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sabbath

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Abby Ayers

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mudhouse sabbath

An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline

lauren f. winner



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The names and identifying details of a few of the people who appear in these pages have been changed.

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To Vanessa Ochs,
who makes these conversations possible.
Chazak, chazak.

introduction

If you call my friend Molly and no one is home, you will be greeted by an answering machine that asks, in the voice of Molly's six-year-old son, that you "please tell us your story."

Here's my story, in a nutshell: I grew up at a synagogue in a small college town in Virginia. (Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, to be precise.) At sixteen, I went off to college in New York City. And then, near the end of college, I converted to Christianity. A few years later I moved back to the small college town in Virginia. Now I worship at a gray stone church that boasts a lovely rose window and a breaking-down organ and the most dedicated team of Sunday-school teachers in the South. Here at Christ Episcopal Church, I understand what people mean when they toss around that phrase "my church home." Christ Episcopal

Church, incidentally, is exactly two blocks away from Congregation Beth Israel.

It is now going on seven years since I converted from Judaism to Christianity, and I am still in that blissed-out newlywed stage in which you can't believe your good fortune and you know that this person (in this case Jesus) whom you have chosen (or, in this case, who has chosen you) is the best person on the whole planet and you wouldn't take all the tea in China or a winning Lotto ticket or even a nice country estate in exchange.

Still, I miss Jewish ways. I miss the rhythms and routines that drew the sacred down into the everyday. I miss Sabbaths on which I actually rested. I have even found that I miss the drudgery of keeping kosher. I miss the work these practices effected between me and God.



This is a book about those things I miss. It is about Sabbaths and weddings and burials and prayers, rituals Jews and

Christians both observe, but also rituals we observe quite differently. It is about paths to the God of Israel that both Jews and Christians travel. It is, to be blunt, about spiritual practices that Jews do better. It is, to be blunter, about Christian practices that would be enriched, that would be thicker and more vibrant, if we took a few lessons from Judaism. It is ultimately about places where Christians have some things to learn.

Jews do these things with more attention and wisdom not because they are more righteous nor because God likes them better, but rather because doing, because action, sits at the center of Judaism. Practice is to Judaism what belief is to Christianity. That is not to say that Judaism doesn't have dogma or doctrine. It is rather to say that for Jews, the essence of the thing is a doing, an action. Your faith might come and go, but your practice ought not waver. (Indeed, Judaism suggests that the repeating of the practice is the best way to ensure that a doubter's faith will return.) This is perhaps best explained by a *midrash* (a rabbinic commentary on a biblical text). This

midrash explains a curious turn of phrase in the Book of Exodus: “*Na’aseh v’nishma*,” which means “we will do and we will hear” or “we will do and we will understand,” a phrase drawn from Exodus 24, in which the people of Israel proclaim “All the words that God has spoken, we will do and we will hear.” The word order, the rabbis have observed, doesn’t seem to make any sense: How can a person obey God’s commandment before they hear it? But the counterintuitive lesson, the *midrash* continues, is precisely that one acts out God’s commands, one does things unto God, and eventually, through the doing, one will come to hear and understand and believe. In this *midrash*, the rabbis have offered an apology for spiritual practice, for doing.



“Spiritual practice” is a phrase that means what it says. Madeline L’Engle once likened spiritual practice to piano etudes: You do not necessarily enjoy the etudes—you want to skip right ahead to the sonatas and concertos—but if you don’t work

through the etudes you will arrive at the sonatas and not know what to do. So, too, with the spiritual life. It's not all about mountaintops. Mostly it's about training so that you'll know the mountaintop for what it is when you get there.

All religions have spiritual practices. Buddhists burn sage and meditate. Muslims avail themselves of their prayer rugs. Christian tradition has developed a wealth of practices, too: fasting, almsgiving, vigil-keeping, confessing, meditating. True enough, Christians in America—especially Protestants in America—have not historically practiced those practices with much discipline, but that is beginning to change. In churches and homes everywhere people are increasingly interested in *doing* Christianity, not just speaking or believing it. Here is the place where so-called Jewish-Christian relations become practical. If the church wants to grow in its attendance to, in its doing of things for the God of Israel, we might want to take a few tips from the Jewish community.

There are, of course, some key differences between how Jews and Christians understand

the doing of practice (differences that are perhaps most succinctly captured with Paul's words: "Christ, and him crucified"). The Jewish practices I wish to translate into a Christian idiom are binding upon Jews. Jews are obligated to fulfill the particularities of Mosaic law. They don't light Sabbath candles simply because candles make them feel close to God, but because God commanded the lighting of candles. Closeness might be a nice by-product, but it is not the point.

Christians will understand candle-lighting a little differently. Spiritual practices don't justify us. They don't save us. Rather, they refine our Christianity; they make the inheritance Christ gives us on the Cross more fully our own. The spiritual disciplines—such as regular prayer, and fasting, and tithing, and attentiveness to our bodies—can form us as Christians throughout our lives. Are we obligated to observe these disciplines? Not generally, no. Will they get us into heaven? They will not.

Practicing the spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians. Instead, the practicing teaches us what it means to live as

Christians. (There is an etymological clue here—*discipline* is related to the word *disciple*.) The ancient disciplines form us to respond to God, over and over always, in gratitude, in obedience, and in faith. Herewith, a small book of musings on and explorations in those practices.

Na'aseh v'nishma.

shabbat one sabbath

Recently, at a used bookstore, I came across Nan Fink's memoir *Stranger in the Midst*, the story of her conversion to Judaism. She describes the preparations she and her soon-to-be-husband made for Shabbat:

On Friday afternoon, at the very last minute, we'd rush home, stopping at the grocery to pick up supplies. Flying into the kitchen we'd cook ahead for the next twenty-four hours. Soup and salad, baked chicken, yams and applesauce for dinner, and vegetable cholent or lasagna for the next day's lunch. Sometimes I'd think how strange it was to be in such a frenzy to get ready for a day of rest.

