

**“Turning Mistakes into Triumphs”**  
**March 6, 2010 / 20 Adar 5770**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

You might not have noticed but we have many different congregations in our one community. We have some who come for the learning, some who come for the social events, some come for holidays and some come for worship. Within the worship crowd, we have an even smaller breakdown. We have some who come only for the high holidays, some who are weekday attendees and some who just come on Shabbat. Then within the Shabbat crowd, we have distinct Friday night people and purely Shabbat morning people. I would like to offer an apology beforehand to the very small segment of people who are Friday night and Shabbat morning people. For the first few years of my rabbinate at Har Zion Temple, I often spoke of the value of Shabbat for many weeks, and what I meant by many weeks is every week. The phrase “just 25 hours” became my mantra. I think it worked because we have many who have taken Shabbat much more seriously. My apology comes because I have often shared the following idea and I am sorry you now have to hear it again.

Growing up in an observant home, Shabbat was part of our week. There was no negotiating, the likes of which I hear all of the time from my own children today. No arguments about going out Friday night, no discussions about having to go to *shul* or not, and as some have heard many times before, there was often a conversation between my parents on Thursday night that changed slightly as we grew. When we were little, my father would ask my mother, what she was making for *Shabbos*. Would there be chicken or a roast? Would there be *chulent*? As we got a little older and my mother went back to work outside the home, the conversation changed to who was making *Shabbos*. Growing up in what was then an attempt at an egalitarian home, my father would feign an attempt at making *Shabbos*. When that really never worked out, the question changed one more time. The final iteration of the question had morphed from, “What were we having for *Shabbos* – to who was making *Shabbos* – to who was buying *Shabbos*.” As if it was possible to buy Shabbat. As if you could go into a store and purchase *Shabbos*.

However, the meaning was obvious. Shabbat dinner could be purchased, but making *Shabbos* dinner would take more of a commitment. If the commitment, determination and promise to make Shabbat a priority is not fully engaged, the first challenge that comes along will most certainly see its disintegration. I remember the years of public school conflicts that I had to reconcile with Shabbat, the dances, the ball games, the track meets, and the club outings. Each brought a sense of urgency and a test to my observance but all along the way and with each new excuse, my parents stood fast. They stood strong and unified in their boundary. Each time either my brothers or I waged a battle, they brought the same consistent answer, “We are sorry but you cannot go to the dance, you cannot do that sport or you cannot miss Friday night dinner.” On the rare occasion when they had gone away for the weekend and left us with our grandmothers, they were equally resolute. Not only did it take a congregation of people who would see us at those varied events, it took generations of parents and grandparents to enforce the commitment. Shabbat was no different whether we were at home or on vacation, whether we were in my grandparents’ home or my parents’. The same is true today of our children. When this week’s Torah reading speaks of Shabbat, it uses the words *l’dorotam brit alom*, for generations it must remain covenant.

Please turn to page 529; chapter 31, verses 16 and 17 of the Book of Exodus in your Humashim. You will find two sentences with which you might already be familiar because the same two sentences make an appearance in our prayer book a number of times. Before we look at the words and where they are found in the prayer book, let's glance at the very next chapter and see the context in which this mandate is offered. No sooner is Shabbat given as a primary gift and a symbol of the promise of loyalty between God and the Jewish people, when the people turn to Aaron and ask him to build the golden calf.

When the people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down the mountain, they turned to Aaron and asked him to build a god. Moses, the man who had brought them out of Egypt, was gone and they had no idea what happened to him. Instead of Aaron standing firm and remaining committed to what Moses and God had worked so hard for, it was the connection between this people and the one true God – God Almighty – that leads them to build the golden calf, the single greatest act of infidelity in the entire Torah. Although this sounds like I'm blaming Aaron, the truth is this story has plenty of blame to go around. Don't get me wrong, this was the perfect storm. Moses, God, Aaron and the Jewish people each have their role in this, and each missed an opportunity. This is how colossal mistakes can happen. They can also happen to us. When God becomes enraged, He says, "I am going to destroy this people," and Moses says, "I am done with them." Aaron is ashamed of himself and the people are incredibly embarrassed. The emotions run deep. Moses sums it up best in verse 25 on page 535. He saw that the people were out of control and that Aaron had let them get out of control. The rift had been created and the divide was wide. Moses smashes the tablets and then they melt down the golden calf. Then Moses turns to God and essentially asks, "OK, now what? To which God responds, "OK, now we start over. We write a new contract."

