of the day. If life is an overgrown forest whose tangled branches tear at our

skin as we race to traverse it, Shabbos is a graceful clearing that makes room for breath and blessing.¹

This is a truth that my parents learned from *their* parents. Both sets of grandparents came from Russia in the early years of the twentieth century, my father's parents to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and my mother's parents to Providence, Rhode Island. Family lore emphasized the struggle to remain *shomer Shabbos* in the face of strong economic and social headwinds. My parents lived Shabbos and passed it on to me and my brothers, imparting it as sacred practice, the legacy that is the most precious part of our family heritage.

When I met Lauri, the woman who would become my wife, I was delighted to discover that her family traditions were very similar to mine, especially with respect to Shabbos observance. Her fondest childhood memories involve walking to synagogue as a family and singing *zemiroth* (hymns serenading the day) at the Shabbos table. She appreciated that her parents presented Shabbos not as a day of restrictions, but rather as a time of uninterrupted togetherness. To this day, Lauri recalls the long walk from home to synagogue as a time to be close, to converse, or to luxuriate in trusting, loving silence. Her father's work involved hundreds of miles of driving weekly. He did not need to verbalize his commitment to surrender the car for a day; it impressed itself silently and effortlessly.

Lauri and I both came of age at the height of America's love affair with the automobile. The mid-twentieth century American auto was a work of art on wheels, exuding stylish elegance and panache. The parallel decision of our respective families to forgo on Shabbos the appeal of this icon of modernity – signifying effortless mobility, empowerment, social status, and independence – was a clear statement that spiritual values reigned supreme in our households.

But there was another marvel of engineering that for a while threatened to impair our experience of Shabbos – television. My parents were early adopters of this technological wonder, which, like all such advances throughout history, was promoted as not just a scientific

1. The phrase “graceful clearing” is from Wendell Berry, *The Country of Marriage* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 7.

breakthrough but as an agent of cultural and even moral progress. Educational programs would elevate the level of learning in every household. News would be accurate and more informative because it would be conveyed in pictures as well as words; everyone knows that one picture is worth a thousand words, and furthermore, pictures don't lie. American families would now be able to view Shakespeare in the comfort of their homes! And so on.

It did not take long for powerful economic forces to take control and for astute observers to recognize that programming, in a race to the bottom, had quickly become a "vast wasteland."² But by then it was effectively too late. The TV set dominated our small family room that we called "the den," and I was in the thrall of situation comedies and action shows that in retrospect can only be called truly insipid.

What about Shabbos? Saturday morning was prime time for cartoons, and the urge to watch them seemed irresistible to one young boy in Boston, Massachusetts. For a while, we settled on the following arrangement: The TV would not be turned off Friday afternoon, but the controls would not be touched on Shabbos. This meant that I could select one channel among the three available. My choice was made with care and due diligence, maximizing access to the programs I most wanted to see. Of course, this inevitably had an impact on Shabbos morning. Arrival time at services kept slipping later and later, and sacred benedictions were sidelined by the likes of *Bugs Bunny and Friends*.

I don't recall how long Saturday morning cartoons lasted at our house (possibly as long as several years), but eventually they came to an end. It may not have been verbalized in quite this way at the time, but it became clear that this arrangement did not conform to the spirit of Shabbos. The Shabbos home – meant to be a refuge from invasions of all kinds, especially commercial encroachments and shallow distractions – needed to be safeguarded and returned to its state of quietude and equilibrium. What is remarkable is that Lauri's family in Gary, Indiana, went through essentially the same trajectory – first

2. The phrase was made famous by Newton Minnow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, in a speech delivered in 1961 to the National Association of Broadcasters.

leaving the television on during Shabbos, and then realizing that (as Lauri's father put it) "the television needs to rest, too."

I mention our parallel experiences to indicate that the hegemony of brightly shining novel devices is not inevitable; it can be resisted and even rolled back by the soft power of Shabbos. Our two families – separated by nearly a thousand miles and entirely unknown to each other at the time – went through matching lines of development, first allowing and then subduing the brash interloper.

This supremacy of Shabbos – so urgently needed to tame our own era's new devices with their siren song of connectivity and unlimited content – depends on truly inviting Shabbos to take up residence in our homes, our hearts, and our neighborhoods.

These considerations lead to the following questions: What is the core of Shabbos experience? How can it be cultivated, sustained, enhanced? What is the most effective way to introduce Shabbos to those not familiar with it? What is the best way to explain Shabbos to newcomers, as well as to those who have grown up with it, who consider themselves veterans but may be in danger of lapsing into habit and taking Shabbos for granted? How can we immerse ourselves in the sublime delight that this day offers in a way that totally surpasses the beckoning immediacy of flickering screens? These are some of the questions that this book seeks to explore.

