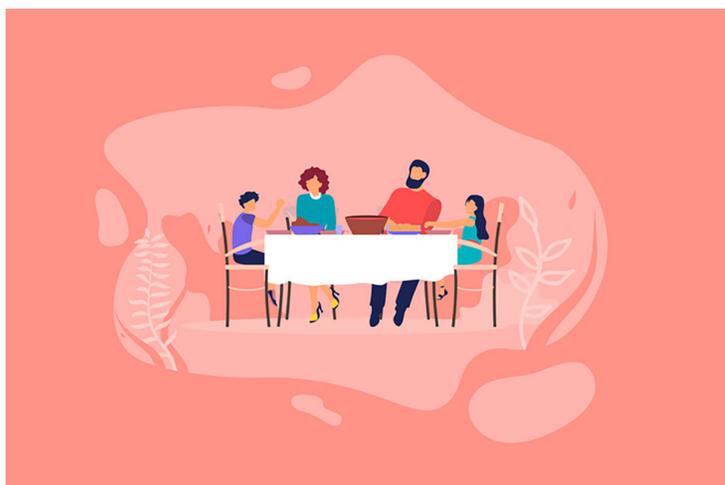


shabbat

I Used to Hate Shabbat Dinner. During Covid-19, It's The Highlight of My Week.

By Pam Moore Jul 2, 2020



“This is *quiet time!*” I yelled at my children, who are 6 and 8. As a 41-year-old mother of two in Boulder, Colo., I experience rage more often than I’d like, especially when I feel powerless. Coronavirus isn’t helping.

“We *are* being quiet, Mama,” countered my youngest.

“No, you’re not. You know how dad is downstairs in his office, working? I work, too. I have deadlines. Give me ONE HOUR. STOP SCREAMING,” I screamed.

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Like parents all over the world, overnight I became my family's teacher, kitchen staff, tech support, and full-time referee. As coronavirus upended just about every aspect of our lives, I worried I’d lose the momentum I’d built in my freelance career.

I wish I could say I was never a yeller until the stress of a global pandemic got to me, but I’ve always had a tendency to raise my voice when I get frustrated or feel unheard. I’m not proud to admit I’ve been known to yell at a non-responsive laptop, a finicky door, and my children.

In the East Coast Jewish family where I grew up, everyone talked over each other and raised their voices. We could argue over anything, including whether or not to have Shabbat dinner. Although my parents sent me to a Jewish day school, Friday nights in our Rhode Island house were typically not holy. I would watch *Solid Gold* with the babysitter, stay up late, and sprint to my room when we heard my parents' car in the driveway.

Once I got my driver's license, however, my mom invoked Shabbat as the reason I couldn't go out with my friends on Fridays. This made no sense to me as we'd always been very lax when it came to observing Jewish law. Every summer, we had lobster races on the porch before throwing the crustaceans in a pot of boiling water and eating them for dinner. After Yom Kippur services, we'd always stop at my grandmother's house, where my dad enjoyed a tongue sandwich.

In other words, we were not religious — but suddenly Shabbat became a big deal. I would stomp my Doc Martens up to my room, yelling, "Since when did you become this Super Jew!?" and slam my door.

Still, when I got to college, I sporadically attended services and Shabbat dinner at Hillel. In graduate school, I went to Hillel almost every Friday night. I appreciated the community, but I was mostly interested in meeting eligible Jewish men — specifically the medical students and MBA candidates.

I never imagined I'd end up marrying someone who had never so much as attended a bar mitzvah, had no idea what Shabbat was, or how to pronounce the "ch" in challah. I met my husband at a bar — he is a fourth-generation Coloradoan WASP whose family is polite, never teases one another, and rarely argues. Also, their conversations include *pauses*.

After being on lockdown for two months, I realized I couldn't blame my short fuse on my upbringing. Quarantine was turning me into a monster. My youngest had finally started kindergarten, affording me entire days to work uninterrupted for the first time in seven years. Attempting to work with my kids home, I felt like I was one snack request away from a mental breakdown.

I squeezed my work into the 20 minutes when my kids' online classes overlapped, the 30-minute blocks when they played in their imaginary worlds, or "recess," when I banished them to the backyard. Working in bite-sized spurts was driving me nuts.

"I think I'm losing my mind," I told Dan in bed one night.

While I felt lucky that no one we knew was sick or dying because of coronavirus, I struggled with the uncertainty. I didn't know when we could have babysitters again. I didn't know when I'd see my parents. Living thousands of miles away, I missed them. I'd hoped we could still fly out to visit this summer, as we'd planned, until they told me they weren't comfortable hosting us. "Better safe than sorry," my dad said.

I hung up the phone and thought of the beach walks I wouldn't take with my dad, the stories my mom wouldn't read my girls, and the cocktails we wouldn't savor on the porch as the sun set over Narragansett Bay. I wanted to sit around my parents' table with my siblings and their families and share a loaf of my mom's homemade challah over Shabbat dinner. I hadn't realized just how much I valued my family's Shabbat dinners until now. It occurred to me that perhaps my mom's goal wasn't to imprison me on Friday nights but to create some connection.

Dan and I had discovered Shabbat was an easy but meaningful way to wrap up the week and welcome the weekend. On Friday nights, even during quarantine, I prepare a "real" meal — not frozen pizza or leftovers, which we rely on most evenings. Dan attempts the Hebrew prayers, his enthusiasm more than balancing his tendency to mumble through some of the words. While he has no intention of converting, he appreciates the rhythm the Jewish tradition brings to our week.

After we say the traditional blessings, we perform our own weekly ritual: Each person shares the highlight of their week. As an extrovert, many of my opportunities for joy have gone the way of yeast and hand sanitizer since the pandemic took hold. Yet despite the losses, the uncertain future, and the monotony of sheltering in place, every week I struggle to choose just one highlight. Just last week, I struggled with my selection: Was it my unparalleled (and perhaps overblown) joy upon completing a 500-piece puzzle we'd been working on for days? The daffodils starting to bloom? Or the time my girls asked me to get in the bathtub with them?

According to the late Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, the purpose of Sabbath is not to recover from the previous week or to prepare for the week ahead. "The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life," he said.

As the sun dipped behind the mountains on that Friday, I was reminded of all the beauty that remained despite — and because of — having to stay home. I've completed projects in the yard and puzzles with my family. Instead of our daily sprint to the bus stop, we take leisurely morning walks.

I haven't had a lot of quiet time since coronavirus flipped the world upside down. But every Friday night the noise feels like less chaos and more like a blessing.

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