



## Shabbat: Sign, Symbol, and Sacrament; The Pause that Refreshes

Parshat Ki Tisa, Exodus 30:11 - 34:35 | By Mark Greenspan

“Shabbat” by Rabbis Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz, (pp. 98-136) in *The Observant Life*

### Introduction

For those who strive to live an observant life one cannot overstate the importance of *Shabbat*. In *To Be a Jew*, Rabbi Hayim Donin writes that the observance of the Sabbath is often the first step into Jewish living and the initial step out of Jewish observance. In their description of *Sabbath* Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz offer a picture of what it might mean to become *Sabbath* observant but they do not address the larger issues of how *Sabbath* fits into our world. Those who become more Sabbath observant cannot imagine their lives without the Sabbath and those who do not observe the Sabbath are intimidated by the minutia and restrictions that make up this day. *Sabbath* flies in the face of our contemporary values and life style. For most Americans leisure time is about entertainment and fun or possibly doing the errands and chores we don't have time to do during the week. Saturday is a day at the golf course, going to a football game, or possibly visiting the mall or the grocery store. How do you explain to the non-observant person what it means to set aside a day without all the instruments and strategies we normally use to entertain ourselves? Within the Conservative movement those who celebrate *Sabbath* do it in an all-too-restricted manner. *Sabbath* is limited to candle lighting on Friday night and maybe a couple of hours in synagogue on *Sabbath* morning. Young people who attend Camp Ramah or USY *Shabbatonim* are often exposed to a full *Sabbath* but return home to find that they have no community with which to share this experience. Is it any wonder that we lose so many of our most committed young people? A text study of *Sabbath* like this one only tells half the story. *Sabbath* must be experienced. It is one of the greatest challenges facing the Jewish community today.

### The Torah Connection

*And the Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to the Israelite people and say: Nevertheless you must keep My Sabbaths, for this is a sign for Me and you throughout the generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, have consecrated you. You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his kin. Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For six days the Lord made heaven and earth but on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.*

- Exodus 31:12-17

**And you, speak to the children of Israel:** But as for you, although I have mandated you to command the Israelites concerning the work of the Tabernacle, do not let it seem to you that you may easily set aside the Sabbath because of that work. **Only keep My Sabbaths!** Although you will be rushed to perform the work of the Mishkan quickly, the Sabbath shall not be set aside because of it. All instances in which the word *akh* (only, nevertheless, but) or *rak* (only) are used implies limitations; so too here, to exclude the Sabbath from the work of the Mishkan.

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- Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, Rashi's Commentary

*It was taught: They related concerning Shammai that all his life he ate in honor of the Sabbath. Thus if he found a well-favored animal, he said, Let this be for the Sabbath. If afterwards he found one better favored he put aside the second for the Sabbath and ate the first. But Hillel the Elder had a different trait, for all his works were for the sake of heaven, for it is said: "Blessed is the Lord, day by day." It was likewise taught: Beth Shammai say: From the first day of the week prepare for the Sabbath; but Beth Hillel says: "Blessed is the Lord, day by day." (Psalms 68:20)*

*Rabban Johanan said in the name of Rabban Simeon ben Yohai: Every commandment which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave unto Israel, He gave to them publicly, except the Sabbath which He bestowed upon them in secret, for it is said: "It is a sign between Me and the children, of Israel forever." (Exodus 31:17) If so, idolaters should not be punished on its account! The Sabbath He indeed made known to the idolaters but its reward He did not make known to them. Or you can say: Its reward too He made known to them but 'additional soul' He did not make known to them, (this term indicates the spiritual ennoblement conferred by Shabbat). Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said: On the eve of the Sabbath the Holy One, blessed be He, gives to man an additional soul and at the close of the Sabbath God withdraws it from him, for it says: "He ceased from work and rested;" (Exodus 31:17) once the Sabbath has ceased woe that the additional soul is lost!*

- BT Beitzah 16a

*It is a sign forever" (Exodus 31:17). The verse tells that the Sabbath will never cease in Israel. You find that any observance for which Israel were willing to give up their lives has been preserved among them. But any observance for which Israel were not willing to give up their lives has not been preserved among them. Thus the Sabbath, circumcision, and study of Torah, for which Israel were willing to give up their lives, have been retained by them. But such institutions as the Temple and the sabbatical and jubilee years, for which Israel were not willing to give up their lives, have not been retained by them.*

- Midrash Mekhilta Ki Tisa, Shabbata 1

*More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath the Sabbath has kept the Jews.*

- Ahad Ha-am, Asher Ginsberg, Zionist ideologue, 1856-1927

*To love Judaism is to know how much the Sabbath matters...What the Sabbath does to foster such social solidarity is simple. The Sabbath coordinates non-work time. It makes people stop working not only for 25 hours a week but for the same 25 hours a week.*

- Judith Shulevitz in the Israeli daily, *Haaretz*

*The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.*

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (2001; reprint, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1951)

