

TRANSCRIPT: Ezra Klein interviews Judith Shulevitz

Sabbath and the Art of Rest

Judith Shulevitz shares the wisdom of the Sabbath and its offering to a modern world that struggles to unplug.

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Ezra Klein

I'm Ezra Klein. This is "The Ezra Klein Show."

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This episode for me today has its roots way back and so I'm going to take a moment in setting it up. When I was in college, a rabbi I knew, he gave me Abraham Joshua Heschel's book "The Sabbath." And I love that book. I've probably read it a dozen times since. And the reason it's mattered to me so much for so long is not just about the idea of the Sabbath. It's a critique of the way many of us, certainly me, live. A critique of the way our world has been designed.

Heschel's argument is that the modern world is obsessed with questions of space. We spend our days trying to master the spaces in which we live — building in them, acquiring from them, traversing them. And what we spend to do that is the time that we have to live. He writes, "Most of us seem to labor for the sake of things of space. As a result, we suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time and stand aghast when compelled to look into its face."

That line has always felt true to me. It's always felt true about me. But I mostly ignored its trueness. There's stuff to do every day. Maybe what's changed recently is that I've gotten older. Maybe it's that I've had children or I'm seeing my own parents age. But I've had more trouble ignoring that trueness.

I don't think the speed at which I live, at which I move through time, at which I see the people around me living and moving through time is a speed that any of us really want. I don't think the habits that I've cultivated here are really good ones. So I've become interested in what this old practice has to say about how I live and how we live today.

Heschel has this line — "Six days a week we seek to dominate the world. On the seventh day, we try to dominate the self." It's amazing how much harder that is to do. But I can't shake the question of, what if I did actually spend a full seventh of my life, which is what the Sabbath is supposed to be, living at a different speed? Who would I be if I knew more than how to work and not work? Who would I be if I knew actually how to rest?

A metaphor we often use now for rest is recharging — I need to recharge, like we're iPhones that need to be plugged in overnight so we can work again in the morning. And here, too,

Heschel has a critique of this. He knew it. He talked about it. He writes, “Man is not a beast of burden and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work.”

When I was young, I went to an Orthodox Hebrew school for a couple of years. And I had friends who truly kept Shabbat. I enjoyed going to their homes. But I didn’t understand why they were giving up so much, all of these should-nots, the refusal to use a car, or to turn off a light, or to fire up a video game. There was so much renunciation.

And I still don’t quite think those practices are right for me. But all I could see then was what was being pushed away. And now I’ve become a lot more interested in what was being created, what was worth creating.

In her beautiful book, “The Sabbath World,” Judith Shulevitz looks very squarely at that question. What the Sabbath has tried to create and how that has worked throughout time, throughout cultures, throughout different religions. There’s the Jewish Sabbath, Jewish Shabbat. But obviously it’s a Christian practice. Now there are secular versions of the practice and many more.

And she looks at how difficult, how antagonistic, how idealistic that act of creation is in the world in which we live. And what struck me reading her is how fundamentally countercultural the practice now is, how radical something so ancient now feels to me, and, in a way, how urgent it feels.

I mentioned in my end of the year A.M.A. that my big resolution for this year is to actually build some kind of consistent Sabbath practice. So I asked Judith to come on the show and talk about her book, talk about these ideas for a bit. As always, my email: ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com.

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Judith Shulevitz, welcome to the show.

Judith Shulevitz

Thank you so much. It’s a pleasure to be here.

Ezra Klein

I think most people who are familiar at all with the Jewish Sabbath, know it mainly for all the should-nots — all the things that people who keep it are prohibited from doing. But tell me about the should here. What are the Sabbath rules attempting to create?

Judith Shulevitz

I would argue that they’re trying to create meaning. I think of all the rules around the Sabbath telling you to stop doing things, which are the should-nots, as creating a kind of frame, if you think of it in space rather than in time, or you think of a frame in time rather than in space, or you

could think of it as a proscenium around a stage, or you could think of it as a break after a line of poetry.

These are things that create meaning. They bound time and say this is going to be special. Now we're going to make something extraordinary out of the ordinary. Because the ordinary stuff of a Sabbath isn't that extraordinary, right? You're supposed to have a meal. The Jewish Sabbath has a big Friday night meal. Sometimes it's a big lunch after synagogue. The Christian Sabbath had a big old Sunday lunch. The Black church is famous for its fabulous lunches. It could be a dinner party, right? But it's something else, right? You are supposed to come together. In a Christian idiom, I'd say you're supposed to break bread. So you're supposed to be collective.

You are supposed to let your mind wander. We'll gather, have a moment of just letting go. Not all the time, some of the time. But these are the positive things that the frame gives a special gloss to the way it does a work of art and says, this space here, it's meaning. Make sense of it.

Ezra Klein

Tell me a bit about the threads connecting the things that are prohibited. Where do those prohibitions come from and what ties them together?

Judith Shulevitz

So there's a lot of different ways of thinking about that. The typical rabbinic way of explaining that is that there are these set of rules — a set of a kind of work that you don't do because that kind of work is acting on the world. And the Sabbath is a time when you're supposed to stop acting on the world.

You're supposed to stop doing things to make things. You're supposed to let the world rest, as well as you. So this is the environmental dimension of the Sabbath. But pre the environmental movement, there was a great rabbi in Germany. And he said, what is there to safeguard the world from man? And that's the Sabbath.

