



Crazy busy

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How the intensity of modern life yields to holiness once a week

I just finished reading a book called “Crazy Busy” by Edward H. Hallowell, M.D.

The good doctor, who taught at Harvard for 20 years, specializes in ADHD. His theory is that our entire culture is showing signs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. To address folks who are “overstretched, overbooked and about to snap,” he offers simple exercises and approaches to help them slow down and focus on what’s most important. It’s a very quick read.

I paid a fine at the library, though, because I was so busy that I didn’t finish reading it by the due date — not even after renewing the book three times.

If that sounds like a bit of manufactured irony to make a point in a column — well, you give me too much credit. I’m only reporting the facts.

The most potent and disturbing line in the book comes early on, when Hallowell reports that people who have perfectly average processing abilities have come to him almost hoping to be diagnosed with ADHD. A diagnosis would at least explain why they feel so frazzled and fragmented, why they are working so hard and seemingly getting nothing accomplished. Hallowell concludes: “While some do [have ADHD], most do not. Instead, they have ... a severe case of modern life.”

Hardly anyone I know is immune. We are stressed by the increased pace of life, the torrent of information coming at us, and the unremitting demands of connectivity. It has become strangely honorable or even admirable, in some circles, to martyr yourself to busy-ness. When I was growing up, the “correct” answer to “How are you?” was “Fine, thank you.” Or, in traditional circles, “Baruch Hashem/Thank God.” Today, the socially acceptable answer is “Busy!”

It is easy to become addicted to busy-ness. Fruitfulness is harder to come by.

A whole new lexicon has been created to express our state of “overwhelm” (a word once used as a verb or adjective, but not a noun). We have “gigaguil” if we don’t stay on top of every last email. We suffer from a new form of anxiety — FOMO: fear of missing out. Meanwhile, the speed of life that we have chosen (or, at least, are putting up with) guarantees that we will miss out on many of the things that really and ultimately matter: good health, unstructured time with family, communion with God, volunteer and mitzvah opportunities, or just sitting quietly to dream, meditate, or think.

Hallowell’s book is worthwhile, but it doesn’t break any new ground. The truth is that we know what to do: prioritize, delegate, say no to some things, bundle similar tasks together, carve out time for creativity, distinguish between the important and the urgent. Nevertheless, I was happy to pay the library fine, because I believe that we all need regular reminders, fresh inspiration, and social support for opting out of busy-ness.

Hopefully, this column serves those ends, too.

As Jews, we can find inspiration and support through something much more powerful. We have an infinite, yet neglected source to draw upon for creating a healthy balance between activity and rest, doing and being: Shabbos. “Six days shall you labor and do all your work, and the seventh day is a Sabbath unto Adonai ... [for] God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Time management will take you only so far. Energy management (eating right, sleeping, exercising) will take you farther. Habit management (creating routines to manage time and energy) is the next step. But holiness is a game-changer.

Holiness is not a mere tool for management. It is a call on your life.

Shabbat attends to body and soul not as means of production, but as holy, though weary, actors. Shabbat affirms priorities that have nothing to do with busy-ness and everything to do with holiness. Shabbat lives (and since primordial times has lived) completely outside of the business and busyness economy.

Shabbat is not the pause that enables a productive week; it does not demand rest for the sake of efficiency. Shabbat is the purpose and culmination of the week. As such, it is a more powerful prescription for our ADD culture than any other intervention I know.

Time at the office can be wonderful, inventive, creative, life-affirming. But it still is what Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has called “commodity time.” Shabbat is “organic time.” It is the time you spend sitting and telling stories around the table; resting and playing with your family; visiting with friends; making love with your spouse; eating delicious, slow food (as opposed to fast food); finding common cause in prayer, Torah, and spiritual conversations.

In the biblical 6:1 ratio, the balance between labor and rest is in favor of melachah — your life’s work. But let’s not forget that work and busy-ness are far from identical. The commandment is not to be busy for six days out of seven, but to do our work. It is part of everyone’s life work to “love your neighbor as yourself,” to “care for the earth” — and of course there are individual missions and job descriptions, too. I would argue that “our work” includes the mitzvah of self-care. Being “crazy busy” may be an unfortunate byproduct of overwork or poor time management, but it isn’t anyone’s idea of productivity or contribution.

When you think of self-care not merely as necessary or even effective, but as a mitzvah — a sacred commandment — then it has a different valence. Self-care is no longer just an aid in recovery or a strategy for productivity. It becomes both a duty and a pleasure. It is a thank-you for the divine gift of life. It gives us perspective on the purpose to which we have been consecrated. It gives us the power and the inspiration to fulfill the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and “live life as if it were a work of art.”

On the bulletin board in my kitchen, amidst the school notices and after-school schedules, are a meal rotation chart for packed lunches and an exercise chart for the adults. Those reminders help my family to organize our weekdays and to care for mind and body in healthy ways. But you won’t find a “Shabbos observance chart.” We are lucky to have experienced that mitzvah in its fullness, and so no one in my house needs reminding. Nor will we be tempted to “cheat” on our Shabbat observance (the way we might on our diets) or just skip a week (the way I might, when it comes to exercise). Crazy-busy loses its appeal and compulsion in the face of passionate rest.

The madness of contemporary busy-ness will elicit many wise and wonderful responses. If you seek a reprieve, no doubt there’s an app (or a few hundred) for that. This column is just a reminder to stop and “take account of our days” (Psalm 90:12), because it is all too easy to simply acclimate ourselves to societal ADD. It seems normal to commoditize and monetize our one irreplaceable resource: time. There is so much social support to remain overbooked and so little support to reset priorities.

I’m also offering friendly encouragement to launch the original “app” for apportioning time and energy in a balanced and meaningful way: namely, Shabbos. If you want help with that, please feel free to contact me... 24/6.

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