



By Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein
Founder of The Shabbat Project



The ideas below have been adapted from Chief Rabbi Goldstein's new book: *Shabbat. A Day To Create Yourself*. You can find out more [here](#).



Shabbat is the Divine gift we all need to thrive in today's frenzied world. We need Shabbat – as a matter of personal renewal and national survival, and as the blueprint for a bright future. For it has within it everything we need. It has answers to our most daunting problems. It empowers us to seize the opportunities and confront the challenges we face in these uncertain times.

Modern society is grappling with serious social issues. With high levels of anxiety and discontent, families are struggling to connect. We are distracted and overwhelmed by external stimulation and frenetic communication, our lives swamped by unprecedented professional and social demands, our emotional well-being assailed by the frenzy and pace and pressure of modern life.

Our core sense of meaning and clarity of purpose is being eroded by a noisy and confusing world, with a cacophony of confident voices peddling every philosophy and product imaginable. The seismic political, technological, and socio-economic changes that regularly shake the foundations of society make our world feel more unstable than ever.

Amid this turbulence and relentless pressure, Shabbat gives us the time and space we need to breathe, to create ourselves – to build our inner world, strengthen our faith, nurture our family, and find meaning and purpose. It gives us an opportunity, once a week, to savor life's blessings, free ourselves from our burdens, and access true pleasure. It gives us a Divine formula to live optimally and joyfully – and curate the kind of life we yearn for.

Shabbat is profoundly refreshing, both physically and emotionally, and it empowers us to improve our quality of life; to be happier and more fulfilled as individuals; and to nurture our families with more attention, love, and connection. It is our Divine recipe to attain everything we most want from life: happiness, connection, family, wisdom, faith, meaning, love, joy, renewal, stillness, pleasure, inspiration, community.

Shabbat is the voice of clarity and purpose we need in this confusing world. Every week it reminds us of the Divine perspectives that have guided generations of Jews across continents and historical eras.

These perspectives lay the philosophical foundations of who we are, why we exist and what we are here to do. They are not merely abstract intellectual concepts; they are the foundational truths that animate our existence, coloring every moment of life with meaning and purpose.

Shabbat teaches us that we have a Creator and that He cares about us; that we are G-d's partners in creating a better world; that our lives have purpose; and that our good deeds connect us to Him and to the people around us.

Through these perspectives, Shabbat provides compelling answers to 'why be Jewish?' We can no longer take for granted that a new generation of young Jews will want to be Jewish. We live in a global village and in a generation exposed to every conceivable lifestyle and value system. It is no longer a foregone conclusion that they will choose Jewish values and our way of life.

The only true answer to apathy and assimilation is to understand why we should be Jewish in the first place. Without such an understanding, we will not be able to convince the next generation of Jews why they should not abandon their heritage; why they should not take the path of least resistance and assimilate. Shabbat empowers us to impart this understanding to our children and grandchildren.

For all these reasons, and more, Shabbat is described as the "source of all blessing," the Divine gift of a day of happiness and togetherness, a refreshing source of renewal never more than a few days away.

Ultimately, Shabbat is more than just a day of rest – it is a day that completely transforms us.

These are big claims. How does Shabbat accomplish all of this? That, really, is [what my new book is all about](#). But the key is that, at its heart, Shabbat is a total, immersive experience – the cumulative effect of what we do and don't do on the day. Shabbat is not merely an abstract concept, an intellectual construct. It is an immersive, lived experience as shaped by the *halacha*. The philosophy of Shabbat is inseparable from the practical aspects of the day. The ideas animate our actions. And our actions bring these ideas to life. It is the Divine blueprint of the day, as sketched by the *halacha*, that makes it so revolutionary.

It is these very practical aspects of the day that create an immersive, uniquely enriching experience, bringing us happiness and meaning and connection. Within these 25 hours, the detailed laws of Shabbat – what we do and refrain from doing – help us achieve two things: one is clearing the space, the other is filling it.



CLEARING THE SPACE

By clearing these 25 hours – between sunset on Friday evening and stars out on Saturday night – we make space in our hearts and minds, and in our homes, for the magic to happen. To clear the space is simply to clear the clutter of our frenzied life; to cease trying to control everything; to stop doing and start being. But what we refrain from is not arbitrary.

At the heart of what we don't do on Shabbat is what the Torah calls "work," which the *halacha* defines as 39 categories of creative actions, encompassing the full spectrum of human innovation deployed to shape the environment to meet the needs of individuals and society. These categories relate to the production of the basic elements needed for human survival: food, clothing, and shelter, as well as the resultant human imprint on the plant and animal world. They include the primary expressions of human creativity – writing, building, and transporting, as well as the all-important category of igniting fire as a source of energy to provide light and heat, critical to the establishment of human civilization.

These categories are modeled, according to the Talmud, on the 39 forms of creative work employed to accomplish the first major architectural construction feat of Jewish history – building the ornate and intricate portable Sanctuary in the desert after the Exodus. Each of the 39 categories has subcategories, and together they make up the laws of Shabbat, delineating what we refrain from doing on the day.