So these rules — you could almost say these rules are to safeguard the world from man, but also to safeguard you from being an eternal slave — today, we would say, of the clock — in the deep past, we might have said from the struggle to survive.

Another way of thinking of the rules is as a giant mutual noncompete clause or a solution to the problem of collective action. So let's take it in the modern world. If I run a store and everyone else is going to keep their store open on Saturday or on Sunday, it's very hard for me to shut my store down. I'm not going to be able to compete. I'm going to lose business to someone else.

But if everyone's shutting their store down, then I'm cool. I'm good. I can just go do my thing, whatever it is. Go to church, or stay home with my stack of books, or just hang out with my family, whatever it is. So those are some of the things that I think the rules are meant to create or prevent.

Ezra Klein

So I want to note a couple of levels there. The first level being the individual level. What am I supposed to be doing? What is the intention with which I'm supposed to be acting? And then all the way up to the social level. What are we all doing? And we're going to take all those pieces, but I want to focus for a few minutes here on the Torah, the origin of it. Tell me a bit about the theology of the Sabbath.

Judith Shulevitz

So there's this puzzle in the first creation story. Remember that the book of "Genesis" has two creation stories, right? There's the one where God says let there be light and there is light, and the one where God creates Eve out of Adam.

So let's take the first one. So on each of six days, God creates something material, tangible. Creates day — well, I guess maybe day and night are not so tangible, but they're certainly experiential. Creates vegetation, creates the stars and the moon, creates animals. And on the sixth day, creates man and woman. Which, by the way, God creates equally on the sixth day.

And then on the seventh day, God rests. But God doesn't just rest. He makes rest, which seems like a contradiction in terms. God is making something. God is making rest. So the rabbis say, well, how can that be? And how can God be making something that isn't? And the answer is God was creating this system of meaning, which is based on stopping and looking back over what God had created to say, is that good? And it turns out it was good.

Ezra Klein

I want to pull in Abraham Joshua Heschel here who wrote this classic book, "The Sabbath," many, many years ago now — decades ago. And I'm probably going to weave in and out of that book a bit because it's influenced me a lot. But he writes here that the word being used in the story is menuha.

And he writes, "Menuha, which we usually render with rest, means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion." He goes on to say it's something closer to, quote, "tranquillity, serenity, peace and repose." And I want to get at the distinction between rest, as defined by something you're not doing — rest is I'm not working — versus rest as a kind of state I'm achieving.

Judith Shulevitz

Yeah. Well, I would say I don't see that much of a distinction between these two things. I would say both are active processes. First of all, because you have to create the space beforehand. So that's one thing. And the second is that you rest, you try to have repose, like, every evening, right? What's the difference? How do you make that —

Ezra Klein

Do I? [LAUGHS]

Judith Shulevitz

Well, maybe you don't. In our 24/7 economy, which you are deeply enmeshed in, maybe you don't. But there's a rabbi named Genibah, who talks about what this Sabbath feeling should be as opposed to a nothing or a not doing or a thing — to go back to the creation story — that has to be created.

And he says, it may be compared to a king who made a bridal chamber, which he plastered, painted and adorned, but what did the bridal chamber lack? A bride. Similarly, what did the world lack? The Sabbath. It's bringing something in that is different, that is special. And in order to do that, you have to create the space for it.

Ezra Klein

Let me not pretend my own motivations here are all that theological. One reason Heschel's book has meant so much to me, and your book has meant so much to me, and I've been struggling so much with this idea, is a sense I have of myself that I actually don't know how to rest. And that I can sometimes not work [LAUGHS] but the things I tend to replace it with look a lot like work.

Judith Shulevitz

Yes.

Ezra Klein

When you're somebody who likes to read and then you do a podcast based around books you read, your leisure becomes — I mean, obviously there's a paradox of me even just doing this episode at all about the Sabbath — but this gets to another Heschel quote.

He writes, "Labor is a craft, but perfect rest is an art." And goes on to say, "To attain a degree of excellence in art, one must accept its discipline, one must adjure slothfulness. So then it feels like rest is hard work in that description. But he's getting — how do you think about that?"

Judith Shulevitz

I would say that I actually don't agree with Heschel there because he frames it in an individualist perspective, right? It's on you, Ezra. You have to stop working. And if you don't, you feel bad. And even the things that you are doing feel like work by other means.

I mean, I'm a book critic. And I did have a fact-checker on a story I wrote about this say to me — I write about reading novels on Shabbat — and he said, isn't that what you get paid to do? And I'm like, yeah, kind of. [LAUGHS]

It's permitted. So there isn't any way you're going to get to this kind of rest by yourself. That's the fundamental message of my book. My book was written, in part, to look at the Sabbath from the point of view not of a great prophet — which Abraham Joshua Heschel absolutely was a great rabbi, a great prophet, a great master of poetry and theology — but from the perspective of an ignorant, flawed human being.

And the great lesson I learned from writing this book was, I don't have to yell at myself for not doing it. I can't do it until I become part of a community that does it, that makes rest something pleasurable, that makes it festive. So one of the ways I like to define Shabbat or the Sabbath, really, because this is true of the Christian Sabbath and the civic Sabbath as well, is that it's a four-step program for creating community and social cohesion.

So the four steps would be right laws to limit work time, make sure the schedules are coordinated, make it a regular habit so that it becomes a regular norm — and the fourth is really the most important — make it festive. Make it fun. Fill it with things. Fill it with meals. Fill it with long walks. Fill it with what they call a Shabbas shlof, which is a Shabbas nap sometimes with mandated sexual activity, if you are married. That's the Jewish Shabbat.

