

The Shabbat Idea: Human *Doing* vs. Human *Being*  
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It's amazing what we can learn from our best-selling gadgets. Consider the "smartphone." My first "smartphone" was a Palm Treo, and what surprised me most about the Palm Treo was, in fact, not all of the really cool features that it had, it was one feature that it lacked: a devoted off-button. It disabled the phone-connection, but the rest of the computer, including my calendar, contacts, and tasks remain on, wide-awake, and inviting me into my To-Do-List.

In the year 2010 alone, there were 300 million smartphones sold, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2011, there were 107 million—meaning, the number is only growing. The most popular of these smartphones is, of course, the iPhone (and "if you don't have an iPhone, well, you don't have an iPhone.") The iPhone, like most of these smartphones, also lacks a devoted off-button. In order to turn it off, you have to actually *work* for it: you have to hold down a button for a little while and wait for further instruction. It claims to have a power button, but if you push it once it just makes a clicking noise and pretends to be off. That's not an off-button, that's just "taking a nap."

We live in a world that's losing its off-buttons, and *we* are losing our naps. It all breaks down to the number 7. But first, a story.

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In the summer of 2007, I was a chaplain in a hospice/end of life care unit. In the morning of my first day of clinical work, I received a note: Room 7, Mr. Green. Mr. Green had just lost his father who was 98. When I entered the room, I saw his father on the bed and Mr. Green next to him. Mr Green's eyes were sore with grief; he was still holding his father's hand. Right away he asked me a question: "*What do I do now, chaplain?*" New to this role, I asked myself the same question: "what do *I* do?" Before I could even respond, Mr. Green's daughter arrived. The two embraced; she glanced toward her grandfather, shed a tear, and asked her father, "*what do we do now, dad?*" Overwhelmed with sorrow, she did what she felt she had to do: she took out her Palm Treo and stepped out of the room to make calls. She kept herself busy—a very normal initial reaction to grief.

This early encounter of mine was one of many in which I observed this human habit of *constantly doing*, as it creeps into our lives in the most significant moments. It is the habit of *doing* that can turn a sacred wedding into a business party, or a comfortable home into a 24-hour office. Living in today's world, we all have experienced first-hand, how our constant "doing" interferes with the all-too-neglected practice of *being*. *Being* with a wedding couple, being with family, being with our selves—*just being* in the myriad moments of our busy, limited lives.

Our tradition has much to say about these two categories—*being* verses *doing*. To a culture that lacks off-buttons, Judaism responds with the number 7.

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In the beginning, there was the number 7. 7 words in the first verse of the Torah: *B'reishit Bara Elohim Eyt HaShamayim v'Eyt Ha-Aretz* (in the beginning, God created heaven and earth). These first 7 words of Torah tell of the creation of heaven and earth—with the number 7, our universe begins. For 6 days, God engages in the important work of *doing*, and on the 7<sup>th</sup>, God stops, making that day... separate.

Historically, the 7-day week is a Jewish invention, and the idea of a 7<sup>th</sup> day of rest emerged as a radical response to oppressive labor conditions. Shabbat is the result of a national liberation movement. It's not just a Jewish *rule* about what we can and can't do on a certain day, it is also a Jewish *concept*, an *idea*—an ethical legacy. At the core of our age-old Jewish story is the memory that *avadim hayinu*—we were slaves—deprived of a day of rest, and then liberated.

Tragically, we live in a world that, by and large, is not. According to The American Anti-Slavery group, 27 million people are enslaved around the world—as many as 17,000 in our own United States are trafficked annually. In this “Land of the Free” alone, slavery is estimated to yield profits of 9 billion dollars a year. As Charles Jacobs, President of iAbolish.org explains:

Modern-day slavery does not fit our familiar images of shackles, whips, and auctions....

Though the vast majority are no longer sold at public auctions, today's slaves are often no better off than their more familiar predecessors.

Ben Skinner, senior fellow at Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis, in his book *A Crime So Monstrous*, investigates the negotiations behind the selling of human beings in four continents. He tells the stories of modern-day slaves, survivors, traffickers, and abolitionists. Skinner observes that there are more slaves in the world today than ever before. He witnessed this with his own eyes. But as a percentage of the world population, there have never been fewer. Skinner therefore insists that "within a generation, we have the potential to wipe the crime from the face of the earth.

*Avadim Hayinu*, we were their predecessors. We, as inheritors of the Shabbat concept, are strongly connected to the millions of people who are living in our nightmare memory. The fruits of their labor are the clothing on our backs, the coffee in our pots, the diamonds on our fingers. Now is the time to remember that in the beginning there was the number 7.