Now we can look back at the text which is my focus for this morning. *V'shamru*. Again it is found on page 529 verses 16 and 17. Please look in your prayer book to see how it is used. These two sentences are used three different times to inspire us. First, Friday night just before the *Amidah* on page 34; then Shabbat morning in the middle of the *Shaharit Amidah* on page 117; and then on page 315 as part of the *Kiddush* we offer in our homes after we return from services this morning. Each time we say these words, we understand the need to guard the observance of Shabbat carefully because we must insure the continuum of continuity of religious survival through Shabbat. Not only do we recognize the important commitment God has made to us, we realize we must reciprocate and on the backdrop of the story of the golden calf, we realize the urgency of this relationship.

In an effort to encourage more people to continue their serious Torah-based study, I have often remarked that to understand the Torah you have to know the entire Torah. Today I add to that statement, to understand prayer and the transformative capacity of our liturgy, you have to know Torah. You have to know the allusions, the references and the context of the Torah, and then the weight of the biblical text will overlay the incredible insight of the liturgy. That is what is going on here.

Each time we utter the words of *V'shamru*, you can't help but feel and remember the story of the golden calf and all that it represents. Because of their proximity in the Biblical narrative, we can't help but place them in juxtaposition with each other. If the golden calf is about infidelity, then Shabbat is about the passionate love affair between God and the Jewish people. If the golden calf is about a moment of betrayal, then Shabbat is about eternal commitment.

The words of *V'shamru* asks us “to observe Shabbat.” We can’t go backwards and undo every mistake we made. We can’t change the past, but we can affect the future and we can decide not to make the same mistakes twice. *V'shamru* teaches us “to maintain it as an everlasting covenant through all generations.” If we are going to make commitments they have to be lasting. In the face of the missteps we take, we are energized to make promises about how we will never do that again. The assurance comes with time. Week after week we must reaffirm that promise. *V'shamru* teaches us, “It is a sign between us, God’s people, and God for all time.” If we want a relationship with God then we need reminders. If we are going to maintain any bond, we need reminders of the love with which we embarked on that relationship. For those who are married, it may be a wedding ring, for God and the Jewish people it is Shabbat. *V'shamru* wants us to remember that, “in six days God made heaven and earth and on the seventh day God rested.” Mistakes happen in just a second of misjudgment, but repair takes time and effort.

In Pirkei Avot, the Rabbis imagine the minutes before Shabbat and what God was doing. In an inspirational moment, the Rabbis have God creating all of these last second additions to the world. As the list unfolds, it becomes clear that God is creating the fixes to the mistakes that will happen such as a rainbow for when the world is destroyed after the flood. Manna was created knowing the desert would not yield the necessary nourishment to sustain the Jewish people through the wilderness. Each example teaches that long before the sin has been committed, the repentance is made possible. Long before the mistake happens, the route to repair exists. We just have to make it happen. *V'shamru* is the reminder; *Shabbos* is the remedy.

The words of *V'shamru* tell us week in and week out that there is always *Shabbos* to come home to. Just 25 hours. The words of *V'shamru* remind us that *Shabbos* is where we meet God, each other and ourselves and it is always there. Shabbat gives us the chance to restore relationships and rediscover self every week. To which I add this prayer and I ask you to join me on the bottom of page 14.

Dear God, help us to make this a new Shabbat.  
After noise, we seek quiet;  
After crowds of indifferent strangers, we seek to touch those we love;  
After concentration on work and responsibility,  
We seek freedom to meditate, to listen to our inward selves.  
We open our eyes to the hidden beauties  
And the infinite possibilities in the world You are creating;  
We break open the gates of the reservoirs  
Of goodness and kindness in ourselves and in others;  
We reach toward one holy perfect moment of Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom!