

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

Day 6 – Friday 6th September

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was looking out over the town square. Everywhere he saw people rushing. He called out to one man, “What are you rushing for?” The man replied, “I’m running to make a living.” Levi Yitzhak replied, “What makes you so sure that your livelihood is in front of you so that you have to rush to catch it up. What if it’s behind you? Maybe you should stop and let it catch up with you.”

True then, it’s become more so in our time. Ours was supposed to be the age of leisure. Yet many people work harder than ever. One parent at work has become, in many cases, two. Too many people I know feel endlessly pressurised, trying to juggle home and work, family and career, ambition and recreation. We have to run to stand still. Sometimes we’re so busy making a living that we don’t have time to live. When do we stop to let our blessings catch up with us?

Which is why holy times are important. For me, Friday nights around the Shabbat table, with the candles, the wine and the challah are the high point of the week. It’s when Jewish husbands sing the song of praise to their wives, taken from the 31st chapter of the Book of Proverbs, “A woman of strength, who can find? Her worth is above rubies.” Parents bless their children. Together we share words of Torah about the parsha, the biblical portion, we’re going to read in the synagogue the next morning. We sing zemirot, the traditional melodies. And for a day the pressures of the outside world disappear. There are no phones or emails, no radio or television, no working or shopping. In ancient times Shabbat was a protest against slavery. Today it’s an antidote to stress, the most effective I know.

I remember a young man who came to see me in a state of high anger. His wife by a civil marriage was converting to Judaism so that they could have a Jewish home. Our rabbinical court had told him that he too would have to practice a religious life if we were to sanction the marriage. Why should he need to change, he wanted to know. He was born Jewish. Surely that was enough. Well, we spoke and he went away to reflect. Two years later I officiated at their wedding. They radiated happiness.

A few weeks before the wedding, he came to see me. He wanted to thank me, he said. “I know that at the time I was angry. But you were right. I used to be a workaholic. I worked seven days a week. Keeping Shabbat has changed my life. I now have time for my wife and our baby. We have friends. We feel part of a community. One day in seven we have time to celebrate these things, which I never had before. The work still gets done. But now I have time for the things that matter. Thank you.”

Rest sets everything else in perspective. When life becomes an endless succession of pressures, we lose the natural rhythms of work and rest, running and relaxing, striving and enjoying the fruits of our striving. We move so fast that we miss the view. We travel so often that we forget where we’re going. At regular intervals we need to stop, pause, breathe, cease becoming and just be. It makes a difference. People used to say that food tastes better on Shabbat. I think they meant, it tastes better when you have time to let it linger on the tongue. Happiness is tasted in tranquillity. And that is what Elul is about; taking a moment in the year, as Shabbat does for us in the week, to slow down, appreciate the view, and realise that our blessings are right there behind us, waiting for us to rest so that they can catch us up. Shabbat shalom.