

One of the great privileges I have in my work at Beth Rishon is spending time with our children and teens. In particular, it is a real joy to spend time with our high school students who want to continue learning after their bar or bat mitzvah. The high school program meets on Tuesday evenings and is an opportunity for us to explore Jewish topics on a deeper level; the way I like to put it to the kids considering the program is that they've spent years learning the content of Judaism – learning Hebrew, prayers, the holidays, and so forth – and now it's time to make Judaism theirs and figure out what they're supposed to do with it. Twice a month on Tuesdays the Cantor and I have led a small but dedicated group that is grappling with questions of meaning and identity and thinking about the ways Judaism can provide guidance and insight as they grow into young Jewish adults.

Which made a session I led with our students this past winter truly eye opening. The class was on Shabbat – not the basics which, as I said, get covered in younger grades, but about trying to understand the meaning and purpose of Shabbat. What it means, for example, to step away from work and tasks for a period of time to focus on connecting with the world around us, with gratitude, and renewing ourselves. I explained to our students that the standard description of Shabbat as a 'day of rest' both shortchanges and actually misconstrues what Shabbat is actually about. We read the story of Creation from the Torah and discussed the very first Shabbat on that very first seventh day, when God ceased from the work of Creation. The Jewish view of Shabbat, I suggested, is less about resting than it is about ceasing from creating; because as beings created in the Divine image, we too have the capacity to create, but also the ability and the responsibility of sometimes choosing *not* to create.

Our students, understandably, were puzzled: in what sense do we create and what does it mean for us to stop creating? We looked at traditional Jewish sources which understand our daily activities as a form of creation, in that we seek to change, influence, and transform the world through our exertions. That effort might literally be directed at changing the world – building cities, growing businesses, inventing new medicines and cures – and it might be directed at ourselves: pushing ourselves to strive and improve into the best, most accomplished version of ourselves. Our students aren't building any cities or inventing new medicines yet, but they definitely understand what it means to try to push themselves to ever-greater levels of achievement, feeling pressure to excel academically and in the many, many extracurricular activities that they all participate in.

It started when I asked our students to each think about something they were trying to do better at. There was a long and knowing inhalation around the table; clearly this was an issue that was top of mind for them and they spend a lot of time thinking about. One of them said under his breath, "Whew, there's a lot." For some it was getting A's in a difficult class, for others it was getting accepted to a top-level musical ensemble or making the travel team in one of their chosen sports. When I asked them to think about what it might look like to pause and take a break from pushing and striving, they looked alarmed and confused. Our students – and here, I should hasten to add, this has nothing to do with our Beth Rishon kids but I think the vast majority of accomplished, overachieving teens in our society – are so so tightly wound, so focused on all they are trying to achieve that it was difficult for them to even picture a different mode, one which wasn't rooted in accomplishment but in acceptance.

What do I mean by acceptance? The pursuit of growing and pushing ourselves and trying to achieve are worthy and laudable goals I told them, and ones that Judaism celebrates –

six days a week. But part of the lesson of Shabbat is that this isn't the whole story: we need to balance our urge to strive and grow with the mandate to pause and accept ourselves for who we already are. This is often a lot harder because our kids – and, I would add, many of us – are so focused on the things they want to do or are trying to accomplish that they end up creating a destructive dynamic where the place they are now is constantly held up against the place they're trying to get and inevitably found wanting. So if I'm working to run a mile in under five minutes or get the lead in the school play, I'm going to be continually dissatisfied with the version of me that hasn't achieved this yet. I'm going to persistently feel inadequate and wanting. But if we relate to Shabbat as a day when we *aren't* trying to push or strive, it becomes a time when we can actually just focus on and embrace who we are right now, a day where we are *enough* the way we are without having to push ourselves to be something more. In other words, a day where we can learn the critical value of accepting ourselves. A day where, by pausing from our work, we can balance our clamorous obsession with *doing* with the quieter but no less urgent imperative of *being*.

And I do mean "obsession" because so many of our teens are so focused in ways that I consider damaging on what they are trying to accomplish that it was difficult for them to even wrap their minds around a different frame where they could pause and simply celebrate themselves for who they are, rather than defining their self-worth by what they can do.

There are so many reasons for this, but they're clearly rooted in the messages our kids are receiving these days, messages that I think are deeply worrying. First, there's an anxiety about success – a feeling that our kids have to push themselves harder than ever just to have a chance at even keeping up. Colleges are turning down ever more-qualified applicants, the job market is incredibly competitive; and while the kids I was teaching are still several years from that point, the anxiety is already clearly filtering down. But beyond that, our kids' perception of what's even considered normal or acceptable is deeply skewed because of the unrealistic expectations they are setting for themselves. A significant part of the blame for this lies with social media, where our kids are constantly exposed to a steady diet of people who all look accomplished, happy, well put together, and generally on top of things. Although our kids are sophisticated, although they know at some level that the various people they're following are curating their posts and cherry-picking selective slices of their own lives to showcase, it's easy to forget that when you're surrounded by it. And by the way, our kids are: a recent poll shows more than half of US teens are on social media for at least four hours a day, and that's even true for one-fifth of eleven and twelve-year olds as well.

In addition to presenting a distorted view of what life is like, social media also breeds FOMO – fear of missing out. FOMO is a big problem with our kids and even, honestly, a lot of people in their twenties and thirties as well. FOMO is a lurking concern or worry that there's some great opportunity that we're missing out on or might be at risk of missing out on, and it's a direct symptom of our hyperconnected world where everyone knows what everyone else is up to. When I was in high school there were all kinds of parties happening I wasn't invited to, and while I was vaguely aware of it, I wasn't seeing my friends' and classmates' posts in real time about how awesome that party was, and having my feed filled with pictures of other people having a good time while I was sitting at home. Or else, kids are paralyzed by a different kind of FOMO, a constant anxiety that there's something even better or cooler they could be doing that just hasn't been planned yet. While in theory waiting to see if there's something you want to do

more maximizes happiness, in reality it can also be debilitating because everything is contingent and there's always a worry there might be something better lurking around the corner, if only we don't commit to what's already in front of us.

