

Sabbath resistance: Sabbath and the status quo

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

In his book *Jewish Renewal*, Rabbi Michael Lerner says that anyone engaging the practice of Shabbat can expect a rough ride for a couple of years at least. This is because Sabbath involves pleasure, rest, freedom and slowness, none of which comes naturally to North Americans. Most of us are so sold on speed, so invested in productivity, so convinced that multitasking is the way of life that stopping for one whole day can feel at first like a kind of death.

As the adrenaline drains away, you can fear that your heart has stopped beating since you cannot hear your pulse pounding in your temples anymore. As you do no work, you can wonder if you are running a temperature since being sick is the only way that you ever get out of work. As time billows out in front of you, you can have a little panic attack at how much of it you are wasting since time is not only money but also the clock ticking on your life.

For reasons like these, plenty of us take an hour here or there and call it Sabbath, which is like driving five miles to town and calling it Europe. Two hours on a Friday afternoon is not enough, Lerner says. We need ten times longer than that to calm down enough to draw a deep breath. We need ten times ten to trust the saving rhythm of Sabbath without worrying that our own ambition will yank the rug of rest out from under us. "You haven't had the experience," he says, "until you've tried doing it for the full 25 hours, and doing it for a year or two minimum."

I have been doing it for seven years now, which is how I know the rabbi is right. For the first couple of years, I paced as much as I rested. Every few hours I caught my mind posing inventive questions. If I enjoyed yard work, was it really work? Was browsing a mail order catalog really shopping? By year three I had come to count on Sabbath the same way I count on food or breath. I could work like a demon the other six days of the week as long as I knew the seventh was coming. For the first time in my life, I could rest without leaving home.

With sundown on the Sabbath, I stopped seeing the dust balls, the bills and the laundry. They were still there, but they had lost their power over me. One day each

week I lived as if all my work were done. I lived as if the kingdom had come and when I did the kingdom came, for 25 hours at least. Now, when I know Sabbath is near, I can feel the anticipation bubbling up inside of me. Sabbath is no longer a good idea or even a spiritual discipline for me. It is an experience of divine love that swamps both body and soul. It is the weekly practice of eternal life, marred only by the fact that I do it alone.

In its community form, Sabbath is not only about rest but also about resistance. Each time it appears in Torah, the commandment limits the exploitation of others as well as the exhaustion of the self. When you stop working, so do your children, your animals and your employees, even if they do not believe in your God. *You* believe in your God, so they get the day off. By interrupting our economically sanctioned social order every week, Sabbath suspends our subtle and not so subtle ways of dominating one another on a regular basis. The lion is restrained from making a profit on the lamb, who may still choose to lie down for a Sabbath nap alone but is free from the fear of waking up as lamb chops on this one day at least.

If we paid as much attention to Leviticus 25 as we do to Leviticus 18, then we might discover that God is at least as interested in economics as in sex. Real rest involves all creation: freeing slaves, forgiving debts, restoring property and giving the land every seventh year off. Leviticus 25 shows divine concern for *grapes*, for God's sake; it promises both the tame and wild animals in the land enough to eat, along with the hired hands who have time to play horseshoes during the year that the tractors stay parked in the barn. While there are a lot of yard signs supporting the Ten Commandments in the rural county where I live, I do not know a single farmer who keeps the Sabbath holy by giving the fields their hard-earned sabbaticals.

Where there is money to be made, there is no rest for the land, nor for those who live in it. Developers bulldoze the laurels by the river where the raccoons taught their babies how to fish. An entire pine forest comes down to produce the paper for this week's Eddie Bauer catalog. People who have already run out of closet space work overtime to pay the interest on their average \$9,000 credit card debts, while economic predators send teenagers applications for their own preapproved cards in the mail. No resistance to such ravenousness will come from those who are heavily invested in its revenue. The resistance will have to come from elsewhere, from those who live by a different rhythm because they worship a different God.

This is my growing edge, where Sabbath is concerned, and I cannot do it alone. God did not give this commandment to a person but to a people, knowing that only those

who rested together would be equipped to resist together. To remember the Sabbath is to remember what it means to be made in God's image and, when the Sabbath ends, to join God in the holy work of mending the world.