A Jewish view of Shabbat

An enviable practice for our time

Karen Soria

Herman Wouk tells about the time a Broadway producer of a play Wouk had written told him: "I don't envy you your religion, but I envy you your Sabbath."[1] I suppose the man imagined Judaism—the unenvied religion—as composed exclusively of prohibitions. But this busy producer also perceived that the Sabbath provides respite and renewal from the relentless demands of work.

Abraham Joshua Heschel many years ago wrote the seminal statement of the Jewish concept of the Sabbath—or *Shabbat*, in Hebrew—in his book *The Sabbath*.[2] Heschel's poetic writing mocks the concept of Judaism as a collection of don'ts as he describes Shabbat as a sanctuary in time. His analysis has only gained in importance as technological innovation accelerates and contemporary demands increase and further impinge on our lives.

One way of reading Genesis 1:1–2:3 sees the work of creation as having been completed on day six before God rests on Shabbat; another sees creation as culminating with the creation of rest itself.

The beginnings of Shabbat

But the beginnings of Shabbat observance lie in a few verses from Scripture.[3] The creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:3 takes us from day one through day six[4] into the crown of creation with the Sabbath, the only day that has its own name. One way of reading the text sees the work of creation as having been completed on day six before God rests on Shabbat; another sees creation as culminating with the creation of rest itself.

The Sabbath is so essential to Judaism that the fourth (in the Jewish numbering) of the Ten Commandments deals with its observance. Exodus 20:8–11 tells us to "remember" the Sabbath, and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, to "observe" the Sabbath. The difference in words has provided fertile ground—understandably

so!—for Jewish exegesis, as the rabbis of old (200 or so BCE through 600 CE) explored, debated, discussed, and finally recorded their thoughts on what one needs to do to remember and observe the Sabbath. In addition to Scripture, Judaism has volumes upon volumes of writings that came after the canon of Scripture was set in approximately 200 BCE. Scripture is referred to as the "Written Law" and the Talmud as the "Oral Law," although both include much besides what we think of as law. The rabbis of old took oral teachings and finally wrote them down in the Mishnah (fixed in approximately 200 CE), which became the core of the Talmud. Many commentators have added their thoughts as Judaism continues to develop over the millennia.

One of their starting points developed out of the scriptural details of building the tabernacle in the wilderness: all construction was to cease on the Sabbath, and the rabbis organized the tasks of construction into thirty-nine categories of work. Of course, times changed between the Ten Commandments and the start of the discussions, as they did between the start of those discussions and their end in 600 CE. And the discussions and debates continue in Jewish circles on what one may and may not do in appropriately remembering and observing the Sabbath.

By setting boundaries around what one cannot do, Judaism opens up a treasure of what one can do. At their best, boundaries make room. Shabbat becomes a day of rest, renewal, revitalization, restoration, repair, replenishment, and rekindling of our spiritual and emotional selves.

Boundaries shape a day to be envied

Now considering those thirty-nine categories of work that one is not allowed to do—the don'ts: how can they shape a day that is envied? By setting boundaries around what one cannot do, Judaism opens up a treasure of what one can do. At their best, boundaries make room. Shabbat becomes a day of rest, renewal, revitalization, restoration, repair, replenishment, and rekindling of our spiritual and emotional selves. We literally re-member ourselves, as we set aside the physical and mental demands of the everyday in order to refocus on the life of the soul. God's resting on Shabbat is described as *vayinafash* (*nefesh* is "soul"); Shabbat rest is thus a re-souling of ourselves. It is as though we recreate

ourselves, in line with the Exodus verses' emphasis on Shabbat's connection with creation.

How profound is our need for such a time! We are continually bombarded with demands. Our electronic devices beep and message senders expect instant reply. Social networking purports to keep us in touch with family and friends—an admirable goal—but too often those notifications, posts, and worthy articles distract from human connection—to ourselves, our loved ones, and God. If we do not open the space in our lives for relationships, they will not happen. If we fill our lives with busyness, we will have no room for anything else. We lose touch with ourselves as human beings, if we become merely human doings.

Ritual creates a sanctuary in time

We open that space through the creation of a "sanctuary in time," to use Heschel's image. We construct not a physical tabernacle or other kind of place but an oasis in time, with leisure to think about how we live and what is truly important in our lives. With time to see the gifts that do in fact fill our lives, we thank and praise the Holy One of blessing. We build that oasis with conversation with family and friends, not about the business or busyness of our lives, but about what and who are truly central to our lives.