Shabbat preparations had their own rhythm, and once the table was set and the house straightened, the pace began to slow. “It’s your turn first in the shower,” I’d call to Michael. “Okay, but it’s getting late,” he’d answer, concerned about starting Shabbat at sunset.

In the bathroom I’d linger at the mirror, examining myself, stroking the little lines on my face, taking as much time as I could to settle into a mood of quietness. When I joined Michael and his son for the lighting of the candles, the whole house seemed transformed. Papers and books were neatly piled, flowers stood in a vase on the table, and the golden light of the setting sun filled the room. . . .

Shabbat is like nothing else. Time as we know it does not exist for these twenty-four hours, and the worries of the week soon fall away. A feeling of joy appears. The smallest object, a leaf or a spoon, shimmers in a soft light, and the heart opens. Shabbat is a meditation of unbelievable beauty.

I was sitting with a cup of hot chai in a red velvet chair at the Mudhouse, a coffee

shop in Charlottesville, when I read that passage. It was a Sunday afternoon. I had attended church in the morning, then cleaned out my car, then read *Those Can-Do Pigs* with my friend's two-year-old twins, and eventually wended my way down to the Mudhouse for chai and a half hour with a good book. It was not an ordinary workday, and I did feel somewhat more relaxed than I would on Monday morning. But it was not Shabbat. Nan Fink nailed it: Shabbat is like nothing else. And Shabbat is, without question, the piece of Judaism I miss the most.

It is also the piece I should most easily be able to keep. A yearning to, say, observe the Jewish new year, or a desire to hear the Torah chanted in Hebrew: Those things might be harder to incorporate into a Christian life. But the Sabbath! The Sabbath is a basic unit of Christian time, a day the Church, too, tries to devote to reverence of God and rest from toil. And yet here a Sunday afternoon finds me sitting in a coffee shop, spending money, scribbling in the margins of my book, very much in "time as we know it,"

not at all sure that I have opened my heart in any particular way.



God first commands the Sabbath to the Jewish people in Exodus, with the initial revelation of the Ten Commandments, and then again in Deuteronomy. The two iterations are similar, though not identical. In Exodus God says, “*Remember* the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” whereas in Deuteronomy He enjoins us to “*observe* the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, God elaborates upon this simple instruction, noting in Exodus 35, for example, that no fire should be kindled on Shabbat, and in Isaiah 66 that on the Sabbath, the faithful should “come to worship before me.”

There are, in Judaism, two types of commandments (*mitzvot*): the *mitzvot asei*, or the “Thou shalts,” and the *mitzvot lo ta’aseh*, or the “Thou shalt nots.” Sabbath observance comprises both. You are commanded, principally, to be joyful and restful on Shabbat, to hold great feasts, sing happy

hymns, dress in your finest. Married couples even get rabbinical brownie points for having sex on the Sabbath.

And then, of course, are the *mitzvot lo ta'aseh*. The cornerstone of Jewish Sabbath observance is the prohibition of work in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5: "You shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you." Over time, the rabbis teased out of the text just what the prohibition on work meant, first identifying thirty-nine categories of activities to be avoided on Shabbat, and then fleshing out the implications of those thirty-nine (if one is not to light a fire, for example, one also ought not handle matches or kindling).

It's easy to look at the Jewish Sabbath as a long list of thou shalt nots: Don't turn on lights; don't drive; don't cook; don't carry a pair of scissors anywhere at all (for if you carry them you might be tempted to use them, and cutting is also forbidden on Shabbat); it's okay to carry a stone or a sweater or a scarf, but only inside your own

house, not out onto the street and then into the house of another; don't plan for the week ahead; don't write a sonnet or a sestina or a haiku; don't even copy down a recipe; and while you are allowed to sing, you shouldn't play a musical instrument, and of course you mustn't turn on a radio or a record player. What all this boils down to (and boiling is another thing you cannot do on Shabbat) is *do not create*. Do not create a casserole or a Valentine card or a symphony or a pot of coffee. Do not create anything at all, for one of the things the Sabbath reprises is God's rest after He finished creating.

One of the finest explanations I know of the Orthodox Sabbath comes from Lis Harris's *Holy Days*, a journalistic ethnography of a Hasidic family in Crown Heights, New York. Harris, a secular Jew, has come to Crown Heights to spend Shabbat with the Konigsbergs. She is perplexed, and a little annoyed, by all the restrictions. Over dinner, she asks her hosts why God cares whether or not she microwaves a frozen dinner on Friday night. "What happens when we stop working and controlling nature?" Moishe

Konigsberg responds. “When we don’t operate machines, or pick flowers, or pluck fish from the sea? . . . When we cease interfering in the world we are acknowledging that it is God’s world.”



I remember, from my Jewish days, the language we used to name the Sabbath. We spoke of the day as *Shabbat haMalka*, the Sabbath Queen, and we sang hymns of praise on Friday night that welcomed the Sabbath as a bride. It is something of this reverence, and this celebration, that is missing from my Sabbaths now.

I remember the end of Shabbat, Saturday night. By the time Saturday night rolls around, part of you is eager to hop in your car and race to a movie, go out dancing, sip a late-night espresso. But still, even after a full day of Shabbat rest and even Shabbat toe-tapping boredom (because, let’s face it, occasionally Shabbat gets dull), even then you are sad to see Shabbat go. You mark the end of Shabbat with a ceremony called