And there have been 7 throughout: Lev. 25 instructs that every 7<sup>th</sup> year is a Sabbatical year for the land, a year of complete rest. This 7<sup>th</sup> year is known as the *Shemita* year—*shemita* means *rest* or *release*. In a *Shemita* year, the land must be free of cultivation or harvesting.... an “ancient expression of the Sabbath idea” (Rabbi Gunther Plaut). Even the land deserves the number 7.

We can translate this in any number of ways: Are we actively pursuing alternative energy resources? Weaning off of oil, lessening our world-leading carbon emissions? Protecting wildlife? Managing waste?

And the concept of *Shemita*, of not working the land all the time, also informs our productive lives as well. According to the Harvard Business Review, workaholicism is on the rise, particularly

among high-earning individuals, the vast majority of whom now work more than 50 hours a week. According to the American Institute of Stress, Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems. It compromises the immune system; it can lead to depression, anxiety, and even psychosomatic issues. It can strain or ruin relationships with family and friends.

And it's actually economically harmful as well: the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that Healthcare costs are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.

Though for most of us a sabbatical may be out of the question, perhaps a more reasonable possibility might be a year in which we don't work ourselves sick, a year for us to breathe, to focus on the off-buttons: taking our lunch breaks, exploring this beautiful city of ours, taking care of our bodies, and of course, spending time with our loved ones.

In fact, one of our goals in Riverway is to help each other carve out the time and space to do just this: To *unplug* from the rest of our stressful, busy lives and connect—to *plug in*—to our best selves, to each other, to community, to tradition or spirituality—let's just call that stuff, "Judaism." We are here to connect 20's and 30's to... the number 7.

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Returning now to the hospital---to Mr. Green and his father and daughter.... When Mr. Green's daughter returned to the room, after making her calls, Mr. Green reached out for her hand and drew her near. He placed her hand on the still hand of his father's. Mr. Green was teaching his daughter how to turn off her Palm Treo and instead hold her grandfather's hand. Mr. Green and his daughter had become *human beings* rather than *human doings*, as they said their goodbye. I quietly left the room. There was nothing left to be done.

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We are now at the culmination of the number 7: There were 7 days in between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. These days are designed to represent Life. This entire period of the Days of Awe, is a microcosm of our lifetime, with Rosh HaShanah as the beginning, Yom Kippur as the end. On Rosh HaShanah we eat apples and honey, we celebrate Creation. On Yom Kippur we don't eat or drink, we don't wash or brush, some traditionally dress in burial garb.

During this Kol Nidre service, in accordance with tradition, we removed the Torah from the *aron kodesh*, the *holy ark*, during the chanting of *kol nidre*. When the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark, is without a Torah it transforms from being an *aron kodesh*, to simply an "*aron*"—the Hebrew word not only for "ark" but also meaning, "coffin." With our bare humanness on our minds and our vulnerability in our hearts, we stand before the open *aron*, an open casket, and face our mortal selves. The staging of a spiritual near-death experience.

To some this may sound morbid, but perhaps to many of us it may sound familiar, reminding us of these words spoken by one of the great geniuses of our age, who said this:

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.... Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you....”

The author of these words is Steve Jobs, of blessed memory.

Yom Kippur embodies this message. Because unlike the day of our death, at the end of Yom Kippur, the Shofar is sounded—we awaken, and are pulled out of the depths. We eat, we nourish our bodies, and we are pushed forward to another week, another month, another year, with a new perspective on Life itself. Rosh HaShanah is the beginning, Yom Kippur is the end, and in the middle there are 7. Yom Kippur is referred to as “the Sabbath of all Sabbaths,” a day in which we *commit* to acting less like “human doings” and more like “human beings.”

It is now time to commit. In Hebrew, the word for “commit” is *nishba*, at the core of which are three letters *shin*, *vet*, and *ayin*: *spelling the number 7*. When we *nishba*, take an oath, we “commit to the number 7”:

- To the works of creation, the delicate pieces of our natural world, we *nishba*, we *commit*.
- To those who are deprived of their freedom, longing for the Sabbath ideal, we *nishba*, we *commit*,
- To those around us, family and friends who fill our lives with love, we *nishba*, we *commit*,
- We stand together on this day with the limited time that we have been given, and the presence—*the being*—with which we are blessed, and we *nishba*, we *commit*.

May we—as human *beings*—find the paths toward sacred rest and renewal, the hidden “off-buttons” aching to be pushed, and may we open ourselves and our world to the sacred blessing of peace: the Shabbat that is the only way to Shalom.