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& A F F E C T

A Shabbat Outlook

*“The Sabbath is to
the week what the
line break is to
poetic language.
It is the silence
that forces you
to return to what
came before to
find its meaning.”*

— JUDITH
SHULEVITZ

Shabbat, says the Talmud, is G-d’s gift to the Jewish people—and what a gift it is! It offers respite from labor and a break from the intrusion of our ubiquitous technologies. It allows family and community the time to connect and reflect without distraction. The warm smell of challah, the glowing candles, and the comfort of ritual all leave their imprint, shaping forever the meaning of family, peoplehood, and one’s place in the universe.

Yet to many, Shabbat is archaic, restrictive, and daunting, and it is therefore altogether ignored. The objective of this course is to remove the barriers that keep people from enjoying what Shabbat has to offer. We invite women of every level of observance to experience the mystery of this most precious of Jewish treasures on their own level. This mitzvah is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and so this course provides multiple entry points so that students at every level of affiliation can explore meaningful ways to enrich their lives with the lessons of Shabbat.



LESSON 1

Gift of Rest

It is difficult to imagine today a society functioning without a weekend, but this institution was unheard of in the ancient world. Societies customarily celebrated seasonal holidays, but the notion of a universal weekend—where an entire society would take a day off each week—was nonexistent. In fact, Greek and Roman writers habitually mocked the Jews for their Shabbat. Yet, these mockeries were ignored by contemporary Jews because of the profound meaning they found in Shabbat.

This lesson explores the deep riches that Jews have found in the past, and continue to find today, in Shabbat observance. We learn that some of the restrictions of Shabbat allow us to experience its power: increased productivity, enhanced physical and emotional health, a more robust sense of liberty, a better fostering of relationships, and amplified feelings of happiness. We then climb to the next rung to discover the vast spiritual treasures embedded into this day—how Shabbat is a different day, a loftier day, a more spiritual time, rendering it a conducive period for us to ponder and explore our relationship with G-d and our overall life-mission.

LESSON 2

Glow of Peace

The prototypical Shabbat scene, as depicted in art and literature, is of a family gathered around the elegantly set Friday night table, with the Shabbat candles burning. These images portray a sense of peace, love, and serenity. But it was not only in the best of circumstances that Jews dedicated themselves to kindling the Shabbat flames. In the Kovno ghetto during the Holocaust, Jewish women asked a local rabbi whether they could use electric lights to fulfill this mitzvah because they could not obtain candles or oil. Analyzing this question and the rabbi's answer allows us to explore the contours, function, and meaning of this powerful mitzvah. We will learn the practical laws and customs as well as the rich symbolism and meaning that is present in this ritual act that ushers in the Shabbat.





LESSON 3

The Feminine Shabbat

“Come, O bride, come O bride, come, O bride, O Shabbat queen.” Why is Shabbat compared to the bride and not the groom? Why is Shabbat compared to the queen and not the king? The liturgy of Shabbat is replete with female references, and Jewish mysticism teaches that Shabbat is truly feminine in multiple respects. By exploring the mystique of Shabbat’s femininity, we will gain a deeper insight into the nuances of Shabbat, a greater appreciation of ourselves as women, and a newfound understanding of how the two interrelate and feed off of each other in unique ways.



LESSON 4

Divine Delights

Much of what is written about Shabbat leads us to characterize it as a day of transcendence, a day whose holiness naturally affords much spiritual pleasure. Yet, when Jewish law formulates how to observe Shabbat, it instructs one to take pleasure by not just one but three sumptuous meals that are to be graced with lavish foods. If Shabbat is characterized as a day of transcendence, why is so much emphasis placed on eating and physical pleasures? Shouldn’t the primary pleasure come from the sublime and ethereal? This lesson will explore two Jewish answers to this question, which will reveal two distinct philosophies concerning the concept of Shabbat, and more broadly, two perspectives on the overall function of Judaism and our purpose in life.



LESSON 5

Sacred Symbolisms

There are certain laws and customs with regard to the Shabbat meals, and this lesson provides the opportunity to discuss their history and significance. Why is Kiddush recited on wine? What is the significance of two covered loaves? Why is it so important to consume fish and meat on Shabbat? Why do Ashkenazi Jews eat gefilte fish, and why do Jews eat cholent (or some variation thereof) on Shabbat? This lesson explores the origins and rationales for each of these customs, rendering what was heretofore a random food assortment that was merely good for the palate into a unified and holistic journey that is also good for the soul.



LESSON 6

Order from Chaos

For many, what Jewish law permits and proscribes on Shabbat appears random and whimsical, and the dos and don'ts often seem dry, almost mundane. This lesson looks back at how Jews historically tried to demonstrate a logical structure that underlies the laws of Shabbat observance, and how Jews attempted to infuse this subject with soul and spirituality. We will explore some of the interesting theories that were postulated by rabbis in nineteenth-century Germany and in the Hasidic courts of Eastern Europe. A common refrain was that the laws and minutiae of Shabbat are consistent with its deeper theme—to become more mindful of how G-d is the anchor of our successes and accomplishments.



LESSON 7

The Farewell

“Do not be afraid, Jacob My servant.” These words are customarily sung by some Jews after the Shabbat queen has departed. The need to “not be afraid” also appears in the text of the Havdalah, which we recite at the conclusion of Shabbat. The person is about to shift into a second gear, and this triggers spiritual qualms and uncertainties; but in the end, she is assured that there is nothing to fear. By examining the Havdalah ritual, we will acquire a deeper grasp for how Shabbat and the weekday are two important modes of our spiritual service, and how they both ought to interact with and enhance each other.