



Parshat Vayelech—Shabbat Shuvah
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The 300 and the 3000

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This is my 16th year at Temple Emanuel, and so I have finally, after all these years, mustered up the courage to talk about something I've always wanted to talk about. It is the elephant in the room. Namely, on the high holidays that we are in the middle of, we sit in shul, through lengthy services, and most of us don't really *like* being in shul, sitting through lengthy services. For so many Jews on the high holidays, going to shul is a duty. A *got to do*. Not a *want to do*. Put in your time in on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and then you're good for a year. Don't have to come back. In shul business, people vote with their feet, and most of us vote most of the time *not* to attend Shabbat morning services, unless we happen to be invited to a B'nei Mitzvah or auf ruf, or we are saying Kaddish or have a yahrtzeit. 3,300 souls are members of Temple Emanuel. At most, and this is being generous, 300 could be described as regular shul goers. 3,000 out of 3,300 find somewhere else to be on Shabbat morning.

I finally have the courage to talk about this now because of something that happened this summer. Every summer, a group of Temple Emanuel members goes to the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem to study Torah. This year the theme was faith. Donniel Hartman framed our study by asking the question: "Do I have to believe in God in order to be a good Jew?"

After a week of intensive learning, we approach the final session, featuring 3 panelists: Donniel Hartman, Blu Greenberg, who is an Orthodox Jewish woman, and a pioneer in pushing for gender equality within the Orthodox movement, and Yossi Klein Halevi, an astute observer of Israel today. Each of these panelists is a true thought leader, impacting the way real people

see and practice their Judaism. This last session was meant to be a discussion, by these three giants, about their own spiritual journeys: who they are as Jews and how they got there.

As long as I live, I will never forget the last ten minutes. The moderator poses the final question: *Tell us about your own prayer life as it relates to the synagogue you attend. Where do you go on Shabbat mornings, and how does it work for you?*

In response, each speaker explained why going to shul does *not* work for them. The service is too long. Too many words. Too much repetition. Too boring. The same every week. Plus, they can't relate to the God of petitionary prayer. They don't think the world works that way.

Quiet meditation, in their own time, in their own space, in their own way, is far more effective than slogging through a long, cumbersome synagogue service, which they avoid.

At first I could not believe my ears. We did not need to come from Newton to Jerusalem to hear that the service is too long and repetitive. That's the problem. We knew that already. We came from Newton to Jerusalem to hear the solution. What do we do about it?

But with some reflection, I have come to treasure those last ten minutes. After all, if these three luminaries struggle with communal prayer, then it is not only us. This session liberated me to take a fresh look at a problem we share with the rest of the Jewish world.

Why do so many of our people, the very strong majority, vote with their feet *not* to come on Shabbat morning?

Shabbat morning services everywhere, including here, have lots of problems, which the Hartman panel named. Too long. Too repetitive. Too boring. The whole time thing does not work. If you go at the beginning, 9:30, and stay till the end, 12:00, and then schmooze with

people at kiddish for a half an hour, you have just spent three hours of your Saturday morning.

Where else do we spend three hours in one place? We measure out our life in hours.

We do a spinning class? An hour.

Yoga? An hour.

A tennis lesson or session with a trainer? An hour.

We see our therapist. An hour.

We pay our lawyer. Bills by the hour.

We see a friend for a cup of coffee at Starbucks. An hour.

Or for lunch. An hour.

Should we do a grocery run? Pick up some vegetables and ingredients for dinner? If we can go, shop, and come home. In an hour.

We are a three hour experience in a one hour world.

I want to concede all these problems. And by the way, I don't believe that there is a solution to these problems.

But taking our services as they are, with their well-known challenges, I want to make the case for regular attendance on Shabbat morning *because of what you will get out of it*.

Specifically, you can get three things from regular Shabbat morning attendance that we need, that we lack, and that are very hard to get elsewhere.

The first thing flows from *The New Yorker* cover of July 23rd. It shows a father, mother, daughter and son on summer vacation, at the beach. But their back is towards the water. They are not focused on the water, on the beach, on the moment, or on each other, because each is focused intently on his or her hand-held device. Four people alone, together. Four people whose vacation is spent with their smart-phones.

I am not here to slam technology. Just the opposite. Let's begin by conceding that technology, those smart-phones always in our hands, makes possible 1,000 wonderful things we could not do without them. Technology is here to stay. It is pathetic to rail against something that is immensely positive and here to stay.

That said, one of the consequences of technology that we are just beginning to understand is that it is affecting *how we think*. A *Newsweek* cover this summer is entitled "iCrazy: Panic. Depression. Psychosis. How Connection Addiction is Rewiring Our Brains." This is an immensely rich and developing subject, of which I am far from an expert. I just want to point out one obvious thing that you all know already. This technology, for all of its wonder and splendor, makes us less able to dwell, less able to stop and think deeply, to take in one text, to read one book, to appreciate one moment. There is always a light blinking, a phone ringing, a device bleeping, a hand-held beeping, some new emergency demanding your time and attention right now. Which means you cannot be in the moment you are in. Thus the family of four on the beach, ignoring the water, ignoring the sun, ignoring one another, focusing instead on their smartphones. Thus icrazy.

