

Just One Shabbos...

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“The Western Wall on Friday night, his first time ever there...” So begins the song that is familiar to many a Ramaz Lower and Middle School student from the Friday Onegs – and also familiar to many a parent who has been in attendance. It is the song “Just One Shabbos” by Mordechai Ben David, one of the “superstars” of the Chasidic Jewish music scene. The song, from 1981, appears on many top-ten lists for most inspirational (or recognizable) Jewish songs of all time. It gets a lot of play-time in outreach and educational settings – Chabad, college Hillels, NCSY, Ramaz and other schools – due to the catchy beat and meaningful lyrics. And every person who heard the title of the sermon has started singing it to me. I, for your sake, will not.

The song is actually based on a statement in the Talmud (Shabbat 118b):

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: אלמלי משמרין ישראל שתי שבתות כהלכתן - מיד נגאלים

Rabbi Yochanan said, “If only the Jews would properly observe two Sabbaths, they would immediately be redeemed.” Lest you think MBD, as Mordechai Ben David is affectionately known, got his *Gemara* wrong, many

mefarshim, commentators, understand this statement as, in fact, referring to the Jews observing just one Shabbos. Why, then, does it say two? Well, Jews were never really that good with numbers. Seriously, though, the statement is referring to the proper observance of both the *zachor* and *shamor* elements of one Shabbos. If the Jews keep one Shabbos properly on all fronts – meals, dress, prohibitions, behavior, then they will merit immediate redemption.

It is also possible that MBD was basing his song on the Talmud Yerushalmi, Jerusalem Talmud (1:1). There it states:

אמר ר' לוי אילו היו ישראל משמרין שבת אחת כתיקנה מיד היה בן דוד בא
Rabbi Levi taught: “If the Jews would observe one Sabbath properly, the son of David (*Moshiach*) would immediately arrive.” However you look at the Talmudic teachings, it seems like a pretty good deal: keep a Shabbos, go directly to redemption.

This is, however, quite strange! Jews don't generally accept shortcuts. There is no easy way to be holy or righteous. It is a life-long process. Other religions do have such shortcuts. For example, the NY Times this week reported on the return of the “indulgence” to Catholic churches. According to church teaching, the article explains, “even after sinners are absolved in the confessional, they still face punishment after death, in Purgatory, before they can enter heaven. However, in exchange for certain prayers, devotions

or pilgrimages in special years, a Catholic can receive an indulgence, which reduces or erases that punishment instantly, with no formal ceremony or sacrament. There are partial indulgences, which reduce purgatorial time by a certain number of days or years, and plenary indulgences, which eliminate all of it until another sin is committed. You can get one for yourself or for someone who is dead. You cannot buy one — the church outlawed the sale of indulgences in 1567 — but charitable contributions, combined with other acts, can help you earn one. There is a limit of one plenary indulgence per sinner per day.” Sounds like a pretty good deal.

In Judaism, however, performing specific actions or taking on certain responsibilities don't automatically yield a specific result. Take, for example, the Jewish path to atonement. The Talmud speaks derisively of the Alexandrian Jews who cheered the priest taking the *se'ir ha-mishtaleiach*, goat to be tossed off the cliff, out to the wilderness. They chanted, “Take our sins and go!” This is not how Yom Kippur works as there is much more to Jewish penance. But what about this great deal of keeping one Shabbos and getting redeemed? Or what about Berachot 4b:

אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי אבינא: כל האומר (תהלים קמ"ה) תהלה לדוד בכל יום שלש פעמים – מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא.

Rabbi Elazar taught in the name of Rabbi Avina: “One who recites the ‘Tehilla l’David’ *Ashrei* prayer three times a day is assured of being one who is worthy of the world to come.” This sounds pretty automatic as well! Maybe we do have some shortcuts! What is the difference?

There are no shortcuts to spirituality or redemption. One Shabbos or *Ashrei* three times a day does not guarantee anything. As Rabbi Norman Lamm has pointed out, “To be a Jew means never to look only for the easy way. It means never to sacrifice conviction for convenience...It means always to search for the road of the greatest meaning and duty.” Judaism places much more emphasis on the backbone than the wishbone.

The bold promises of the Talmud refer to an outlook. Better yet, these statements are part of a creative marketing strategy. Jewish law is vast and complex. It is very easy to lose sight of the grandeur and glory that is the religious experience while focusing on the multiple details that are the essential minutia of Jewish law. There is a lot of beauty and meaning to be found in Judaism, and it is accessible to all who embrace the system.

Take *Ashrei*. Reciting it three times a day, on its own, does not guarantee anything. However, an individual who acknowledges God’s involvement in everything from aleph to tav – the way *Ashrei* is composed,

is the type of person who is on his or her way to *olam ha-ba*. If a person will focus on God's ability to help all in need and internalize this message for himself, as the verse *potei'ach et yadecha* – You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of all living things implies, then this is a person on his or her way to *olam ha-ba*. It is this attitude that makes the difference. The same is true for Shabbos. If only each Jew would appreciate the beauty of the 25 hours of Shabbos, then we'd be on our way to a redeemed era.

