

“Abundance and Limitations”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Right before World War II the renowned Rabbi Morris Shapiro delivered this verdict on American Jewry: they have learned to make kiddush, he said, but have not yet learned how to make *havdalah*. In other words, America understands the blessing over the wine, the blessing of abundance; but the blessing for the end of Shabbat, the blessing of limitation, of distinction, is not yet understood.

The verdict still stands. We live with astonishing abundance. Sociologists have pointed out that for most of human history the greatest boon to human life would have been pure drinking water. Now with a twist of the tap we have water tested to the billionth particle, and insist on drinking bottled water! We are the avatars of excess.

But the presence of so much has blinded us to the reality that one thing remains limited — time. The clock of our lives still ticks rapidly along and accumulating goods does not change the quality or depth of life. As Chesterton wrote, the most important part of the painting is the frame; the most important part of life is its limits. Havdalah, the distinctions, separations, and limitations of life are less familiar to us than its riches. Rabbi Shapiro's message is still relevant: as we learn to affirm, we must learn to distinguish; as we yearn to say 'yes' we must also learn to say 'no.'