Gut Yontiff! Shabbat Shalom! Gut Shabbos!

One of the questions
often put to me at this time of year,
is ‘what will we at BHS do[?]'
when Rosh Hashana
or Yom Kippur
falls on a Sunday,
and we cannot use Plymouth Church
because its own congregation is worshipping?

Let me share the good news with you all
—it will never happen,
so you needn’t worry.

The second day of Rosh Hashana,
when we’re all back at BHS,
can fall on a Sunday,

but the first day of the New Year,
and likewise the day of Yom Kippur,
will never,
and can never,
fall on a Sunday.
One less thing
for our new Executive Director, Sue Gold,
to have to worry about!

Having now set aside
your visceral worries
and deep-seated anxieties
over this troubling concern,
let me take a second—now—to explain why.

Astronomically speaking,
it is of course very possible
for 1st day Rosh Hashana
or Yom Kippur
to fall on a Sunday,
and the ancient sages knew this Very Well.

But allowing Yom Kippur
to fall on Sunday
(or for that matter Friday)
would have created
a degree of difficulty in observing Shabbat,
i.e. Saturday,
that the Rabbis found unacceptable.
Given the preparations
traditionally necessary for each day,
positioning Yom Kippur immediately before
or after Shabbat
would do a disservice to both occasions.

And as much as the sages
may have claimed
that if you were willing,
you could start observing Shabbat
as early as Wednesday,
and end its observance
as late as Tuesday,

the reality of observing
more than 24/25 hours of Shabbat
—at least before the arrival of Messianic times—
was a non-starter.

But shifting the High Holy Days,
by a single day,
thereby often overlaying Yom Kippur
on top of Shabbat,
allowed a solution.

Yom Kippur, if you don’t recall,
is also—uniquely
entitled Shabbat Shabbaton –
the Sabbath of Sabbaths.
All of this, explains why you may have noticed that Yom Kippur so frequently falls on Saturdays. Over the last decade, Yom Kippur has fallen on Shabbat 5 out of 10 times. And will fall on Saturday next year as well.

Admittedly, when Yom Kippur is so scheduled, we lose out on the flavors, aromas and sustenance of a regular Shabbat,

but the real gift that Shabbat has to offer, remains.

I realize that for some of us gathered here who were raised in more Conservative or Orthodox Jewish households, Shabbat in its traditional observance may not have always seemed a gift.

From one particular vantage point, both Yom Kippur and Shabbat seem primarily about limitations and restrictions.

This perception focuses on what is lacking, what we have been deprived of. Of the many activities and tasks, concerning which we have been told we are not supposed to engage.
To the uninitiated
or the overly well-initiated—
Shabbat
or Yom Kippur
can feel focused on denial.
Creating a sense of deprivation.
And yet, I would argue,
that this view,
entirely misses the intention of these days.

Despite the apparent paradox
between this most frequent
and heimish day of the Jewish year,
and this most solemn
and singular day of the Jewish year;
Shabbat and Yom Kippur
are mostly about saying ‘yes’
to the sorts of things
that during the work-week or year
we typically dismiss
as not have enough time for.

Time.
Time to do nothing.
Time to BE.
To BE
with those we hold most dear.

To BE with
and rediscover
our own authentic selves.
Shabbat and Yom Kippur
both come
to clear the stage
and create Time for us
to BE
Once each week,
and once each year.
It is only by stopping,
by releasing and relinquishing,
by clearing space and time,
removing—momentarily—
the demands and distractions
that fill in and color our days
that we can begin
to recognize that there are elements
missing
from our lives.

Most of us lead lives that are TOO busy, TOO stuffed.

Our days are filled
with schedules and appointments,
projects and deadlines.
Commitments
to parents and children, to spouses and colleagues.
There are Bills and payments.
Transportation and waiting rooms.
Exams and prep,
scans and evaluations.
Groceries and laundry,
Medicines and music lessons,
House-cleaning and car repairs.
Contractors and repairmen.