We light candles and wave our hands as though bringing the light closer: the candlelight represents spiritual and intellectual light of the soul. Covering our eyes while saying the words of blessing, we then uncover them as though to see—truly see!—light for the first time.

We beautify that space through ritual, sanctifying ordinary food with blessing and ceremony, through actions that are metaphors for values and ideas. We light candles and wave our hands as though bringing the light closer: the candlelight represents spiritual and intellectual light of the soul. Covering our eyes while saying the words of blessing, we then uncover them as though to see—truly see!—light for the first time. How extraordinary and wondrous the ordinary can be! On Shabbat we pause to see and hear, as though for the first time.

Shabbat ritual frames the sanctuary of time. We welcome it with blessings over light (both the literal candles and metaphoric spiritual light), wine (or fruit of the vine, symbol of joy), and

bread (hallah, the braided egg bread, richer and sweeter than the weekday dark or multigrain breads). The blessings are to be said shortly before sunset, and then the family—be it small, extended, "typical," or postmodern—sits down for a relaxed meal, often with special foods. Because the blessings at the start remind us of the gifts God gives us (and our responsibility to use them wisely and to share them), we need to say thank you at the end of the meal, again with blessings and songs.

Morning brings the opportunity for communal prayer and study, a chance to thank, praise, and glorify God. An afternoon nap is an important tradition in many Jewish homes, before perhaps going back to the synagogue for afternoon services and (in any case) offering the blessings to say farewell to the Shabbat, when three stars are visible. The end blessings complement the beginning ones, using a candle with multiple wicks, sweet-smelling spices, and wine. We thank God for making differences in the world.

Binding one day in seven in order to unbind ourselves

How profound: to bless God and to emphasize the blessing in our differences! This is a gift Judaism brings to the world. God loves our differences. But when we were slaves, we could not appreciate that. The blessing over the wine at the start of Shabbat praises God for two foundation points: creation and redemption from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Moreover, we are told repeatedly in Scripture to remember that we were slaves in Egypt. If we remember the heart and the hurt of a slave, then we can never treat another as we were treated.

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Slaves cannot pause when tired. Their taskmaster orders their schedule and commands their effort. They cannot rest; they have no luxury of time to reflect on their lives and on life's meaning. In addition to remembering Sabbath rest as the crown of creation, Jews mark another touchstone on Shabbat: redemption from slavery, when God freed us from being slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt in order to covenant with us at Mt. Sinai. Deuteronomy 5:15 connects Shabbat observance, history,

and our actions in this way: "Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Eternal your God brought you out from there with strong hand and extended arm: therefore the Eternal your God directed you to keep Shabbat." Every Sabbath—indeed, prayers at every Jewish service—harks back to creation and redemption.

How many of us are slaves to another schedule, set by work or imposed demands? How many of us, on our deathbed, will regret time not spent slaving for temporal gain? How many of us make regular arrangements to appreciate what we have and who we are, to discern our life's path, and to deepen our connections with the people and values that give our lives meaning? Slavery, as Scripture tells us and Jewish interpretation has taught over the centuries, is not a one-time or a once-upon-a-time event. Slavery is something we humans do to others—and to ourselves. To bind one day in every seven to the themes of the essential worth of every human and to the creation of the world—both of them God's creations—could, if we truly incorporated its lessons into our lives, change the world for better.

All we have is the time we are given

The Sabbath reminds us that all we have is, in fact, the time we have. Jewish teaching says: Make your time beautiful and meaningful! Rest and renew yourself. Become God's partner in creation, in the creation of a human being—yourself.

"So God blessed the seventh day and 'en-holied' it, for with it God 'sabbathed' from all God's work of creating" (Gen. 2:3).

Notes

[1] Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 60.

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1952). Heschel speaks of the "architecture of holiness" and asserts that the Sabbath is the Jewish cathedral in time.

[3] Jews refer to the Bible as Scripture, the Bible, the Torah, or most properly, TaNaKh—an acronym for its three sections, Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Early Christian authorities changed the order of a number of books in the second two sections. Also, authoritative translations for Jews are from the Hebrew of well over a thousand years ago (the Masoretic text), rather than from the Greek.

[4] While the usual translation of *yom* is "day," elsewhere the word clearly indicates a much longer span of time. For example, some verses and explanations in the Psalms, among other places, unambiguously clarify that God's sense of time and ours are not

the same. "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes by or a watch through the night" (Ps. 20:4).

About the author

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