The Puritan Sabbath, which is another one we think of maybe not so pleasurable, but they found what they were doing to be pleasurable, which is attempting to re-enact a biblical Sabbath. And always, always, always being together. Because you just can't do this by yourself. Like I said, in part, it's like a mutual noncompete clause. So if other people are running around you being crazy, there's nothing restful about that. You need the atmosphere of repose.

Ezra Klein

You call Shabbat, in your book, a socially reinforced temporal structure. Tell me more about the two sides of that. Temporal reminds me of the Heschel argument, that Shabbat is a cathedral in time. It is important to understand it, that it's about time, not space. But as you say, something your book really brings forward is that there is a deeply social dimension. So how does the time dimension and the social dimension come together?

Judith Shulevitz

Time is an architecture, as Heschel says. And it shapes what we do with our lives. So you have a family. Each member of it probably does something else. One of your children goes to school. One of them seems like maybe doesn't. [LAUGHS] I've heard —

Ezra Klein

Quiet young.

Judith Shulevitz

— you talk about your family. He's quite young.

Ezra Klein

He's young.

Judith Shulevitz

Your wife does one thing. You do another thing. Your friends do yet more different things. So if there isn't a rhythm to the week, if there isn't time set aside for everyone to stop working, everyone in your family, everyone in your friend group, everyone on your block — so this is

positing this fantasy of a society that is totally homogeneous — but if there isn't a general atmosphere of stopping, then there won't be a feeling of repose or *menuha*. There will be a loneliness and you're looking around and everyone else is running around.

So it is the social structure of time. So when I talk about the Sabbath, I say it's not just non-work or non-productivity. It's absolutely collective non-work and non-productivity because I simply cannot stress this enough. If it's not happening collectively, it's not going to happen.

Ezra Klein

Tell me about this idea you bring forward which is the social morality of time, which is a phrase I just love.

Judith Shulevitz

Yes. I happen to be married to one of these people who is able to enter the things that you say and make them more interesting than they were when you said them. And so when I was telling him, right before we got married, that I wanted our life to be organized in this way — not that it necessarily would be, but that was what I wanted and we were going to work toward it —

he was just taken aback. What are you even talking about? He was at the time assimilated. He's now in some ways even more Jewish than I am. But he came from a very assimilated family. And he just really hadn't thought about Shabbat as anything other than a day when you turn everything off and are kind of bored.

And I was explaining that the rabbi saw Shabbat as a time when you were able to stop living to produce, stop living to be somebody successful, stop living to make money for your family and start living for yourself.

And when you live for yourself to be — not for yourself in a selfish sense, but in order just to be — and when you shed that professional identity or that work identity, you are able to be together, you are able to think of others, you are able to achieve that flowing outward towards others that Martin Buber talks about in his book "I and Thou," and you are able to become a better member of your community, and, incidentally, a better person. So he came up with that phrase — the social morality of time — that you can have morality embedded in time.

Ezra Klein

You also have a very, very interesting section in the book where you talk about the way different structures of time act upon our own morality and what we're able to see. Can you tell me a bit about the good Samaritan experiment?

Judith Shulevitz

So in 1973, two social psychologists wanted to answer the question, what makes someone stop when passing by a stranger who is in obvious distress? Let's just say on the street. They wanted to know which of three attributes would make them stop — innate personality, cultural conditioning or how they were raised, or something more situational.

And they went to Princeton Theological Seminary because they wanted to work with people who were familiar with a parable from the Gospels in which Jesus tells the story — someone is lying on the ground, is in obvious distress. Different kinds of people go by. Finally, the good Samaritan stops and helps the man up, gives him food to eat, water to drink, takes him to shelter.

So they took these students and they wanted to reawaken the story of the good Samaritan in their heads. And they asked some of them to write a sermon about it. And they asked some of them to write an essay on their job prospects. And then they sent them over to another building to give a sermon.

And they divided the students in third. And they told one third of students to get to the building really fast because they were late. They told one third of the students that they weren't late but they better not dawdle. And they told one third of the students that they had plenty of time to get to the building.

And along the way, as they were going to the building, they passed someone slumped against a wall in very obvious distress. And they wanted to know who would stop. And what they found is the people who would stop were the ones who had plenty of time. Some of the ones who were on time but shouldn't dawdle did stop, some didn't. The ones who were in a rush did not stop.

And they concluded that it wasn't a factor of personality. It wasn't a factor of cultural conditioning. It wasn't that they knew the good Samaritan story. It was the situation they found themselves in, how fast they felt they had to go. And they came to the conclusion that ethics becomes a luxury — this is a quote — “ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily life increases.”

They also found that some of the students hadn't even seen the guy. They just hadn't even noticed that he was there. And their conclusion — it's just a line I really like — “time quickening narrows the cognitive map.” Meaning that your ability to perceive things shuts down because you're so focused on getting done what you have to get done by the deadline.

Ezra Klein

I found that study very somewhere in between moving and worrying.

One, it certainly feels true in my own life. I'm not going to say when I am hurrying, the likelihood that I will stop and help somebody on the street is dramatically lower. When I'm hurrying, the likelihood that I will stop and help myself is dramatically lower.

Judith Shulevitz

So true.

