Feinstein-Shabbat

In the office, I have a fast computer with E-mail and a modem, a fax machine, a cell phone and a pager. At home, a microwave/convection oven, a dishwasher, washer/dryer, trash compactor, cordless phones and cable TV. All designed to save me time.

So, where’s all that time? Why don’t I feel like I have more time?

Time, as we know it, was invented only in the last century. A century ago, most people got up and went to bed with the sun and measured their day by the factory whistle or the town clock. Arriving 20 minutes one way or the other didn’t much matter. Time was local. Two o’clock in San Francisco had no relation to two o’clock in New York. All that changed with the railroad. Railroads run on schedules. And schedules demand standardized time. The country was divided into “time zones” and time was made uniform. The concept of an “appointment” was invented only in 1880. So was the concept, “you’re late”. The advent of radio brought uniform time into the home as families rushed to finish dinner to hear their favorite program. Relative to human evolution, fifty years is a remarkably short period. But in the fifty years from 1880 through 1930, our sense of time was completely overturned.

And it has turned again. A friend who works as a business lawyer describes his stress: Once, a contract, a letter, a proposal came in the mail. You thought about it, drafted your response, and sent it off. Total turn-around: about a week. Then came express mail. The proposal comes FedEx by 10:30 AM, and the response is expected the next day. Then came fax: The response is expected by day’s end. Then came E-mail. Now the response is expected instantaneously.

Just yesterday, I called a fellow whose voice mail has voice mail. There’s no break. No retreat. We carry cell phones so we can be reached anywhere, at any time. Call waiting breaks into whatever conversation we’re having to bring us another. We even have phones installed in the toilet.

We live in what writer Michael Ventura describes as “the age of interruption” when “inner time” — our personal sense of the rhythms of time — and the regimented time society imposes upon us don’t jibe. What happens to human beings when the rhythm of life speeds up so drastically? The faster we go, the more empty we feel. The more we “get done”, the less it seems we’ve accomplished. The more contacts we make, the more shallow we become. “Hurry up!” I shout at my son, “Stop playing! Put your shoes on. Let’s go!” And then something shocks me into awareness: Is this really what I want? To slam the child into my adult rhythm? To stop playing?

Here’s a gift for the New Year: One day a week — 25 hours of freedom. To slow down and breathe. To do nothing. To accomplish nothing. Except re-acquainting yourself with the people you love, and the parts of yourself left behind in the rush. To turn your back on the urgent and the pressing, and think about the eternal. To renew your search for what’s true, what’s beautiful, what’s good, what’s important. We call it Shabbat. And it’s God’s gift to you….before it’s too late.

You don’t have to be Orthodox to keep Shabbat. You only have to be tired of being tired all the time. Tired of the fatigue — the drained exhaustion of living on a clock all week long. Tired of the emptiness. Tired of the loneliness. Tired of that feeling that there must be more to life than this.

I don’t keep Shabbat because God commanded me. To the contrary: it is my Shabbat-keeping that brings me close to God: A gift of wisdom, of sanity, of life… a glimpse of transcendence.