



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Rachel Miriam Safman

דרכיה דרכי נעם

SHABBAT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION

RABBIS SHARON BROUS AND AARON ALEXANDER

INTRODUCTION

How do we live in a world that seems to make a mockery of our deepest held beliefs and our tradition's most profound claims?

The first and most foundational claim that Judaism makes about the human beings is that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. Our tradition teaches that this means that every person, by virtue of being born, has innate dignity and worth. It teaches that every single human life is precious and that each person is endowed by God with unique qualities that will never be replicated in precisely the same way in another; that the differences between us are a reflection of God's love and God's greatness, and we should work to cultivate rather than suppress them.

And yet, the reality of our world seems to deny the truth of these claims. Judaism is rooted in an understanding of God and humanity that fundamentally rejects the degradation, exploitation, and diminution of human spirit that is characteristic of human society. Millions die of hunger and treatable diseases every year. War, hatred, prejudice, terror – all of these are about denying the sanctity and worth of human life. This leaves Jews with a great dilemma: do we disengage from a reality that seems to make a joke of our core principles, or do we abandon core principles that seem naïve, impossible and fantastic?

“Living with a dream,” writes Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, “is treacherous business. The dream gives and the dream takes away. Dreams can brighten an oppressive reality, or they can make the everyday appear drab and repellent. Dreams can give life purpose or rob it of value and meaning. Dealing with this double edge has been a major challenge for the Jewish people on their great trek through history toward redemption... Without the dream it hardly seems worth living... With it, everyday unredeemed life hardly seems worth living at all.”

So Torah offers us an eternal prescription, a holy formula that will make it possible for us to engage, live and work in the world as it is, but also to remember to dream about the world as it could be. *Six days a week you will engage and do all of your work, but the seventh day will be a Sabbath – a day for God.*¹ Built into the Jewish consciousness is a way to live with what is and simultaneously reject its limitations. Greenberg continues:

Paradoxically, Judaism affirms both the dream and the reality, both the perfect, redeemed world to be brought into being by human effort and the imperfect, unredeemed world of today...

Greenberg's stunning interpretation of Shabbat places the Jewish people as a timeless voice of dissent against the status quo, ever seeking to allow people to experience and enjoy the world as it is, while still voicing critique, through a weekly rhythmic vision of perfection, Shabbat. He ends his vision by declaring:

Through total immersion in the Shabbat experience, Jews live the dream [of an alternative, more perfect reality] *now*. By an act of [sheer] will, the community creates sacred time and space.²

Shabbat is so much more than a day of rest. It is a day of reconnecting with our deepest dreams for our world and our own lives. Shabbat becomes the holy time that saves us from falling into despair when everything seems to be crumbling beneath us, when the light in our lives seems to be eclipsed in darkness. It comes to remind us that love will ultimately triumph over loneliness, understanding over violence, dignity over degradation. Through praying, singing, talking, walking, dreaming, and sleeping we fortify the part of ourselves that knows that things can be better; we reawaken the part of ourselves that may have forgotten that we are more than our work, our conflicts, our fears, or our inbox.

In Kiddush, the blessing sanctifying Shabbat which is said over wine every Friday night, we evoke the memory of the Exodus from Egypt. What does Egypt have to do with our celebration of Shabbat? The Rabbis knew that it was not

¹ Exodus 20:8-11.

² Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 128



SHABBAT

enough to reaffirm to the great redemptive vision that grew out of the experience of leaving Egypt only once a year, at Passover. Instead, we need to remind ourselves of the possibility of freedom and transformation – personal and national – *constantly*. And especially on Shabbat. But that exercise in memory must never be only for its own sake. In the words of the Slonimer Rebbe, a great 20th century Hassidic teacher:

Every Shabbat has the power to bring redemption to the world. And this is why the commandment is written, “*Keep the Shabbat, and sanctify it. And you must remember, because you were a slave in Egypt*” – it is incumbent upon every Jew to remember and truly know [the experience of the liberation from slavery], because it is on Shabbat that the possibility of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, (the liberation of those enslaved) is renewed. And this is not exclusively for the sake of memory, rather it is for the sake of actually doing the work of Shabbat. A Jew must rise up from a place of degradation, a devastating situation, and find within herself ultimate freedom. And as our teacher taught: the essence of Shabbat is the memory of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* because it is upon every Jew to remember that *it is her life’s work* to leave Egypt, and with the strength of the holy Shabbat, to bring redemption to the world.³

Shabbat then is not just about affirming that things can be different. Shabbat actually has redemptive power – a power that can shape our experience of the world and help turn the tide of human history – because it leaves us with a mandate to *live differently* in the coming week than we did in the past; to see our personal liberation from exhaustion, overwork, anxiety, despair as a microcosm for the liberation of the Jewish people and *all people*; to see each week as an opportunity to elevate our reality to reflect a bit more of what ought to be.

Week after week, year after year, century after century, the Jewish people walk through history with this charge: things can be better. They *must be* better. Do not forget the great dreams our people have carried, encoded in our rituals and our traditions, for thousands of years. Now go – and become agents of the change you want to see.

LIVING THE DREAM – A TRADITIONAL JEWISH RECIPE

One of the great treasures that Judaism offers the world is the constant struggle to capture beautiful and deep ideas and transform them into meaningful practice. Shabbat is a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon, both harnessing the awe and joy of its dream for a different tomorrow, and simultaneously directing a path for living out its ideals in the moment, communally and individually. Now that we recognize the significance of the dream, how do we create the time and space to foster such an experience?

The Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy famously reminds us that ideas and actions are inextricably entwined. We sing together in the famous piyyut (liturgical poem) L’Kha Dodi (Come My Beloved): “*Shamor Ve-Zachor B’Dibbur Echad*” (“Keep and Remember were uttered as one”).

In the Tanakh’s two renditions of the 10 commandments⁴ the verses on Shabbat differ. In one (that appearing in Deuteronomy) the commandment is introduced by the word “*Shamor*” (“Keep”), while in the other the verb used is “*Zachor*” (“Remember”). Our rabbinic tradition understands these to be a simultaneous expression of the ways in which we are to live the vision of Shabbat expressed above. “Remembering” and “Keeping” Shabbat become the legal guidelines by which we may achieve our Shabbat ideal.

The Rambam (1135-1204) conveniently categorizes the obligations of Shabbat as follows:

“There are four components to the observance of Shabbat, two from the Torah and two from the Sages, derived from the Prophets. From the Torah: Remember and Keep. And from the Prophets: Honor and Delight. As it is written in Isaiah 58:13, ‘And you shall call the Shabbat a delight, sanctified to God and honored.’”⁵

³ *Netivot Shalom*

⁴ *Exodus 20:8 and Deuteronomy 5:12*

⁵ *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat, 30:1*



SHABBAT

Let us, therefore, explore these *halakhic* (legal) categories and some of the major the practices therein; the tools that spiritually mark and manage our Shabbat experience.

ZAKHOR ET YOM HA-SHABBAT – REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY AND THE POSITIVE COMMANDMENTS

In Exodus 20:8, the Torah famously teaches us to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, *Zakhor et Yom HaShabbat L’Kodsho*. This positive obligation (*mitzvat aseh*) has been debated by rabbinic scholars because of the ambiguity of the directive “to remember”. Is this something that can be actively pursued? Two major streams of interpretation have attempted to concretize this seemingly benign directive.

The 11th century luminary, Rashi,⁶ understands the unique form the verb *zakhor* to intimate that this mitzvah is an expression of an ongoing action, it is something that exists *all of the time*. According to Rashi, “Pay attention to always remember the Sabbath day so that if you chance upon a beautiful thing, you shall prepare it for the Sabbath.” Read in this light, remembering Shabbat is an obligation that occurs not only on the day itself, but on all days. Every moment becomes an opportunity to actively acknowledge that, not too far away, there is a sacred space and holy time that begs special attention. By capturing these moments and actualizing them, even before Shabbat, we are fulfilling this obligation to acknowledge the potential for holiness in everything.

The Rambam understands this verse differently. He teaches:

It is a positive commandment from the Torah to sanctify the Shabbat day with a verbal statement, for it is written: “Remember the Shabbat day *to sanctify it* (Ex. 20:8)”. That is to say, remember it with words of praise and sanctification. The remembrance is done at the day’s entrance and exit: at its entrance with Kiddush and at its exit with Havdalah.⁷

According to this interpretation, the obligation “to remember” exists specifically on Shabbat – at its onset and conclusion – with a verbal statement of sanctification. *A first step to actualizing the dream is verbally marking it as Holy.*

This familiar practice is the centerpiece of the Shabbat evening ritual, the Kiddush. It is the verbal recognition that we have entered sacred time and space. In fact, a common misconception about the Shabbat Kiddush is that it is simply a blessing over wine. In actuality, it is time itself that we are blessing.⁸ In fact, by specifically mentioning the redemptive communal moment of the Exodus from Egypt (see above), we render time “timeless”. We sanctify all time. The wine (or grape juice) is but the vehicle we use to add joy and sweetness to this moment.

KAVOD AND ONEG – HONOR AND DELIGHT

The active and positive “doing” of Shabbat extends far beyond sanctifying the day in words and thought. Just as Rambam spoke of two prophetic categories of Shabbat Law, Honor and Delight – both extensions, in a way, of *Zakhor Et Yom Ha-Shabbat L’Kodsho* (remembering the Sabbath day to sanctify it) – so the rabbinic tradition extends the category of “honoring” Shabbat to include bathing and shaving before Shabbat and wearing special, distinct, clean clothing on Shabbat itself.

In a similar manner, we honor Shabbat through thoughtful and careful preparation for a day of beauty and tranquility, by bringing out our fancy tableware, white linens, and decorating the table with flowers. In this way we express not only the positive obligation to honor Shabbat, but also the dream of living in a world where this kind of beauty can extend beyond our own table.

⁶ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040 – 1105, France. See his commentary to Exodus, 20:8.

⁷ *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat, 5:1-2*

⁸ *The closing words of the Kiddush are: Blessed are You, God, who Sanctifies Shabbat. (MeKadesh Ha-Shabbat)*



SHABBAT

Of course, this doesn't mean becoming gaudy. Rather, it implies that the intention with which we choose to look and present ourselves and our belongings as we enter Shabbat should be a direct expression of our vision of Shabbat.

So, too, the positive obligation to "delight" in Shabbat. This injunction implores us to not only prepare thoughtfully for Shabbat, but to enjoy the day as well. By kindling flames as Shabbat arrives we create a space filled with light, a space that allows us to enjoy the communal experience of a Shabbat meal and the company of others. We are enjoined to pleasure in tasty food and drink⁹ to the best of our abilities. And yes, the famous double mitzvah of Shabbat, sex, is included in this category.¹⁰

The positive doing of Shabbat, as we have seen, includes sanctifying the day, remembering the day, honoring the day, and delighting in it. In these ways we affirm our active involvement in the mandate to experience immediately what it can mean to live *differently* in the coming week.

SHAMOR ET YOM HA-SHABBAT - KEEPING THE SABBATH DAY – THE NEGATIVE COMMANDMENTS

Perhaps the most challenging aspects of living Shabbat fall within the category of obligations associated with "*Shamor*," the "don't do's" of Shabbat. In the second chapter of the Torah we read:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed God's work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.¹¹

After God completed creation, God rested. So, it follows, we, too, should rest on the seventh day of every week, just as God did.¹²

But this is only the beginning. Resting from work is hardly a clear-cut definition of what it is we are supposed to refrain from doing on Shabbat. What kind of work? Strenuous? Intellectually challenging? Does it depend on the ways in which we live during the week?

Within these questions themselves is embedded a major misperception about the prohibitions associated with Shabbat. The "work" we are not allowed to perform is not really work at all – at least not in the way we conventionally define it today. Rather, it is *malechet machshevet*, intentional/thoughtful creative activities, that are prohibited.

A somewhat exhaustive and very substantial list appears in the second mishnah of the seventh chapter of Tractate Shabbat. It offers us a list of 39 prohibited *melachot*, categories of creative work:

There are 39 primary categories of work [forbidden on the Sabbath]: seeding, plowing, reaping, gathering, threshing, winnowing, sorting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, bleaching it, combing it, dyeing it, spinning it, mounting the warp of the loom, setting two heddles [in preparation to weaving], weaving two threads, unraveling two threads, tying a knot, untying a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing in preparation of sewing two stitches, trapping a deer, slaughtering it, skinning it, salting it & tanning its hide, smoothing [the hide], cutting the hide [into useful shapes], writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a flame, kindling a fire, striking the final blow (completing production of an object), transferring an object from domain to domain (public to private and vice-versa). These are the 39 primary categories of work.