Ezra Klein

There's a deep sense of the morality towards oneself that can begin to fail the faster time is going. Down to whether or not I'm going to the doctor to get things checked out, how I treat my family, et cetera. And at the same time, I don't think there's much argument that we have technologically begun to speed up our lives.

And we create systems in which we are late or behind that can now pervade many more spaces than they could before. I'm often not caught up in my email with my children at the park, when that would not have been a relevant concept a couple of decades ago because there's no email, and when you're at the park, you can't be doing anything else.

And it's part of what has attracted me to this idea of the Sabbath, this idea that what if you spend a full seventh of your life operating at a different speed of time? What would that do to you? What would that mean for you?

Judith Shulevitz

Well, I do think that the experiment answers that question. It means that you would be open to a different quality of interaction with yourself and with others. On the speeding up of time, it's interesting, time use studies show that we actually aren't working that much longer than we used to, but we use social media more.

We use media more. We can spend more time consuming. Now, the time use studies I'm talking about are little older and they don't — it's very hard to tease out what is work and what isn't work in social media. But definitely time has grown faster, and, also, I would say shallower through multitasking.

And if you were able to turn off your devices and go to the playground or go to the soccer game and interact with the other parents, for example, while you're watching your child, you would be building these friendships, you would be building these bonds with your neighborhood. I mean, one of the wonderful things about playgrounds is that they are these spaces that are connected to your neighborhood, so you're actually getting to know your neighbors.

We live in a society where because of social media and because of email, it's very easy to form these friendships that aren't geographically based. But when you're at the playground, you're actually in your neighborhood. And if you could keep your device turned off, then you would get to know the people in your neighborhood and form friendships that might actually help your children because you might go home with one of these families and then your child would have a new friend.

Ezra Klein

One thing that makes me think about is I love listening to music and, unsurprisingly, enjoy listening to podcasts. And I am virtually never moving anywhere alone that I do not have not just earbuds or headphones on, but noise-canceling earbuds or headphones on. And I recognize that I don't talk to people and they don't talk to me in the way that I would have at another time, in a way that I do on the occasions that I don't have those on — and that there is a loss there.

It gets to something Heschel writes. And I mean, Heschel is writing before social media, before the internet. But it's one of these lines from his book that feels more of the moment than I suspect it did even when he wrote it, where he writes, "The solution to mankind's most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization but in attaining some degree of independence on it."

And I've always been really struck by that. I mean, I don't keep the Sabbath. I'm trying to figure out what that practice will look like for me. And I don't think it'll mean no electric lights. And on the other hand, I'm very attracted to the idea of trying to become more independent from the technological shell I have built around myself.

Judith Shulevitz

So one of the things that's very odd and problematic about the Sabbath is that it does try to rip a hole in this glimmering technological web that we live in. And I think that one of the things that keeps us from keeping the Sabbath is that that hole feels extremely uncomfortable for a really long time until we fill it with other things

and — because it's not at our pace.

If you find a social context in which it is possible for you to turn that off, in which you're not thinking, oh my god, I totally forgot to answer that email and it's really important that I do right now, so let me just turn that back on right now — if you simply find a world in which it makes sense to turn it off, you will be able to turn it off. If you're simply trying to do it as a discipline of the self, as a form of self-improvement, I think it just becomes another thing like dieting. Something to beat yourself up with.

If you can set a boundary around your time and say this is a time in which I'm going to do child care — I'm going to interact with my child, I'm going to read my child a story, I'm going to enter into his imaginative world and play a game with him, or even I'm going to take pleasure in just cleaning these dishes — which sounds nutty, but I actually have found a way to meditate while cleaning dishes — and you fill it with something active rather than something negative, then I think it becomes more possible.

Right now, in our moment in history, stopping our technological addiction is probably the hardest thing that we can do. And it is the biggest obstacle to living your life according to the lessons of Sabbath.

Ezra Klein

Something you're getting at there, which I have both mixed feelings and mixed experience with, is the secularization of the Sabbath. The rise of digital Shabbats — people don't look at their phone on Saturdays. The rise of Sabbath is a metaphor, not so much a practice, I mean largely the way I relate to it so far.

So I'm not — this is not aimed at anybody, frankly, but me. It's not a critique of anybody else. But I also — I'm curious what you think of them. How do you think about the Sabbath cleaved from holiness, cleaved from its religious roots?

Judith Shulevitz

So I don't have a problem with people coming to this notion of the Sabbath in a secular way. I think that once you do it, though, you begin, in a way, to replicate what the religion meant for you to do. My experience with the secular Sabbath experiments has been they happen around a dinner. They happen around some kind of social event.

So you're doing the gathering. You are doing what, in part, Shabbat meant you to do, or the Christian Sabbath meant you to do, which is to be together. And that might lead somewhere or it might not.

But if you become what I call a Sabbatarian, you're going to wind up finding your way to a community that makes it part of their life. And that's probably going to be a religious community. It doesn't have to be. But if you want that rich, textured experience, it's going to wind up heading in that general direction.

Ezra Klein

It's funny that describes my experience here quite precisely. And I really struggle with this, and it's something I want to make sure to talk about because I've tried a variety of secular versions of it, and individual versions of it, to get at your social point. None of them have stuck.

And it's hard to get away from the idea, when you look directly at it, that what you are trying to do on the Sabbath, at least traditionally, is create a sense of holiness. And that's a tough word if you are at this point more secular. And it becomes very hard to find. There's often nowhere I feel less holy than in some of the temples I've been to.