And our heads spin and our eyes glaze
trying to take in
Permission slips and order-forms
Notifications and proxies
Sound-bites and headlines
Robo-calls and phone surveys
Petitions and email alerts
Mobilizations and run-offs
Caucuses for war and the forums on health-care.

We are gorged
on commitments and obligations,
On information and input.
And they are real, 
and so much of it 
really must be attended to.

But as a result, 
Too, too often, 
there’s no Time, 
no Room, 
for anything else, 
much less to explore 
what might be missing 
from our lives.

Shabbat, the Sabbath, 
is not merely a day of leisure and rest, 
it is a sanctuary for cessation. 
An opportunity 
to halt our fervid march forward. 
What some of our parents or grandparents 
would have called a *mechaye*, 
literally: a resurrection. 
Instead of gulping in breaths, 
It is the moment when we can exhale.

To discover and enjoy the benefits of Shabbat, 
you don’t need to buy a subscription. 
But you do need to stop.

To turn things off, 
so that you might discover 
what it means to truly turn yourself on.

Like a visiting relative, 
Shabbat asks 
if you wouldn’t mind 
adjusting your schedule 
to her visit.
One of my most favorite and frustrating experiences at BHS often comes at the end of a particularly resonant Shabbat evening service when a member of our community may approach me to mention how uplifting and meaningful they've found the entire experience, and—simultaneously—how much they regret that they can't seem to free up more time to attend more regularly, being so busy and over-committed.

Shabbat arrives recognizing and responding to the burdens we carry from one week into the next. So too, Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, appears shining a spotlight on the self-imposed overload and emotional baggage we carry from one year into the next.

Shabbat arrives asking us to practice Tzimtzum, the Divine behavior of withdrawing, of creating empty time and space, where once all was ungeshtupt—‘over stuffed’—with our strivings. Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shabbaton, this singular Sabbath of Sabbaths, arrives as a literal Firebreak, that clear line in space and time that banks the flames of our creative undertakings and activities.
—both the generative and destructive fires of the past year—
clearing away the deadwood and undergrowth,
that comfortably distract our focus,
and lays bare
the burdens and accomplishments
we have carried for the past year.

And that is what makes this Day
--potentially--
transformational,
but also terrifying.

For the dread of this day
is not so much of Divine Judgment,
but the fear
of what our personal inventory and self-assessment
would reveal
if actually undertaken:

Of too many days and energies
   squandered or poorly spent.
Of small satisfactions
   achieved at great price and pain.
Of families and legacies
   ignored or insufficiently attended.
Of values and beliefs
   Denied, suspended or forgotten.

Of distracting ourselves
with constant commitments
in order to avoid
looking back
or too far forward.

And lastly,
of that unspoken fear
that when we reach the proverbial finish line,
our passing will have left no impact,
and no absence.
Yom Kippur,  
the Sabbath of Sabbaths  
asks us—for 25 hours—  
to cease,  
not only our creative labors—  
but also our consuming,  
our imbibing,  
our habitual filling ourselves up at every moment.

Yom Kippur asks  
that we allow ourselves  
to digest what is already there  
without immediately refilling.

To stop.  
To stop distracting ourselves.  
To silence the throbbing din of our activities and consumption.  
To allow for emptiness and want.  
To permit the quietude of stillness.

To acknowledge  
our fear of stopping,  
of--God forbid--releasing,  
of letting go  
of those things  
we have already begun, resolved or committed to.

Our deeply ingrained reluctance  
to change paths,  
to backtrack,  
to change our minds, and our destinies.

This is the gift of Yom Kippur,  
which is also the gift of each and every Shabbat:  
Shavat va-yinafash:  
To stop,  
to cease,  
to release,  
and thereby rediscover—not our doing—  
but our own authentic ‘BE’ing.
Keyn Yehi Ratzon –
May it be God’s will!
Shabbat Shalom! And Gut Shabbos!