A lexical note: I speak of "Shabbos," rather than "Shabbat" or "Sabbath." This is the way I heard the word pronounced as I was growing up. It is the way my parents and grandparents spoke as they honored the day in an American environment that was generally resistant or actively hostile to it. My grandparents brought Shabbos as their most precious possession from the Old World of Eastern Europe, and they saw themselves as carrying forward the heritage of untold generations before them. The alternate forms are equally authentic, to be sure. But since one of my goals is to present Shabbos as a family legacy and to invite readers into that legacy, it is important for me to refer to the day in the way that seems most natural, that comes to me honestly and without affectation.

Introduction

Shabbos is the generative kernel at the center of the Jewish spiritual universe.

A parable:

Rabbi Jacob Kranz (1741–1804), known as the Maggid (preacher) of Dubno, told the following story in a sermon about Shabbos:

A poor man was trudging along the road on foot, carrying a heavy duffel bag on his shoulder. Suddenly, he was overtaken by a large, well-appointed carriage, drawn by a team of handsome horses. Carriages such as this would usually pass him by, leaving him in the dust or even splattering him with mud. But this time, the carriage stopped. A nobleman called out from the window, “Would you like a ride?” The poor man gratefully accepted the offer, boosted himself up, and took a seat. At first, the nobleman, engrossed in his papers, did not glance at his passenger, but eventually he looked up and noticed that the poor man was still holding the bag, his shoulder bent from the weight. The nobleman said, “Why are you still carrying your load? Why didn’t you take it off and place it in the cargo space?”

The poor man replied, “I was so grateful for your kindness in stopping to give me a lift, I didn’t have the audacity to ask you to carry my baggage as well!”

The nobleman smiled and said, “But don’t you realize that even with your duffel on your shoulder, I am carrying your baggage anyway?”¹

This parable holds several layers of meaning that call for careful unpacking. First of all, Shabbos is about stopping. The poor man is given respite from his exhausting trek by the grace of the wealthy nobleman who stops to offer entry into his carriage. Perhaps it is weariness that does not allow the poor man to realize that he can put down his load. Force of habit keeps the duffel bag on his shoulder until specifically prodded. He must be awakened to the realization of his new situation in the carriage – a place of buoyant grace and kindness – and this does not happen at once. It takes new awareness, and most of all trust in the goodness of his benefactor, to release the weight on his shoulder.

As a preacher, the Dubno Maggid’s style was to explicate the moral of his parable, not only by placing it in the context of scriptural verses, but also by making the story’s meaning explicit in the lives of his listeners.

The Maggid explains that God carries all creatures, as the verse states, “I created you and I shall carry you” (Is. 46:4). Every human being is freighted with burdens, especially the burden of earning a living. For the Eastern European Jews whom the Dubno Maggid was addressing, that burden was often crushing. The point of the parable was to frame Shabbos as an exercise in trust. Shabbos meant not only ceasing from work but also – what was much more difficult – ceasing to think about work, halting the endless internal ruminations about customers, markets, supplies, regulations, accounts payable, taxes, making enough profit to survive and feed one’s family. Many workers lived day to day, never far from the threat of actual starvation and destitution. Ceasing from work one day a week took genuine courage and commitment. The Maggid knew his people; although they might be physically in the synagogue,

1. *Mishlei Yaakov*, ed. Moshe Nisbaum (Jerusalem 5749/1989 [1875]), 158–59.

their minds were still consumed by work-related worries. Deeper trust required putting down the duffel bag in the carriage provided by God – the carriage called Shabbos.

This lesson is as timely today as it was in the late-eighteenth century. Not all of us have the same kind of economic pressures as Jewish laborers in the old country, though we should not dismiss job worries even in our own day. But new types of burdens have appeared, mostly due to technological innovations that promise convenience and connectivity but have tethered and tangled us in a way unprecedented in history. The burden now is fear of missing out – what some have archly tagged with the acronym FOMO. The latest email, text, update, newsfeed, blogpost, tweet – the urgent swirl of audible pings and visual flags demanding our attention has become an irresistible burden. More than ever, we need to realize that the carriage has pulled up at our side, that a domain of safety and repose beckons, and that we can put down the burden of boundless distraction, so that we can enter the realm of the sacred and reencounter the world, each other, and our own selves.

THE NATURE OF THIS BOOK

There are many kinds of books about Shabbos. Perhaps the most common type addresses the laws of the day, giving procedural instructions in line with the halakha. The writing tends to get technical very quickly; I know of one such effort that attempts a comprehensive presentation in four densely packed volumes. There are works that give a pragmatic rationale for Shabbos observance as a time to refresh and recharge, noting that rest and time off from work are necessary for optimal human functioning, especially in our 24/7 world. Some books provide a poetic evocation of the sublime spirit of the day, while others introduce the reader to the world of Kabbala and its symbolism in order to lay the groundwork for a mystical understanding of Shabbos as the time for cosmic restoration and unification. Other books suggest engaging family activities, while others offer instructions for *halla*-baking and cooking traditional Shabbos foods.

The theological significance of Shabbos is emphasized by some writers; this perspective is rooted in the Torah itself, which emphasizes that observance testifies to God's creation of heaven and earth in six