

# Counting days under 'lockdown' and the blessing of Shabbat

By Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

I can't be the only person who's losing track of time. One day simply runs into another. That's why I'm finding the traditional Jewish way of structuring the week so helpful: Sunday is *rishon leShabbat*, the 1<sup>st</sup> day towards Shabbat; Monday is *sheni leShabbat*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day towards Shabbat, and the week culminates in Shabbat itself.

It would be easy to undervalue or even forget the Sabbath in these strange times. After all, we're mostly at home anyway, can't travel and can't invite anyone round for Friday night dinner. Our house, often so full of people, feels like a ghost town and the dog stares disconsolately at the empty rooms. (Or perhaps he's thinking 'my space at last!')

It's easy to let go. That's why I'm writing in praise of Shabbat. I imagine for any non-Jewish reader that Sunday, Friday or another festive date could be similar.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, the key 16<sup>th</sup> century code of Jewish law written by Rabbi Joseph Caro, insists that everyone 'has to make a special effort to honour Shabbat.' Therefore 'One should get up early on Friday to prepare for Shabbat.' No one should leave the work to others – even if, in these strange times, we could.

It would be easy to say, 'Why lay the table beautifully under lockdown?' 'Why make sure there's at least something, one thing, special, for the meal when things are hard to come by?' Keeping up our care and discipline is especially important, now we're stuck inside and often alone. Shabbat gives the opportunity both to love and honour its traditions and to care and be kind to ourselves and those closest to us. In fact, we may have greater opportunity now than ever to keep the day sacred from sundown to sunset.

Unlike candles, wine and challah, there is no requirement to have flowers on the Shabbat table. For many there is little or no, access to the outside. So maybe, if you have one, put a picture of a flower or tree on your Shabbat table. Make it beautiful.

The Talmud tells how Rabbi Yannai would put on his finest clothing on *Erev Shabbat* and turn to greet the sacred day with the words which have become so familiar: 'Come, Shabbat bride'. No one has ever accused me of being a smart dresser. But right now, I'm thinking that I'm going to make a point of wearing my best clothing for the Sabbath. Commenting on the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Mishnah Berurah* specifically discusses the case of the person who is entirely alone for the whole day, as many of us will be in the current circumstances, asking whether he or she needs to change. Yes, the author answers, we dress in our best clothes not to show off to each other but to honour the presence of God.

Electronic means of communication are not permitted on Shabbat, – and it's a wonderful and welcome chance to get away from the computer! So we should try to be in touch with as many of our family and close friends as we can during Friday, wishing *Shabbat Shalom*. Many of us feel painfully alone and a call, a conversation, singing at least *Shalom Aleichem* before the Sabbath comes in is a blessing.

Speaking of blessings, Friday night before Kiddush is a time for family blessing; parents, especially, bless their children. I am very aware that many grandparents are in prolonged isolation and unable to see their beloved grandchildren. The blessing can, and should, therefore be done by Zoom or phone, prior to the onset of Shabbat.

But in these stressful weeks, I want to suggest something further. We all need our spiritual strength; Judaism has a three-thousand-year-long history of resilience. Please think of parents, grandparents, family, friends, ancestors, teachers, Jewish and also not-Jewish, who have brought us blessing. I am hoping that their presence (virtual, like everything else at the moment) will be like hands above our head, and that their spirit and the humanity, wisdom, discipline and courage of our people will embrace us, willing us blessing, wishing us Shabbat Shalom.

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