## Reflections

What does it mean to set aside a day each week with nothing more than prayer, meals, learning, relaxation and the company of family and friends? Our lives are so frenetic it is hard for us to imagine doing nothing (which is what we are likely to consider these activities). And how would we begin creating such a space in time for ourselves? Jewish tradition offers a methodology for separating ourselves from the world of things and tasks in a fashion that at first might seem odd but in fact is quite brilliant. M'lakhah is defined not simply as physical taxing labor (like mowing the lawn or painting one's house) but rather as those tasks that are creative. Tearing a leaf off a tree, carrying a book in a public thoroughfare, or opening an umbrella are all defined as melakhah while carrying a piece of furniture around one's house is not! Of course moving furniture might not be in the spirit of the Sabbath but it is technically not prohibited in the categories of m'lakhah and toladot. Sabbath is more than just a day of rest; it is a day of rejuvenation. M'lakhah is defined by the nexus of Sabbath and the Tabernacle. In fact the Torah tells very little about how to observe the Sabbath. Other than telling us to refrain from m'lakhah, labor, to avoid kindling a fire, and not to gather sticks, there is little else in the Torah about the actual observance of this day. The sages famously wrote, "The laws concerning Shabbat...are like mountains hanging by a hair since there is scant scriptural basis but many laws" (*BT Chagigah* 10a).

But even this doesn't answer the question of how to celebrate Sabbath. After all one can strictly observe the laws of the Sabbath without doing it b'ruach Sabbath, "in the spirit of the Sabbath." If I use a Sabbath timer to turn on the TV so I can watch the football game am I really celebrating Sabbath? If I spend my time in synagogue talking about business and gossiping is this in the spirit of Sabbath? If the Sabbath meals are more about my stomach than my soul then what have I accomplished? The discussion in Babylonian Talmud Beitzah above makes this point quite dramatically. For Shammai and Hillel Shabbat is part of a way of living the entire week. Shammai believes the Sabbath is something we prepare for all week long. For Hillel, on the other hand, it is the culmination of a week lived by the highest spiritual values in which we cherish each moment of life as we experience it. Both of them agree that Sabbath is the culmination and full expression of our Jewish identity, the day on which we are blessed with a neshamah yeteirah, an additional soul. All human beings are endowed with a soul but Sabbath introduces into our lives an additional element of spirituality that is uniquely Jewish.

There is no question that Sabbath is a demanding discipline. But anything in life that is worthwhile requires sacrifice, discipline, and effort. And just as one cannot appreciate the joy of swimming without entering the water it is hard to explain to people what Sabbath means if they are unwilling to enter into the day. Of course one need not do so all at once (one should never dive into the deep end of the pool without knowing how to swim) but there can be steps along the way that should lead to a deep commitment both to the celebration and observance of Sabbath.

## Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *The rabbis of the Talmud, noting the juxtaposition of Sabbath prohibitions at Exodus 31:12-17 and the laws of the Tabernacle at Exodus 31:1-10 reasoned that those activities necessary to constructing the Tabernacle were the very ones prohibited on Shabbat. Thus they spoke of thirty-nine avot m'lakhab (that is 39 broad archetypal categories of labor) prohibited on the Sabbath...To these avot m'lakhab, the rabbis added a long list of toladot ("offspring") that they perceived to issue, like descendants from the broader categories*  
- *The Observant Life*, p.127
2. *For moderns, the concept of m'lakhab can be interpreted in a boarder sense that enhances the ancient rubrics without replacing them. Rabbi Samuel Dresner, for example, writing in The Sabbath, taught that the larger category of "work" should include earning one's livelihood, engaging in business or commercial transactions, shopping, performing strenuous physical exertion, changing the physical world by kindling or extinguishing a flame, repairing, improving, constructing, destroying, planting, cooking, sewing, writing, tearing, traveling from community or neighborhood to another, making preparations during Shabbat for events that will take place after Shabbat ends, engaging in any activities that constitutes drudgery, allowing oneself to be preoccupied, distracted, or anxious about any of the above, or to be angry, hateful, grieved, despairing about anything at all...*  
- *The Observant Life*, p.127

## Questions to Ponder

1. How do the laws of Sabbath create an opportunity for rejuvenation and renewal? In what ways are they restrictive and in what ways might they be liberating?
2. Originally published in 1951 Abraham Joshua Heschel attempts to offer an explanation for the centrality of the Sabbath in the spiritual life of Jews in his classic work *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. In what way did his work speak to the people of that generation and how does the work speak to our generation?
3. Compare the visions of spirituality of Hillel and Shammai as presented in the Talmud above. How are they different from one another? What does each one say about the role of Sabbath in our lives?
4. In what ways do we need Sabbath as individuals? In what ways do we need Sabbath as Jews?
5. Come up with three ways that you would introduce the Sabbath into your daily life.

*Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan*