

A Message from Rabbi Fasman



Mark Fasman - Rabbi

I heard a story recently about a chasid who was caught smoking on Shabbat. The members of his community took the man to the rebbe for some tokhecha – some rebuke. After all, the man was not only jeopardizing his own reward in the world to come ... he was also behaving in such a way as to compromise the sanctity of the community.

After just a few minutes in the rebbe's study, the chasid reappeared, visibly shaken by his meeting. He asked his fellow chasidim to forgive him for having been mechallel Shabbes – profaning the Sabbath. They all wanted to know what the rebbe had said to him. He replied: “just one word.”

What word? The man said, “The Rebbe looked straight at me – and, with tears streaming down his face, said simply, ‘Shabbes!?’” Such is the centrality of Shabbat to the Jewish understanding of living in this world. Achad HaAm (Asher Ginsburg): **“More than Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel.”**

So when did the Jewish people begin to keep Shabbat – and when did Shabbat begin to keep Israel? At the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis, we read about God's Shabbat. The seventh of God's “days” - ki vo shavat mi-kol melakhto asher bara Elohim la'asot “because on it Elohim ceased from all the work of creation.”

And then, we find not another word about Shabbat for the remaining forty-nine chapters of the book of Genesis. In fact, it is not until Exodus 16 [Parashat Beshallah] that the word reappears: in answering the first kvetch of our ancestors following the exodus from Egypt (a kvetch of hunger ... some things never change), Moses tells the people that God will send them manna each day, and so it happens. But on the sixth day the people gather a double portion – and the leaders ask Moshe what's up. He responds that shabbaton Shabbat kodesh l'Adonai machar – “tomorrow is a rest day, a holy Sabbath to Adonai.” Moses explains that there is enough on the sixth day to last them through the seventh. There is no reason for them to have to go out to that great natural restaurant on Shabbat.

Yet, cynical from our very origins, the people nonetheless go out on the seventh day to look for manna, (but, of course) they don't find it. God sighs to Moses, ad anah mei'antem lishmor mitzvotai v'toratai – “How long will you refuse to observe My commandments and My teachings? [And God continues:] Re'u ki Adonai natan lakhem ha-Shabbat al kein Hu notein lakhem ba-yom ha-shishi lechem yomayim – “See that Adonai has given you the Sabbath; that is why He gives you on the sixth day a two-day portion of bread.”

God has given us the Shabbat. Shabbat is a divine gift, and despite its clear sanctity, God's people respond by starting another of our time-honored traditions: we return the gift given to us. Note also that, from its very inception, Shabbat (like all Jewish observances) is directly linked to food.

It seems clear that, at the time of the exodus from Egypt, our ancestors had no concept of Shabbat. But they did learn, beginning with this first lesson concerning the double portion of manna that they were to collect each erev Shabbat in order that they would not have to be mechallelei Shabbat – profaners of the Sabbath. Their Shabbat instruction began on the eastern shore of the Sea of Reeds and continued seven weeks later, at mount Sinai, at which time they received Aseret haDibrot (The Ten Utterances – or, more commonly and less correctly, The Ten Commandments). Only one of this “top ten list” refers to the sanctification of a particular time – the fourth utterance: Zakhor et yom ha-shabbat l'kodsho – “remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it. Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work; but the seventh day is Shabbat to Adonai, your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, your animal, and your stranger within your gates – for in six days Adonai made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Adonai blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.”

The “lesson” at Sinai continued relatively privately between God and Moses for the next forty days. And the very last thing that God said to Moses on Mount Sinai, immediately followed by the episode of the Golden Calf, is: V'shamru v'nei Yisrael et ha-Shabbat la'asot et ha-Shabbat l'dorotam berit olam; beini u-vein b'nei Yisrael ot hi l'olam ki sheishet yamim asah Adonai et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz u'va-yom ha-shevi shavat va-yinafash – “The Children of Israel shall observe the Shabbat to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations; Between Me and the Children of Israel it is a sign forever that in a six-day period Adonai made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day, He rested and was refreshed.”