And you have a beautiful line on this, where you write, "It's weird to fill your mouth with words that have been drained of meaning. It's like wrapping your tongue around a fossil." So how do you think about that relationship then between a sense of holiness and the distance many of us feel from this thing we want, which is the experience of holiness?

Judith Shulevitz

One thing I would say about holiness is it means setting apart and perceiving as special. Certainly in the Jewish tradition, it is literally conceived as that, which is set apart. So we've already talked about creating these boundaries around time and setting it apart.

One of the things that fascinates me, and in a way it's why I called the book "The Sabbath World," is that it's a sort of enclosed world that we can never reach. And holiness is a little bit like that. It's this thing that's beyond us. It partakes of a different order of being. It's God's order of being. We're never going to get there.

The Sabbath sort of has nostalgia for the pure Sabbath we can never achieve built into it. And this is constant throughout — the rabbinical legends. There's a wonderful legend about a Sabbath river that lies beyond our world. It's always going to be just beyond our reach. The perfect Shabbat, the perfect Sabbath — we're never going to attain it.

So, yes, I started going back to synagogue and the words felt meaningless to me. I struggled with prayer. I still struggle with prayer. When I go to services, really the only thing I really like is the Torah service, because I love reading texts and sitting there and reading the portion of the Torah we're reading and thinking about it in a new way.

Ezra Klein

You really enjoy the literary criticism portion of the service. [LAUGHS]

Judith Shulevitz

What can I do?

That's who I am. And I mean, for me, the words start to have meaning when I realize where they come from in the Jewish tradition, what texts they come from. But a ritual is something you inherit. It comes upon you from the past and dictates what you do. And you don't necessarily know what it means.

I mean, if you have a fabulous Jewish or Christian education, maybe you do know what you're supposed to feel. But you might not feel it for a long time. It might be alien to you. It's by doing that we learn. It's by doing that the meaning yields itself up to us. But if we have preconceived notions about what it means to go to services, what kind of person that makes you, if we have preconceived notions about how far we are from this tradition, then the words will be alien and repugnant, I think, to us.

So I think the hardest thing is having patience and tolerating the alien and the somewhat alienating experience of going to a place that you're not familiar with, you feel like an outsider, you don't know the words, you don't know Hebrew, you don't know the tune of the hymns if it's a church. And just saying, OK, this is OK. And maybe if I do it a few times, it will start to become more familiar. Or maybe first the social piece will come and then I'll keep doing it and it will start to feel more familiar.

One of the things the Sabbath does is make time for study. And maybe you'll learn more about what these things mean. But you're never going to get to this place of total meaning. You're never really going to get there. It's impossible.

Ezra Klein

You have a really nice commentary on this, I thought, where you write about the bridge that that offers into this question of what makes time feel holy. And you write that "Holy time then is time that we ourselves make holy, time that we sanctify by means of ourselves. We have to commit

ourselves to holy time before it will oblige us by turning holy. How do we sanctify the Sabbath? By wearing a special robe, said the rabbis. By beautifying ourselves in our homes.”

And that brings up another dimension of the Sabbath rules, which is not what you can't do on it, but what you're supposed to do before it and why. Can you talk a bit about that?

Judith Shulevitz

So the first time I ever wrote about this, the only thing that came to mind was a line from “The Cat in the Hat,” which is, “It’s fun to have fun but you have to know how.” You can’t get what you need from a Sabbath if you don’t prepare for it.

If you want more than the normal mysticism, you need to elaborately prepare the meal. But you need to prepare it in advance so that you can relax and enjoy it. I mean, that’s the utilitarian notion of it. The more religious notion would be that you are doing it because God commanded you to do it. You don’t necessarily always know why, but God commanded it.

But you have to shop. You have to cook. You might want to make plans with someone in advance. You invite people over. You have to make a challah, if it’s a Jewish Shabbat. And you have to do the preparation, which is also a preparation — you’re preparing yourself to have this experience. You’re not going to have the experience if you don’t make it.

You are part of a community that’s doing it, but it’s not that the community gives you the meal. It’s not that the community gives you the bath. So a Shabbas bath is very important. The mystics made a really big deal of this. In fact, one of the capitalists had a theory that your fingernails and your toenails were emanations of God. So you should always pare your fingernails and toenails, and keep the parings and bury them, not throw them away.

But this is this idea of preparing your body, preparing your meal, preparing your home. You’re supposed to clean your home. This is one way in which the Puritans were very Jewish. They believed in having a full larder, taking a bath and cleaning the home before their Sabbath. And they understood this idea that it’s just not going to have that special quality unless you prepare for it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

We’ve talked here a lot about the theory and beauty of the imagined Sabbath. And then you try. And nothing in practice has ever made me feel less holier or less able to relax than trying to add a bunch of cooking, cleaning, social organizing, et cetera, to a Friday night when I still have a work week and two kids.

And so there’s this interesting tension between I can see it — I mean, I can read all this and I find it really beautiful, and then the actual question of — well, at least if you take the approach I’ve typically taken and try to jam it into a life not built for it — it doesn’t work.

Judith Shulevitz

It doesn't work. It's really true.

Ezra Klein

And it really has its way of revealing also the tensions and lack of space in your own life. I carry around a lot more Sabbath guilt than I do —

Judith Shulevitz

Right. Well, who doesn't.