There really are no shortcuts to spirituality, and hard work is a prerequisite. The catch-phrases and slogans of being assured a place in the world to come are meant to hint at a broader and deeper perspective that is necessary for finding fulfillment and redemption. Things are never as simple as they seem, yet, at the same time, they just might be as simple as they seem. Earning a share in the world to come may not be as easy as it sounds, but, in some ways, it is just as easy as it sounds.

This is especially appropriate today during such turbulent times – from the financial crisis, to the situation in Israel to a general sense of discomfort. We live in a world where it is easy to be overwhelmed with the complexity of the times, but there is also simplicity in the face of all the

complexity, which can be very liberating. Say Ashrei three times, and we will achieve *olam ha-ba*. Just one Shabbos, and we'll all be free.

1. There is one individual, who personified this approach in his life's work of bringing Jews back to Judaism. Rabbi Noach Weinberg passed away in Jerusalem last week. He was the founder of Aish HaTorah, the yeshiva he founded in 1974 with 5 students in an Old City apartment which has grown to over 100,000 students in numerous programs in dozens of cities around the world. Rav Noach, as he was affectionately called, would certainly appreciate "Just One Shabbos." The young man with long, curly hair and backpack in the song may very well have been one of his students. But Rav Noach had a connection with the philosophy of Just One Shabbos. He believed that the best way to transmit Judaism was to give over the beauty of the tradition. The details would follow. The challenge might be seen as overwhelming. Some may see educating today's disconnected Jewish population as way too complex. For Rav Noach, it was "simple."

One of his students tells of meeting Rav Noach in August of 1977 at Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem. There were about 25 guys learning in the yeshiva back then. He told me, "Stay, stick around and I'll teach you wisdom. Our Torah is beautiful." The student responded, "But Rabbi, I don't

want to be religious and I want to still enjoy my life!” “Don't worry,” Rav Noach answered back, “If you like it too much here, we'll kick you out. And about enjoying life - we'll teach you how to *really* enjoy life.” One of Rav Noach's most popular courses was entitled, “Five Levels of Pleasure.” He taught that God wants us to have the ultimate pleasure. He is our Father in heaven, and our job is to take pleasure in this world and our relationship with Hashem, whether it is in doing the right thing or in having a good meal, whatever it was. You need to start somewhere. Just One Shabbos...

2. This week, Israelis went to the polls. Elections are always complicated, and this time was no exception. There was also, thankfully, a simpler message emerging from the election. Rabbi Moshe Lipman, an American-born educator now living in Israel, wrote in the *Jerusalem Post* this week of his “exhilarating and enlightening” experience serving as chairman of one of the 9,000 ballot boxes. He described the camaraderie of the observers even though they were from vastly different religious and political backgrounds, the passion of the voters – one even traveled several hours back and forth from his previous place of registration to retrieve the proper documentation, the recent *oleh* in her 90's voting for the first time, and other such experiences. Rabbi Lipman concluded, “We do not yet know the results of the elections or in which direction our country will turn.

But...Election Day yielded tremendous fruits...that our country has a bright future with passionate and caring citizens who have more in common than we are often led to believe...[T]his serves as an Election Day victory.”

There may be hard politics ahead, but, at least for one moment, we can be inspired by the elections. Just one Shabbos...

3. It is most appropriate to conclude a talk on “Just One Shabbos” with mentioning one particular Shabbos. Our community is infused with a spirit of “Just One Shabbos.” We believe in providing multiple opportunities to experience God’s love and His Torah. Our Beginners Program, in particular, has a mission to provide positive Jewish experiences to all who seek them, and we like to point that we’re all Beginners – just at different stages of the process. It is in that spirit that I want to mention our annual Shabbat Across America program on Friday night, March 20th. Conceived by the National Jewish Outreach Program, it is an opportunity to create a “Just One Shabbos” experience. It is a chance to encourage our fellow Jews – who might normally not experience the beauty of Shabbos – to try it out in a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Everyone has a friend, neighbor, co-worker, acquaintance or friend of a friend that would benefit from Shabbat Across America, and I guarantee that you, too, will enjoy the experience.

We can all make a tangible difference in the lives our Jewish brothers and sisters on March 20th with just one Shabbos...

There are no shortcuts in reaching the Jewish finish-line, and we will not be introducing indulgences any time soon. But we do recognize that “Just one Shabbos” is a welcome, straight-forward and simple philosophy in a complicated world. It is a brilliant marketing strategy conceived by our sages to remind us to never lose sight of the beauty and joy within Judaism. Even when times are tough and it appears that there is no end in sight, we must never despair as all it takes is Just One Shabbos.