None of what I'm saying about the pressures kids are under these days is new – Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* has been on the New York Times bestseller list for the past seventy-seven weeks, with its central theory that children were harmed by moving from a 'play-based childhood' which privileged interacting with others, collaboration, and problem solving with a 'phone-based childhood' which makes kids shyer, more risk-averse, less resilient, and paradoxically more isolated. Anxiety and depression among teens, and especially teen girls, has been soaring since 2010 when smartphones started becoming ubiquitous – by some measures anxiety and depression became two and half times more prevalent just between 2010 and 2020 as kids' lives were increasingly oriented around and mediated by technology. Haidt quotes one college student as saying: "[We] are an incredibly isolated group of people. We have shallow friendships and superfluous romantic relationships that are mediated and governed to a large degree by social media.... Oftentimes I'll arrive early to a lecture to find a room of 30+ students sitting together in complete silence, absorbed in their smartphones, afraid to speak and be heard by their peers. This leads to further isolation and a weakening of self identity and confidence, something I know because I've experienced it firsthand."

One phenomenon in this regard that is especially worrying – I would actually say: terrifying – that's really taken off in the last year to six months is the rise of kids interacting with AI-based chatbots, digital avatars that they can simply speak to through their phone, and which are designed to engage their users and keep them coming back. They have distinct personalities their users can choose and are increasingly sophisticated and popular – almost three-quarters of American teens interact on a regular basis with chatbots. But the really worrying part is that one in three teens considers these interactions as meaningful, or even more so, than relationships with other people. For kids who might already be having difficulty relating to the real people around them, these bots begin to substitute for friends, and it is devastatingly easy for teens whose brains are not yet fully developed – and even some adults whose are! – to get sucked into these faux-relationships that only serve to isolate them even further from the real world and its support systems. This technology is still new and not fully understood, and while the companies that create them program in guidelines designed to help keep users safe, these can often shift and degrade over an extended period of interaction, and when they do there are mounting horrific stories of teens who even take their lives with the help and encouragement of these bots.

Haidt and other thought leaders are sounding the alarm about the danger of excessive phone use – not only depression and anxiety, but an increase in mental health issues. The thing is, our kids know this too. They know they're happier without their phones: I asked them! Several of them talked about attending overnight summer camps where phones are taken away on the first day and given back at the end, and how great it is to just interact with the actual people around them, and not worry what someone else across the country is posting or not posting. One of our kids even said that when he comes back from camp he tries to limit his phone use, since he's so much happier without it. But the problem is, cutting out phones only works because the kids around him were without phones too, and once he's back in his regular

everyday life when everyone is on their phones all the time he really has no choice but to start back up as well.

It's not my intention to go on and on about phones – there's a growing awareness of their negative effects and an increasing number of school districts, including New York City, are implementing bans on phones during the school day to help kids focus on what's in front of them. But the point is, our kids are not all right, and they're navigating and dealing with all sorts of pressures and challenges that previous generations never had to face and in many cases can't even fully understand. Which brings me back to Shabbat.

And by Shabbat, I mean acceptance – moving from the frame of constantly having to strive and succeed and want, to the frame of accepting and celebrating what you have and who you are. It's no coincidence that traditional Shabbat observance actually prohibits the use of phones and other electronics, and therefore like those overnight camps forces you to focus on and actually connect with the people around you. But I told the kids my goal wasn't to get them to become *shomer shabbos*, but rather to get them to understand and embrace a Shabbat consciousness – the idea that there needs to be time that's set aside for acceptance as an antidote to the world and its pressures, to focus on appreciation and gratitude and joy and the gift of simply *being*. Of taking time in nature to experience the world around you, or of reading a book that's not for class but just something you enjoy, or of engaging in an activity that nurtures you and you're doing it because you love it – doing gymnastics, say, because you love the way it makes you feel and not because you're trying to get recruited by a college or become the next Simone Biles. Because again: Judaism supports and encourages pushing ourselves and developing our capacities and engaging the world and improving it, but we are so out of balance because when we're focused only on those things that we lose sight of the big picture and what really matters in this world.

This day, this holiday is all about the big picture – zooming out to think about Creation and reflect on our place in it, how we lead our lives and how we want to do better by being kinder, more loving, more connected. Interestingly, today is supposed to be a day that's about striving and creating, about pushing ourselves to live more fully into the Divine image in which we're created and consider what changes we need to make in our lives to support that. It's not a day for just accepting who we are; as I said, life is a balance and we're supposed to do both. But part of what Shabbat does, by connecting us to that place of acceptance and joy, is help renew and reinvigorate us to reengage in the world, give us a taste of *me'en olam ha-ba*, a glimpse of that perfect world to come that we can use to focus our visions more clearly on what we are trying to accomplish in the world and ourselves.

I pray that we can use the lessons of Shabbat consciousness to help strengthen ourselves for the tasks we must accomplish – at this New Year and at all times. And for our kids, for all our kids, I hope they can internalize this message as well of slowing down, of not being so hard on themselves or defining their worth by their achievements, of accepting the wonderful, messy, emerging people that they are. And I hope their learning can be a gateway to reflection, to connection, to new possibilities and other modes of being, to resilience to empowerment, and to paving a path of blessing in this New Year.