Ezra Klein

— holiness. [LAUGHS]

Judith Shulevitz

So if you were an ultra Orthodox Jew, I think there would be aspects of it that you would chafe under, right? Everybody chafes under rules and regulations. Another reason I wrote this book is that I wanted to write about the Sabbath from the point of view of an American who innately is suspicious of rules and regulations, who fiercely wants to defend her individuality, who wants to be part of American society, didn't want to be separated from it.

But there are these contradictions. There's always going to be these conflicting impulses. And I write about how I'm fundamentally ambivalent toward the Sabbath because there's a lot of times I don't want to do it. And it can be as negative an experience as it can be a positive one.

But it's like anything else. It's like writing, for example. You sit down, you don't want to write, but you got to write. And there will be three hours when it's a slog and that one hour when your mind opens up, and you're in the flow, and you get it. You get why you've created the schedule where you have to sit at your desk from 9 to 1, or whatever it is, as unpleasant as that may be, as many conflicts as there may be.

And nothing good is easy. You have to work for it. You have to work not to work in this case. You have to work to get to the experience of flow, to get the experience to the experience of God, to get to that what Émile Durkheim, the sociologist — who, by the way, came from a family of rabbis — called effervescence, which is that collective joy. You're not always going to it. Now, if you can't ever like it, you're not going to do it.

Ezra Klein

But it gets back to something we were talking about earlier. It's a lot of work to create rest. And I don't mean that glibly. I think there's something very deep there. I mean, it gets to — I mean, Heschel talking about rest as a discipline. But a lot has to be true to find the space of tranquillity.

And the thing that comes to mind here is that we're not taught to do that. We're taught more about rest as a negation of other things. But do you find it to be true?

Judith Shulevitz

Absolutely. I find it to be true. And I find it to be particularly true in New York.

Ezra Klein

Why?

Judith Shulevitz

Because there's always this hubbub. There's always noise. People are always going somewhere. So the only time I've really found it to be a natural experience was in Israel where they really do have these Saturday closing laws, and there are fewer cars on the road, and there's less public transportation. And it's changing. But there is this kind of quietness in the street.

So you don't feel like you're fighting against society in the same way. And I think you are here. We have, essentially, lost this idea. Now, you have to remember that America is fundamentally a Sabbatarian nation. The Puritans founded this country, in part, so that they could keep their very strict sabbaths as they wanted to and as they felt they were unable to in England. They wanted to create these cities on a hill, these ideal communities.

And this theology, this attitude towards Sabbath really dominated for a couple of hundred years. And only in the 20th century have we lost it. We have stores open on Sunday. Everything is open. A lot of people are working.

Now, I don't want to say that I want to go back to the Sunday closing laws or the blue laws. But I do think that we have lost something important socially. So now it's even harder to create the space in our lives because everyone around us is working. So it just feels very odd.

So one of the great writers on the Sabbath is not someone you would have expected to be a big defender of the Sabbath, and he is a Jew. Felix Frankfurter, Supreme Court Justice, who was defending not Saturday, but Sunday, the American Sunday, in a famous 1961 case called *McGowan v. Maryland*, in which the majority of the court was upholding the legitimacy of Sunday closing laws against a First Amendment challenge.

And Frankfurter wrote a concurring decision, which is really one of the great Sabbatarian texts in my opinion. And he talked about Sunday and Sunday quietness on the streets, near the stores. He talked about it as a cultural asset of importance, a release from the daily grind, a preserve of mental peace, an opportunity for self-disposition. And he was saying this because he wanted to make the argument that it may have started as a religious institution, but it became a civic institution and it made our civitas a better society.

Ezra Klein

It makes me think of something that the technology writer L.M. Sacasas has written about. And he was writing about the context of metaverses, but he was making this point based on a lot of

the same thinkers you're talking about here that it is easy to miss how much more of our space has now been invaded by commerce than was true 100 years ago, than was true 50 years ago.

I order books to my Kindle in bed on my phone. I couldn't do that. I mean, I remember — I'm old enough to remember, if you wanted a book, you had to go to the library or to the bookstore, like actually do it. So you then had to read what you already had at home.

The internet makes commerce possible everywhere. We used to have the Sabbath laws, which I think would annoy me very much. [LAUGHS] But they did create space. And so it's not that we lost the laws. But phones and internet and technology has commercialized everything. I mean, it is always there.

And it's one of the ways in which Sabbath seems to me now to be a more urgent countercultural practice because there were things that space used to give us. You just weren't in a place where there was commerce, so there was no commerce. But now there is no place where there is no commerce. I mean, a mountaintop maybe. And so commerce is always possible and you're always in the mind of, oh, maybe I should just go grab that thing on Amazon.

And so if you can't escape in space, then the only possibility, if you think it is important — which I'm not 100 percent sure I do, but I suspect it is — to not have commerce be part of your life 24/7, then you can only escape in time, both as an individual practice, but more, as you're saying, traditionally, as a legal practice, a social practice. Sabbath has been an escape in time from commerce and from capitalism.

Judith Shulevitz

Yes, but note that I was also saying that it's a spatial escape. It is easier to stop shopping and the time in which you are shopping if it is not available to you immediately and if it can't come into your home.

Ezra Klein

And if other people look down on you for doing it.

Judith Shulevitz

Right. And if there's these social norms that you want to uphold because you perceive yourself as a member of a community. So yes, that's true. But I do think that one of the things that's happened is the idea of these firm boundaries around time has become an anachronism. It feels old-fashioned. It feels really weird.