⁹ This explains why the two centerpieces of the Shabbat table rituals are wine and two loaves of challah. ⁸By using our best and adding to what is regular; we are fully expressing our obligation to delight in the Sabbath.

¹⁰ It is called a double mitzvah because we give ourselves the opportunity to fulfill both the commandment to delight in Shabbat and the obligation for those in sanctified relationships to "be fruitful and multiply."

¹¹ Genesis 2:1-3

¹² See the second paragraph of this essay.



SHABBAT

What a list! Clearly not all of these *melachot* entail strenuous activity, yet all of them are biblically forbidden. This reiterates that what we are talking about is not just hard labor, but the very stuff that allows us to live in the world. Food, clothing, shelter, Torah – all of these are incorporated into this list.¹³ On Shabbat, in order to walk in God's footsteps, we must refrain from engaging in the activities that permit us to partner with God and complete creation on a day-to-day basis. By doing this we are forced to contemplate the miraculous gifts we employ and to freshly understand the ways we can continue to use them to create a world worthy of partnership with God, a world that recognizes each person's dignity and inherent worth.

Rabbinically the term *melachot* gets translated as skilled work by a craftsman for creative (not destructive) purposes. Actions must possess three properties to be considered transgressive: Intention, improvement, and permanence.¹⁴ The absence of one of these conditions does not necessarily render a given action permitted, rather it assigns it to the class of actions known as *toldot* (singular, *toldah*).¹⁵ A *toldah* is an action that resembles a *malechet machshevet* in either its intended outcome or its method of performing it, and, for that reason, is also prohibited.¹⁶

The concept of *toldot* leads naturally to that of *sh'vut* or rest, a fitting concept with which to conclude our discussion of Shabbat. *Sh'vut* is a rabbinically instituted category of restrictions, created to safeguard the very principles that make Shabbat so powerful. These laws were adopted for two significant reasons:

- 1) To safeguard people from breaking the biblical infractions mentioned above and,
- 2) To protect Shabbat as a space in which people act *differently* than they do during the week.¹⁷

Through the introduction of the laws of *sh'vut* the rabbis essentially captured the essence of Shabbat: a day that looks and feels different from the grind of every other day. Alas, the outcome was, in the eyes of many, a seemingly endless list of onerous restrictions and obligations. Before we fall into the trap of thinking of the Shabbat laws in these terms, let us stop and think for a moment about what Shabbat would be without the space it provides to simply stop and reflect.

Throughout the week we are engaged, sometimes almost obsessively, in *malechet machshevet* – creative work – that often ends up defining who we are in the world to such an extent that we cease to see one another – or for that matter, even ourselves – except as a means to an end. We lose sight of humankind as a miraculous work of creation in and of itself. The vision of perfection with which we opened this essay speaks about a reality in which we enable ourselves to see one another as God intended us to be seen, as a vessel created in God's image. It forces us to interact with and conceptualize the world through a raw and unfiltered lens, as God must have on that very first Shabbat. What are we then left with? The freedom and courage to once again enter the world of the “mundane” week knowing that our experience of Shabbat brought with it a redemptive and timeless dream of what *can be*.

¹³ Note, this is just one version of the derivation of the *melachot*. Others explain that it is directly related to building the Tabernacle and the creation of the garments and vessels needed to perform its holy work. (See B. Shabbat 49b)

¹⁴ Intention – it must be thoughtful, not accidental. Improvement – the activity must have a positive effect. Permanent – The activity must leave a lasting imprint. Something done that leaves a temporary outcome is not in the category of *melechet machshevet*.

¹⁵ Literally: derivative violation

¹⁶ When one, by accident, performs one of the 39 forbidden *melachot* it becomes somewhat complicated. The rabbis classified all accidental *melachot* into the category of *grama*, indirect effect. Whether or not these actions are forbidden, after the fact, is sometimes related to one's ability to anticipate a possible transgression.

¹⁷ What is referred to in Aramaic as: *Uv'din D'Chol*.