This happens all the time, even in relatively innocuous ways which nonetheless change how we think. My wife Shira always used to read old-fashioned books. Then like so many of you she got the Kindle and the iPad. I'll never forget the moment when I learned that how she reads will never be the same. She was reading the book Game Change, about the '08 presidential campaign, which relates a vignette about then candidate John Edwards combing his hair, for a full two minutes, all of which was available on YouTube, to the tune of I Feel Pretty; and how Edwards' opponents would get comic relief on the campaign trail by watching this clip of his fastidious hair care. With an old-fashioned book, Shira would have read the passage and

moved on. But on her iPad, she touched the screen, and there we were, watching the clip. Now there is a lot you can say in praise of that technology. It makes learning real and immediate and brings multiple media to bear.

But it also makes us less able to dwell on one idea, to read one text, to immerse in one experience without interruption.

That is the first thing shul gives us on Shabbat morning. All week long, those hand-helds are in our hands, making their demands. But for a few precious hours, an oasis. No beeping, bleeping, ringing, blinking, blaring. Where else will you find a few hours just to be?

The second gift we get from being a shul Jew is deep friendship. A writer named Alex Williams wrote an evocative piece in the Times this summer asking whether there is a window of opportunity for making really great friends that closes at some point. His answer is yes. The opportunity to make what he calls BFFs, best friends forever, extends from our teens through our college years. By our early 20s, we can no longer make BFFs. Rather, we are relegated to KOFs, kind of friends. Transactional friends. Friends for limited purposes. Friends for now.

He cited three conditions that sociologists have identified since the 1950s as preconditions for lasting friendship:

One, proximity. You have to be physically near your friend.

Two, frequency of unplanned, spontaneous interactions. In college, students are always seeing each other, easily, organically, naturally. They have time. After college, who has the time?

Three, an organic context where people don't have edge or agenda. It is particularly hard in work contexts-- where agendas are always in the atmosphere--to have an agenda-less connection.

Add to that the pressures of raising children and trying to keep your marriage healthy given the stresses of life and work—and it turns out that after our early 20s, it gets very hard to make a deep and lasting friendship.

The article cites a man in his 40s who, after his divorce, realized that without his wife, he was lonely, and it had been a long time since he had invested real energy in friends. His friendship roster was atrophied. “I’d go to salsa lessons. Instead of trying to pick up the women, I’d introduce myself to the men: ‘Hey, let’s go get a drink.’” Another man moved to New York in his 30s. He was so lonely that he would walk his cat in Central Park in the hopes of creating a conversation.

This article totally resonated for me. It *is* hard after college, when we are in the thick of our families, our jobs, our lives, our bills, to find the time for really good friends. Proximity, frequency, agendalessness are hard to come by. Except that they are not hard to come by here, in shul, especially if you come around regularly.

The window for BFFs is open here year round, and it never closes.

Proximity? People are right next to each other. They sit near each other in services. They talk to each other at Kiddush. They invite each other for Shabbat meals.

Frequency? If you come on Shabbat mornings, you will see each other every week.

Agendaless? That is our specialty. That is at the heart of a Jewish community. What is the agenda of our daily minyan but to offer support, the agenda of our classes but to learn, the agenda of our choir but to sing, the agenda of our social action but to do good?

So the second thing you get if you come regularly on Shabbat morning is a community of sacred relationships in which you can create, sustain and deepen friendships.

And the third thing we get from coming to shul regularly on Shabbat morning is the deepening of our relationship with God. Even if you think you are not a God person, even if you think you don't believe in God, please don't check out on me now. I have something I want to share with you.

I remember once visiting a morning minyan regular who was at home recovering from surgery. He hadn't been at the minyan for some time, and he was missing it. There we were in his living room. So I asked him: How did you come to be a morning minyan regular?

I was not always that way, he explained. Actually, for many years, I only went to shul on the holidays. Then my father died. I knew that my father would have wanted me to say Kaddish. He used to call me his Kaddish. So I started saying Kaddish for *him*.

But after a while it wasn't only about my father. I made friends. Everybody is so warm. It's nice to have a place where people are looking for you—and miss you if you don't show up.

It's also peaceful. It makes me feel grounded. The chapel is beautiful. The light streams in. I sit in the same seat every day, next to the same people.

I started coming years ago for my Dad. But I kept coming for myself--because *I got strength. I got energy. When I don't go, I miss it. When I do go, my day starts off right.*

This noble man came back, and kept coming until he could physically come no more.

What do you call it when there is some other dimension of reality--you cannot see it, you cannot define it, there are some times when you are sure you don't believe in it, but there are other times when you can sense it and reach out to it and you feel less alone. Different people call this different things. I call it God, and I find it in shul.

Getting meaning out of the Shabbat morning service takes work. If you work for it, you will find it. And if you become a shul regular, your life will be never better. Shanah tovah.