The idea that you could only buy your books Monday through Saturday, 9 to 5, or whatever it was, that to you would just feel absurd. And it does to me, too. Increasingly, the idea of a boundary around time, as a boundary around consumption, a boundary around communication outside the home, they just feel bizarre. The internet, but especially the phone, is softening the boundaries around time.

We can constantly refine our plan to get together. There's nothing hard and fixed about it. And you know what, if I'm going to show up late, I can text you and say, I'm going to be late. Don't worry, I'm going to show up, but I'm going to be late.

Whereas, I'm old enough to remember a time when you had to make the plan, and unless you could get to a pay phone, if you weren't going to make it on time, you were going to suffer the social sanction of being the person who was really late. There was a hard and fixed time when you were supposed to get together.

So I think the very idea of these hard and fast limits between one kind of time and another kind of time, the time of consumption, the time of communication with somebody not in your own space, even the time of work — we've lost that. It's something we talk about a lot is this idea that flex time is great, but when you're working at home, you're kind of always working. It's really hard to figure out when to stop.

So I really think just the very idea — it sounds a little abstract — but the very idea of a hard and fast limit — light the candles at 4:10 in the winter or 7:15 in the spring or the summer. That idea is just bizarre. It doesn't even make sense.

Ezra Klein

How do you think about the times when some of these values conflict? So I had this lovely conversation with Susannah Heschel, Abraham Joshua Heschel's daughter, who's written a beautiful introduction to the current editions of that book. And she was making this point to me that part of what it means for people who truly keep the more orthodox Sabbath, that they live in walking distance of their synagogue, is that it means a community lives in walking distance of itself. The Sabbath community is spatially forced together and that makes community easier.

That is not how my community works. The people I love live further from me. If my sons are going to speak to their grandmothers on Saturday, it's going to require a phone or FaceTime or something. If we're going to see a bunch of our friends, it requires getting to them somehow. And there's the question of organizing that in a world where that's now how we organize.

And one of the things that's actually often kept me from doing real digital Sabbath is the feeling that community is important. And in order for community and family to be available in the life I have built, a certain amount of digitalness is intrinsic. How do you think about tensions like that?

Judith Shulevitz

Or if you read books on your Kindle, and if increasingly your books are on the Kindle or even your Jewish texts that you study from, then what do you do about that? That's why I'm not sure that digital Sabbath is really the solution. I do think that Jewish law is constantly updating itself.

You do have to make these value distinctions if you're going to come up with a modern Shabbat. You do have to say, OK, fine, calling mom so that my son can talk to mom, driving to synagogue — one of the great controversies of the mid-19th century and conservative Judaism or in

Judaism — can you drive to synagogue? Yes, you can drive to synagogue, but not to the mall. You have to make these distinctions and hold on to these values.

And again, just to flog a horse, you have to be part of a community where these distinctions are being made by other people as well. You know that you're not going to text your friend because that friend may, in fact, read your text, may, like you, not turn off your phone, but is not going to answer a text unless it pertains to something Shabbatistic, as we say. And so you create a set of distinctions.

It's not going to be as good as living within walking distance of your shul. And there are communities that do that. I used to live in Pelham, right near New Rochelle, where there was an Orthodox community. And they did all live within walking distance of their shul. And they paid jacked up real estate prices in order to do that. But there is that what I call screen door culture that you get from all living together. But you really have to move into a different world to do that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

I got the sense, reading your book, that early adult Shabbats for you were quite lonely, that you were somewhat alone in that practice. And I get the sense that stopped being true at a point. What kind of community did you find or build?

Judith Shulevitz

So I began, in my 20s, to just feel like there was something wrong on Saturday, and I didn't quite know what it was. I was doing what people who are out of college and starting their careers do. I was hanging out with the people I work with. I was having brunch. I was schmoozing. I was networking — I was really networking.

And those relationships felt very provisional, very contingent. It was not unconditional love. It was very conditional love. And they just didn't feel real to me. They started feeling unreal. And I started getting really depressed on those days.

And I was living with a high school friend of mine who I shouldn't have been so surprised, but I was surprised, was quite Christian. She was the daughter of a minister, so I shouldn't have been surprised. But she used to go to church on Sunday. And one day I said, Jane, can I go to church with you? And she said, no, you need to go to the synagogue down the street. So I started going to the synagogue. And luckily, it appealed to my sense of nostalgia. It was very old world. And I just would sit there for, I think, a year. I would just sit there and I would listen to these tunes that I was familiar with, but couldn't remember the words of the tunes.

And I would be really sad and sometimes I would cry. And there was something real about feeling that sadness. With psychoanalysis, when you're feeling a sadness, suddenly you get to feel it. A space has been created to feel it.

And only after quite a long period of time did I send out the signals that I was someone you could invite home. And people started inviting me home to lunch after shul, or if I went on a Friday, to Shabbos dinner. And I got to know a lot of people who were very different from me, though, in some ways the same in that they were Jewish.

But they were older. They were married couples with kids, which I didn't have and I didn't know that many people who did. There were refugees from orthodoxy, a number of women in this particular shul who were refugees from orthodoxy. There were settled down gay and lesbian couples, which was, at the time, not the norm to have an effective gay or lesbian marriage.

I would have these moments of thinking, what am I doing? I've become middle aged before I'm middle age. I don't even know what I'm doing here. But I really appreciated this idea that I was with a group of people who were forming a community based around something they did together, which is searching for this quality of a real community, real experiences that were not work by other means, which is what my social life really was at the time. And there were these meals together. There was study, which I discovered I loved. But it took me a long time.

