

# Finding sanity in ancient ritual

Observing the Jewish Shabbat changed my experience of time as a parent, for the better

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**When you become a parent, time never seems to move at the right speed.**

**Sometimes it moves too slowly.**

**Like when it was tummy time and the baby giggled and then looked at me and oh my goodness his neck is really getting stronger. We are bonding! He is growing! Was that 20, 30 minutes? Is it lunch time? Close to nap time already? Must be. And yet somehow the clock suggests it's only been three minutes, and I have at least two long hours to go.**

**And sometimes it moves too quickly.**

Like when it was Friday and I still hadn't put away the pile of clothes on my desk chair in the bedroom or showered since what was it, Monday, Tuesday? Ew. The mirror was thick with fog, I was about to get in, when I heard a primal scream alerting me that he had woken up early from his nap.

We have to get to music class. We have to get to soccer practice. We have to get to the birthday party. And anyway, how is this kid I am remembering caring for already: one month old, 5 months old, 2 years old, 5 years old, 12 – the current age of my eldest – years old?

"The days are long but the years are short," a friend reminds me, an oft-repeated refrain about the funny nature of time for parents. My mom offers lyrics from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*: "Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise, sunset. Swiftly flow the days ... Swiftly fly the years."

**"This bored–rush cycle was preventing me from figuring out what parenthood meant to me."**

A year or two after becoming a parent, I began to worry that my children's experience of me would be someone who was always trying to maximise or minimise the minutes and hours, never quite at ease. Equally bad, this bored–rush cycle was preventing me from figuring out what parenthood meant to me.

I sought out some intervention to help me wrap my head around this newfound slipperiness of time – not trying to control the chaos inherent to raising kids, but finding a way to punctuate it, now and then. Something that said *this* is happening now, and the pace is just right.

I found what I was looking for in the weekly Shabbat ritual observed by Jewish families for thousands of years – a day of rest, from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. While I had never “kept”, as Jews say, the Shabbat on a regular basis before I became a parent. Post-kids, this thing that once felt inconvenient – being forced to stop – was transformed into a gift.

First this meant lighting the candles, which I sometimes had to immediately blow out to avoid a toddler-induced fire in our small New York apartment. I’d take a breath, cover my eyes, and recite the blessing. There was something about watching the wick ignite, turn into shades of blue, yellow and red, that held all of our attention. Babies, toddlers, preschoolers – nobody can resist the lure, temporary as it sometimes was, of watching fire. Next came the wine or grape juice, a short blessing for the fruits of the vines, the exceptional sweetness a treasure for my somewhat sugar-deprived children.

Then came a longer blessing to remind us that life exists and wow what a miracle, what a wonder, and one way to receive that miracle and wonder is to keep Shabbat separate from the other six days of the week. The words of the blessing did little for my kids until they got older, but they were intrigued by the intense concentration of a parent on something they couldn’t see or understand. Also, they knew challah, the braided slightly sweet bread, came next.

With time, as my children matured, Shabbat began to feel like a ritual we could do together. There was no homework or music practice to rush to, no cell phones in the dining room, my sons had both become old enough to spend a solid 15 minutes without moving their bodies, and be engaged in conversation alone. They’re hardly all harmonious. We have grumpy nights, we have sad nights, we have tired nights. But even then, I think the ritual grants us the capacity to see one another more clearly – to both participate in the moment and remember that we are all messy beings, far more complicated than whatever mood we are in that night. The fact that it’s the big dessert night in our home definitely helps.



Photo: Strauss Family

“Rituals can be a break from the to-do lists that plague modern parenting.”

### Why rituals work

Today, in our productivity-obsessed culture, we are inundated with ideas for finding relief through self-care. Parents are told to take breaks, do yoga and meditation, spend time away from children, and find new hobbies. These are all sound ideas, intuitive, scientifically proven, and can conveniently be adjusted and adapted for individual use. I’ve benefited from them all.

Ancient collective rituals, by comparison, feel strange, irrational and inconvenient. But as researchers have observed, their psychological boosting power is bound up in the fact that they lack a clear instrumental purpose (Hobson et al., 2018). They remind us that we can’t plan everything, that some things are outside our control, that human beings have been grappling with big questions for as long as we’ve been around and we may feel like we’re figuring it all out but the fact is we aren’t.







When I light those candles and mark time through the Jewish Shabbat, it doesn't just give me a culturally sanctioned break from the busyness of the week. It gives me a chance to submit myself to something old and irrational which helps me let go of my need to be productive and efficient – and live in a world where everything makes sense.

**“Participating in a ritual can quiet the part of the brain that is always emoting.”**

Ancient rituals can be a break from the to-do lists that plague modern parenting. They allow us an opportunity to get out of our own heads and connect with others. This has positive effects on those experiencing grief, and can help all of us escape our negative ruminating by offering a sensory experience that immerses us in the present.

Pooja Lakshmin, psychiatrist and author of *Real Self-Care* (2023), told me that this feeling of regaining agency is a big part of why rituals can help new parents: “When there is uncertainty and chaos and transition and turmoil, the brain looks to make order. And that is where ritual falls in. It is a very concrete and tangible way to exert choice.” Participating in a ritual can quiet the part of the brain that is always emoting, and allow us to recalibrate and subconsciously prepare for the future.

As my sons grow older, the role of the Shabbat ritual has morphed into a reminder to stop and be here, and really try to listen to one another. What started as a project focused on time has become one about ensuring connection in time. The days may be long with our kids. The years may be short. Rituals can't change that. But they help us know that sometimes we can stop and attune to the moment, and experience that flame, that flicker that connects us all.

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## References

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