Shabbat is, among other things, a day we refrain from household chores such as cooking, laundry, repairs, gardening, or shopping; a day on which we do not go to work, engage in commerce, or handle money; a day on which we do not build, write, and transport objects; a day on which we do not ignite fire, switch on lights, use electronic devices, or drive a car.

By abstaining from these creative acts, we create space in our lives, a sanctuary from all the pressures and distractions of the week. We create a "home in time."

An approach to understanding this idea of a home in time is to consider the physical spaces we inhabit. We designate a space for ourselves, constructing walls and a roof that serve the functional need of protecting us from the physical elements of the world. Just as a physical house needs solid walls and a roof to protect the people inside, our Shabbat home in time needs the protective walls and roof created by the *halacha*. These laws insulate us from the daily distractions, burdens, and turbulence that afflict us during the week. They let us take shelter in the safety and tranquility of the 25 hours that become our new home.

FILLING THE SPACE

Once we have cleared the space, we have the time to breathe, to nurture our family, to draw on our faith, to “create ourselves,” to truly connect in a spirit of love and togetherness.

We do this by filling that space with experiences that touch the soul, lift our emotions, and refresh our body and mind.

Within our “25-hour home” we have an invaluable opportunity to create the kind of life and relationships we need to be happy and fulfilled. For the 25 hours between sunset on Friday and stars out on Saturday, we have the opportunity to transform a functional, impersonal unit of time into a sanctuary of peace, joy, togetherness, love, inspiration, spirituality, faith, and connection – to build a home in time.

Within these 25 hours, protected from the intrusions and distractions and demands of the daily grind, our spirits are free. Shabbat has the power to revive our soul, rejuvenating us with a renewed spiritual energy that flows into every part of our being, enriching our relationships and uplifting our lives.

At the heart of all this is a series of experiences powerfully curated by the *halacha* – candle-lighting, Kiddush, the three meals, Havdalah – that take us and our family on a remarkable 25-hour journey. These meaningful moments – together with the opportunities the day affords to learn Torah wisdom, pray, and draw closer to G-d, sleep, and rest, reflect, and connect – combine the full spectrum of human experience: thinking, feeling, speaking, and eating.

We begin with lighting candles to usher in an atmosphere of tranquility in our home, allowing us to savor the experience of being together on Shabbat, seeing each other's faces, so that we can really connect. In this way, Shabbat candles symbolize the light of love and attention. The pressures of the week place demands on our time and divert our attention from the people closest to us. The light of the candles helps us re-establish that intimate connection.

Before sitting down to our meal on Friday night (and again on Shabbat morning), we make Kiddush. In reciting the words of Kiddush, together, with real intent, over a cup of wine, we reaffirm our shared values and purpose. We testify that G-d created the universe and that he freed us from Egypt, declaring our loyalty to these truths and to our sacred mission that flows from them. The Divine origins of the universe and of the Jewish people are not just theoretical facts; they shape how we live, and determine our goals, priorities, and values. They give our lives meaning and purpose.

A centerpiece of the day is the Shabbat table. We eat three special meals – on Friday night, Shabbat day and then in the late afternoon – sanctifying the meals with song, words of inspiration, and delicious food. So much of the Shabbat experience revolves around family, particularly these three festive meals. The three Shabbat meals are sacred moments to eat, sing, debate, discuss, and engage as a family. These meals also instill in us trust in G-d. This is symbolized by the two challahs on the Shabbat table for each of the meals, which remind us of the manna: we remember how G-d provided for our people in the desert for forty years, and that our own sustenance today is just as miraculous – that it comes from heaven even if it doesn't fall out of the sky.

Finally, just as we usher in Shabbat with the light of the Shabbat candles, we escort it out with the light of the Havdalah candle. With the Friday night candles we celebrate and reaffirm the character, perspectives, and happiness Shabbat brings into our lives. And when we light the Havdalah candle, we rededicate ourselves to infusing the days of the week with this spiritual light, these profound values.

We venture out from the security of Shabbat into the unknowns of the week, fortified with a renewed connection to the most precious people in our lives, with renewed faith in G-d, and with renewed inner peace and happiness that comes from being immersed completely in the world of Shabbat.

All these blessings emerge when we clear the 25 hours of Shabbat and fill them with the mitzvahs of Shabbat. When we keep Shabbat according to the Divine blueprint of the day, the way our people have kept it for thousands of years.

Over the years, countless people who took part in The Shabbat Project, and kept Shabbat for the full 25 hours, have told me it was a life-changing experience. And it's one you can have every week.

These amazing words of the Talmud say it all:

“אמר הקב"ה: מתנה טובה יש לי בבית גנזי - ושברת שמה”

“Hashem says, ‘I have a precious gift in My treasure house and its name is Shabbos.’”

Shabbat is G-d's gift to us, given with love. We unwrap that gift by immersing ourselves in Shabbat – by keeping Shabbat in all its detail.

