



Making room for the sacred at table

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

— Deuteronomy 6: 6-7 (NIV)

A recent purchase of furniture for my wife’s birthday was an opportunity to begin a significant family tradition, contributing to the spiritual formation of my sons for years to come. Since beginning a renovation of our dining room, my wife talked about wanting a dining room table. Last year I decided that her wish would come true. Wanting to make the gift extra special, I combined the gift with the beginning of a new family tradition – keeping the Sabbath.

Because my work makes keeping the traditional Christian Sabbath especially difficult, my family observes the Jewish Sabbath. Consistent with Jewish tradition, our Sabbath begins with a meal at sundown on Friday around the new dining room table. This weekly occasion brings with it a special blessing, not unlike that offered by the Jews at the beginning of their Sabbath. In this way, we keep the Deuteronomic commandment to impress God’s commands upon our children “when you sit at home” and at table.

For months leading up to her birthday and the delivery of the table, I taught my sons the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). Each night, as part of their bedtime prayer routine, I recited the Shema in Hebrew and English and told them that their learning of the verse was a surprise for their mother’s birthday. Their little sponge-like brains quickly picked up both the Hebrew and English versions. During these months, I developed a responsive prayer for reciting at the table that I hoped would become a long-standing family tradition. By the

Rick Bennett
Director of Congregational Life,
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship,
Atlanta, GA



time of my wife's birthday, the boys each had memorized their shared part in the responsive blessing prayer. Somehow, we managed to keep both the table and the responsive prayer a secret from my wife. Imagine her surprise when she heard her 6 and 3-year-old boys speaking in Hebrew!

Our responsive prayer of blessing for welcoming the Sabbath begins with the lighting of the Sabbath candles, what the Jews refer to as "kindling the Sabbath lights." We begin our tradition with the lighting of just one Sabbath candle, but our boys each wanted to light the candle each week. To eliminate the fuss, I chose to borrow again from our Jewish friends the practice of lighting two candles – one called "observe" and the other "remember." These candles represent the two distinct Sabbath commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), one in Exodus and the other in Deuteronomy. After the boys have lit their respective candles, we hold hands and, with eyes wide open, I recite the Shema in Hebrew. The boys then follow the Hebrew version with the English version.

What follows is a leisurely supper that, unlike most weekday meals, always includes catching up and dessert! I have toyed with making the meal and the Sabbath even more memorable by offering the children some kind of rare treat such as a soda. I've also entertained the idea of having one of my children open the door to welcome "Queen Sabbath" in the Jewish tradition. Regardless of how you form your prayer, the point of course is to bring God to the family table, his work to the family's awareness, and to welcome the Holy Spirit into your home and into the lives of your children.

OBSERVING SABBATH

One of the most effective ways to invite God into your home is to observe the Sabbath – the indirect

subject of this article. To observe the Sabbath, you'll need to prepare for its coming by turning off all phones and putting away all work. The sacred space that Sabbath provides is a prime time for making room for the sacred in family life; its unusualness begs the question, "Why is this day different from the others?" and offers a wonderful platform for sharing our faith and God's intention. There are so many reasons for recovering this forgotten commandment and Marva Dawn treats all of them well in her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*.

With a little creativity and a desire to partner with God in the spiritual formation of your children, you can create a special prayer and occasion that could potentially last generations. In the process, you will lead your family to take seriously what is perhaps the most neglected of all the Commandments. You are welcome to adapt any or all of these ideas for your own family's use.

Shabbat Shalom!

The Shema

Parent: Shema, Yitza-el, Adonai elo-enu, Adonai ehod.

Children: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.

Parent: This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it.

Children: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Parent: Let us give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever!

Anyone: (a brief extemporaneous prayer)

All: Amen.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MEALTIMES

- Consider a litany already written from the resources listed at right.
- Incorporate verses meaningful to you and your family's faith story into a litany of response like the one given. Ever since learning the significance of the Shema, I wanted my children to know it, thus I chose it as the cornerstone of our tradition and as a way to constantly place before them the greatest commandments as summarized by Jesus.
- Share a lengthier responsive prayer or table litany just once a week; don't try to make every night special, but send the message that at least one night a week things are different.
- Involve everyone and give children roles they can easily memorize and in which they take pride. Letting them light a candle is one of the simplest ways to include them in a table ritual.
- Evolve your ritual over time: as children are young, keep it simple, and as they grow older, add parts to the ritual from year to year.

RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT TABLE

Why Not Celebrate by Sara Wenger Shenk – a plethora (150) of substantive ideas for giving attention to the sacred in everyday life. This resource is a “must have!”

A Day in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline – this resource offers a brief, meaningful, and lay-oriented explanation of spiritual formation in the home as well as three services for the home: *A Service for the Night*, *A Service to Welcome the Day*, and *Inauguration of the Sabbath*.

Sabbath Time by Tilden Edwards – part 4, *Living a Sabbath Day*, is especially helpful if you want to begin welcoming the Sabbath as a family or want to create a unique service to do so.

Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives by Karen Marie Yust and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (*Family and Faith Series*) – don't miss chapter 4, *Helping Children Name God's Presence in Their Lives* and chapter 7, *Acting Out Our Spirituality with Children*.

What You Desire

Julian of Norwich

I am ground of your prayers.

First,
it is my will that you have
what you desire.

Later,
I cause you to want it.

Later on,
I cause you to pray for it, and you do so.
How then can you not have what you desire?

Source: *Revelations of Divine Love*