Ezra Klein

Let me ask you from a different stage of life, which is, I think, in a quite cliché way, a lot of this has been on my mind as I've become a father. But it's much harder to do [LAUGHS] with a four-year-old and a one-year-old because they're not into creating a tranquil, peaceful repose. And they're a little bit hard to order around and to — they don't sit through the dinner and so on.

And it's really been puzzling to me because I've become most interested in the idea at the moment when it seems hardest to do. How did it work or how have you seen it work for young families? I mean, so much of Shabbat is about being able to have, it seems to me, control of a space and time. And nothing is more inimical to that than little kids.

Judith Shulevitz

I'm going to challenge the idea of control.

Ezra Klein

Sure.

Judith Shulevitz

Because you're creating a space, you're creating an agenda. There's going to be a meal. Maybe there's going to be services. But you're not going to have control over it. In fact, control is what you're giving up, right? That's what the whole point of these laws about work and not work are.

So you are coming to people where they are, including your own children. And yeah, it's a lot of work to find things to do with these kids. Say you do turn things off, right? Say you don't drive to wherever it is that the playground is, right? I live in a city. You can walk to the playground, but not always. So maybe you're stuck in a house.

What do you do with these kids? Well, you just get through it the way that parents have for millennia. The Orthodox come up with these toys that you can play with that aren't beeping and loud, that are LEGOs, for example, Magna-Tiles.

If you go to services — for me, there were five years in which I was not in services. I was there for the meal they serve after called the Kiddush because I couldn't be in services. Eventually, there was a baby — I found one that had a babysitter and so I could go in. But it didn't — when they were really little, it didn't work.

But you are not necessarily resting, which is why I think the idea of menuha should be expanded to include something that can be very chaotic, like being with your kids. But think about the fact that you are with your kids. Your child is not playing on his device. His attention, even if he's bored — I personally think being bored is a good thing for children to be.

His attention is going to be on you. Oh my god, what a burden, right? That's terrible. Why do I have to entertain this child 24/7? Well, after a while, he will learn to entertain himself in a different way, in a way that isn't programmed to addict him to it. Maybe he'll spend a lot more time reading. Maybe they'll go to services and they'll come in contact with people who aren't like you but have things to teach them.

And you're doing it for the future. You're doing it to implant the seed that maybe they will forget when they go to college or get to high school and go to college and enter the workforce. But when they have children, they'll do it, too.

Ezra Klein

I think that's a nice place to end. Always our final question. What are three books you would recommend to the audience?

Judith Shulevitz

Well, I was going to recommend Heschel, but I am going to skip that because we've talked about it a lot.

Ezra Klein

I recommend Heschel. You should all —

Judith Shulevitz

Yes.

Ezra Klein

— you should all check that out.

Judith Shulevitz

You should all read — yeah, "The Sabbath." I mean, you talked about him being a prophet. When I say that, I mean he had the language, he had the poetry to address people like you and

me, not the already observant, not the converted, but the people who need to hear what he has to say.

So I would say that the first book I recommend is by George Eliot. So that's the nom de plume of Mary Ann Evans. And her most famous novel — you've probably heard of it — is "Middlemarch." But her first novel was called "Adam Bede." And it's from 1859. And it's an incredible novel with what we would now call a feminist plot.

But it's also set in an English village, in the turn of the 19th century, which is important because it's pre-industrial. So she devotes an entire chapter to describing a pre-industrial Sabbath in a small English village. And it's just gorgeous. And you really get a sense of why people would do this and what they did.

I want to say that I really think it's important to remember that the Christian Sabbath was — numerically more people observe the Christian Sabbath than the Jewish Sabbath, because there were more Christians in the world. Another thing that's really great about this book is almost everything that matters that happens in the book happens on Sunday. Because why? That's when life happened among people. So that's the first book.

The second book I would recommend is called "The Seven Day Circle." And it's by a sociologist who actually invented something I draw on heavily in my book called "the sociology of time." His name is Eviatar Zerubavel. He's American, though. He has an Israeli name. But he did grow up in Israel and he talked about experiencing these pauses for Jewish holidays and for the Sabbath. And it's what led him to sociology of time.

But "The Seven Day Circle" is the definitive history of the week. Heschel talks about there being an architecture of time. But he doesn't really flesh that out, because he's really writing poetry. So Zerubavel rigorously lays it out for you, the history of these temporal structures that make up a week and how they affect you.

And the third book I would recommend is by a young journalist named Emily Guendelsberger. And it's called, "On the Clock: What Low Wage Work Did to Me and How It Drives America Insane." So what she did is she took jobs at an Amazon warehouse, a call center and a McDonald's. And she discovered what these jobs take out of you. And one of the things she discovers — it's not the main focus of her book, but it's a big part of it — is what it's like to work these on-demand jobs, work on these on-demand schedules.

For example, when she was filling out her application to Amazon, they told her on this form she had to be willing to work nights, weekends, holidays, and over time on immediate demand with no notice. And she talks about families that never see one another. Husband and wife who work different shifts, who maybe pass each other on a Monday night. So I think it's a really good portrait of what the decalibrated nature of our just-in-time economy does to people.

Ezra Klein

Judith Shulevitz, thank you very much.

Judith Shulevitz

Thank you. [MUSIC PLAYING]

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