

Shabbat Evangelism for a New Generation

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Shabbat is the gift that keeps on giving. I don't know about you, but my life often operates at what feels like an accelerated rate. Sometimes I am not sure I can keep up. I am grateful to PJ Library for inviting me to write this—forcing me to carve time out of my workweek to reflect on the sanctity that I find in my weekend.

Professor Dan Ariely, an Israeli-born behavioral economist at Duke University, speaks about Shabbat in the context of ego-depletion and replenishment, which resonates for me. Ego-depletion refers to the exhaustion we feel every time we have to make a major decision. Even contemplating a major decision is exhausting. Sound familiar? Without time off from decision-making, we cannot replenish our egos.

Enter Shabbat.

A fixed time each week where I have the license, or the obligation, to live in the present. To set my work and political stress aside and chill out—just for a few hours. I am not naturally inclined to sit still. Ever. But the timing of Shabbat is not up to me; it's coming every Friday night, ready or not. My family expects Shabbat dinner, and for us that means a white tablecloth, challah, and a simple dinner of fish, greens, and “Shabbat potatoes” (a.k.a. roasted). It means we are all looking at and talking with each other—no other appointments, no homework, no work-work, and you don't even have to eat your veggies to get dessert.

I have become a Shabbat-evangelist. I am a true believer. Now I devote my time and energy

to understanding and helping overcome barriers to Shabbat practice for the reportedly “most stressed out and lonely generation in America”: millennials.

Simply put, they might be the ones who need Shabbat the most—for the connections, the comfort of ritual, and the stress relief. According to the Pew Research Center, those in this age group “have fewer attachments to traditional religious institutions, but they connect to personalized networks of friends, colleagues, and affinity groups through social and digital media.”

These are the pre-PJ Library folks, exploring different ways of living meaningfully, making their first “adult Jewish decisions” about personal practice. It turns out that thousands of young adults who aspire to host Shabbat dinners get stuck on rudimentary hospitality concerns like, “What should I serve?” or “How do I pace the meal?” or “How do I get my guests to actually show up?”

How might we provide hosts and guests with the tools to make Shabbat dinner part of their lives while lowering barriers to participation, making it more appealing and achievable for young Jewish adults? If Shabbat is so good, how do we encourage this generation to embrace it and make it their own?

Millennials time-shift most things, rarely working 9-5 or watching TV shows at a fixed time; they access what they need when it's most convenient. Shabbat is counter-cultural, it's special, and it's fixed. That “fixedness” can provide a relief to young adults constantly

making choices about how to spend their time. Friday night = Shabbat dinner. Phew.

And it's becoming a thing. This past February, Shabbat dinner was featured in *Vogue* magazine no less, with young adults extolling the virtues of sacred time: “Shabbat—the concept of spending quality time with friends and family while taking a break from scrolling on Instagram—is for everyone. It is an ancient antidote to our modern ailments.”

This sentiment echoes findings that our team at OneTable have gleaned from young adults who are creating their own Friday night dinner communities.

Take it from Julie, a 32-year-old host living in southern California:

“I've recently started attending Shabbat dinners with a group of friends, and have hosted one of my own. I had pretty much abandoned the thought of being religiously involved, until these recent Shabbat dinners. It's so nice to feel a part of something so joyful. We sing, we pray, we talk, we relate. Where so many of us have left our families behind to pursue our dreams in Los Angeles, Shabbat has given me a sense of home, community, and quite unexpectedly, spirituality.”

What happens when volunteer hosts create their own welcoming, enjoyable, and memorable dinners for their peers? Imagine a movement of thousands of young adults, feeling like they not only have a place at the table (literally and figuratively) but that they can create this space for others. OneTable, like our peers at PJ Library, Moishe House, and Hillel, offers a model based on trusting the people we serve to

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create meaningful moments for themselves and others while offering structure, support, and encouragement.

So far so good. With more than 70,000 seats at more than 5,000 Shabbat dinners in just under three years, it turns out that Shabbat is indeed catching on—and is good for you. Since participating in Shabbat dinners, 37% of hosts and guests have done something special on Friday to end the workweek; 33% have found new ways to connect with friends; and 25% have become more mindful of how they spend their time on weekends.

According to Jennifer Miller of *Bloomberg Businessweek* (pjfor.me/sellingjudaism), “If there ever was a moment when Shabbat was poised to become the new yoga practice, it's now.”

The idea of Shabbat becoming as popular and accessible as yoga for this generation of emerging adults is reassuring. It's one of Judaism's most prized and easily shared possessions.

Thank God Friday is just a couple of days away. For me it will bring a pause and a chance to breathe, enjoy time with my favorite people, and feel grateful for the gift of Shabbat.