

Judaism: Experiencing the Sabbath

The Jewish religious aid I chose to experience and reflect on was the Sabbath or Shabbat. The preparation and experience was incredibly difficult and time consuming, more difficult and time consuming than I had imagined, but the experience and knowledge I gained was even more incredible.

In order to get the best and most accurate experience for the Sabbath I decided that I should involve my family, which consists of my husband and three young children. I began preparing for the experience of Shabbat by researching it and all it entails, taking notes on it, and discussing my findings with my husband to make sure he was comfortable with being involved in the experience and involving our children in Shabbat. My husband was not only willing, but excited to be included in it.

On Tuesday I began researching Shabbat through online sources. In doing so, I learned that my original thoughts on Shabbat were incorrect. Shabbat is not just a day of prayer with many restrictions, but a day of rest which people eagerly await. Shabbat is a day of spiritual enrichment and a day to spend quality time with family. I also learned more about what the Shabbat entails: Shabbat starts a few minutes before sunset on Friday and ends about forty minutes after sunset on Saturday when three stars are visible. Shabbat is a time to remember the creation of the world and the emancipation of slavery from Egypt. On Shabbat Jewish people are not allowed to work on anything, including everyday things such as housework, cooking, activities using electricity or electronics, shopping, or driving.

Through my research I realized my biggest challenge would be trying to open my mind and heart to the idea of the way G-d is perceived in Judaism. I am not particularly religious and my views on "G-d" are quite different. I knew in order to achieve the best and most accurate experience I could with Shabbat, I would not necessarily have to believe in what I was practicing, but would need the utmost respect for Shabbat. I decided the best way for me to open up to these beliefs was to talk to a close friend of mine, who is Jewish, about her relationship with G-d and what Shabbat means to her. Hearing about how passionate she was about G-d and how important Shabbat is to her gave me a great new insight and helped me prepare mentally for Shabbat.

On Wednesday morning I planned our meals by researching kosher recipes and items needed for Shabbat so I could go shopping later in the day. Our planned meals included: wine, grape juice, challah, a salad, cholent, and brownies for our Shabbat dinner, with plans to eat the cholent the following day for lunch. I made muffins for breakfast and prepared fruit for our third meal before the Sabbath ends. ("Kosher Recipes & Cooking", 2015). I made plans to alter the recipe of the cholent to be able to cook it in a Crock Pot: this allowed me to turn off the Crock Pot prior to the start of Shabbat and leave it on the warm setting so we were able to have a warm meal for the Shabbat dinner and a warm meal for lunch the next day without switching appliances on or off. I also purchased candles and a white table cloth for the table.

After composing a menu and shopping for the items I needed, I began looking up the blessings we would need to recite for Shabbat. After finding the blessings I needed for the lighting of the candles, blessing of the wine (*Kiddush*), washing of the hands, the blessing over the challah, the Grace After Meals, the blessing of the children, and the honoring of the wife, I printed the English versions so we could recite them easily when the time came.

Starting on Thursday evening and into Friday morning, I began preparing my home for Shabbat. I cleaned as if we had a very important guest coming to stay with us. I made sure laundry was washed and folded so that we would have nice clothes clean and ready to wear for Shabbat. I made sure all the dishes had been through the dishwasher and put away to avoid any urge to run the dishwasher on Shabbat. I vacuumed, swept, mopped, cleaned the windows, and dusted. I set our table with the nicest dishes we have, the candles we would be using in place of the Shabbat candles, the candle holders, and a vase with flowers. Friday afternoon, I began figuring out which lights would remain on and which ones would remain off during the Shabbat. After deciding, I placed tape over the switches to avoid anyone turning them on or off out of habit. Lastly, I unplugged all of our televisions and appliances to avoid having my children turning them on.

Just hours before we began Shabbat, and minutes after my husband got home from work, I faced my second largest challenge: getting everyone to put away their electronics. Two of my children were on their tablets, one was playing with their electronic toys, and my husband was on his work phone. When I asked them to turn them off and put them in a drawer, everyone protested. My husband and I were able to get our children's items turned off and put away. Unfortunately, being a police officer, my husband was not going to be able to turn off his work phone and put it away, but would refrain from using it as much as possible.

Just before Shabbat began, my husband and I discussed the Shabbat with my children. We let them know what Shabbat is, the importance of it, and why we would be experiencing it. Although they could not possibly understand everything we discussed with them, they were very excited to be spending so much time with their parents while eating and playing board games.

Around 5:40pm, I lit the candles we used to represent the Shabbat candles and recited the blessing "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe. Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe to light the lights of Shabbat." (Rich, 2011) Since we could not attend a prayer service we discussed what the two Shabbat candles represented, to remember and to observe, and their importance in Judaism.

Because my husband and I are not Jewish, we felt that it might be disrespectful to recite the blessings of our children and the honoring of the wife so we decided to skip these blessings and proceeded to bless the wine. We recited the Kiddush over the wine. My husband and I drank our wine while our children drank their grape juice. Next we performed the washing of the hands by pouring water over one hand then the other while reciting the blessing; my husband recited the blessing for my children. We returned to the table to recite the blessing over the challah and eat our dinner. After the blessing was recited we each ate a small piece of bread then we ate our large, delicious dinner and recited the Grace After Meals. After our dinner my husband and I put our children in bed then spent a couple of hours discussing our experience and how much we enjoyed the family time with no interruptions.

The next morning we ate our muffins for breakfast and discussed the previous day with our children, and then we went to play outside since we could not attend a prayer service. We ate left-over cholent for lunch, recited the Grace After Meals, and then took an afternoon nap. When we woke up we played Chutes and Ladders and discussed the Torah with our children, explaining why it is so important not only to Judaism but to history itself. We ate our third meal around 3:00pm which consisted of left-over salad and fruit. Next we read a few passages of the Torah, mainly from Exodus, and talked about them. For the rest of the afternoon we played with our children and read books to them. Before we knew it, it was beginning to get dark outside so we went to the back yard and had our children watch for the three stars that would indicate the end of Shabbat. We returned inside to say goodbye to Shabbat by performing the Havdalah. We began the Havdalah with the blessing of the wine, and then we lit two candles and held them close together so their flames combined while we recited the blessing of the flame. Lastly we recited the separation blessing over the wine and grape juice and drank it.

This experience was very tiring and stressful. It was extremely difficult to set aside all of the homework, shopping, and housework I needed to get done. With that being said, I would not trade this experience for the world. It showed me that my family and I desperately need time to relax, talk, and eat together despite our hectic lives; it was also very spiritually enlightening. Although I do not practice Judaism, this experience made me feel closer to the "G-d" I do believe in and gave my family a rare opportunity to bond with one another.

Works Cited

- Kosher Recipes & Cooking. (2015). Retrieved February 11, 2015, from http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/93784/jewish/Shabbat-Recipes.htm
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