Rabbi Ephraim Oshry was the only rabbi to survive the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania during the period of the Shoah. He was often asked to give formal rulings concerning matters of halakhah (Jewish law). These questions came often from the non-religious and are heartbreaking to read, since the questions themselves are an indication of the unimaginable horrors to which Jews were subjected. [e.g., Though the Germans cut off my left arm for stealing a piece of bread, may I still wear tefillin?; May a Jewish body be cremated so that it will not be buried among Gentiles?; Does a home in the ghetto require a mezuzah?]

continued on page 15

continued from page 2

In his 45th teshuvah, Rabbi Oshry writes on the following question: We Jews of the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania were completely enslaved by the Germans; we were worked to the bone night and day without rest; we were starved and paid nothing. The German enemy decreed our total annihilation. We were completely dispensable. And, in the end, most of us would die.

One morning, during prayer, Reb Avrohom Yosef, who was leading the congregation in the morning service, reached the blessing [she-lo asaniaved – “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, king of the universe,”] “Who has not made me a slave,” [the Conservative text of this blessing is changed to the positive statement she-asani ben/bat chorin – “who has made me free.”] and shouted bitterly to the Master of all masters, “How can I recite the blessing of a free man? How can a hungry slave, repeatedly abused and demeaned, praise his Creator by uttering ‘Who has not made me a slave?’”

Every morning as Reb Avrohom Yosef led the prayers, he let out the same cry! And many of those who joined him in prayer felt the same way. I was then asked for the Torah ruling on this question: Should the blessing be omitted because it seemed to be a travesty—in which case it would be forbidden to recite it—or was it forbidden to alter or skip any part of the prayer text established by our sages?

To this question, Rabbi Oshry’s responded: One of the earliest commentators on the prayers points out that **this blessing was not formulated in order to praise God for our physical liberty but rather for our spiritual liberty.** I therefore ruled that we could not skip or alter this blessing under any circumstances. On the contrary, despite our physical captivity, we were more obligated than ever to recite the blessing to demonstrate to our enemies that even if physically we were slaves, as a people we remained spiritually free.

The Jews of Kovno were enslaved just as their ancestors in Egypt had been enslaved. And one of the consequences of this slavery was that every day was precisely like the day before and the day after. The sun could tell them the cycle of the year and the cycle of the day. The moon could tell them the cycle of the month. But there was nothing to tell them the cycle of the week. There is no meaning to the statement “the first day” or “the seventh day” or “Shabbat.” Slaves have no Shabbat – both because it is not permitted and because the concept of Shabbat has no meaning in a life that does not distinguish between behavior on most days and behavior on each seventh day. And thus our most powerful statement of personal freedom is the observance of Shabbat.

From the outside, Shabbat looks like anything but freedom; from the inside, those who do Shabbat know very differently. Shabbat is freedom, not enslavement. Jews who have never experienced Shabbat – every week, for a substantial period of time – often find it easy to forego Shabbat, and still easier to find all manner of rationalizations as to why the primitive and quaint customs associated with Shabbat are simply not relevant in the modern world. But those who come to Shabbat as adults rarely look for or even consider those rationalizations. Only a the situation of true compulsion – the need to support my family (not simply with enhanced income, but meeting basic minimum survival needs) or an external enemy (God forbid) that would not permit Shabbat observance – could cause me to mechallel Shabbes. Desanctifying Shabbat desanctifies my life. Jettisoning Shabbat would make me like any other animal, responding only to the cycles and urges of the natural world (described by the Rabbis as yeitzer ha-ra, the inclination to the non-holy, the inclination to do that which is profane). As The Elephant Man cried out in anguish: “I am not an animal.” Those who keep Shabbat know that they are not animals. And they are not slaves (to themselves or to others).

Are you a slave to others – who deny you the opportunity to distinguish one day in every seven? Do your employers truly insist that you must profane the Shabbat in order to work for them? Do your family members insist that you profane the Shabbat?

Are you a slave to yourself, for you deny yourself Shabbat? Is there any difference in your life between Friday and Saturday and Sunday? Is the only way that you know what day of the week it is due to the television schedule for that evening (increasingly the same each day) or your cycle of beauty shop appointments or the day that the shopping coupons appear in the newspaper?

Slavery is hard. Freedom is harder. **But Shabbat makes freedom possible.** If you cannot (or will not) make Shabbat, then you are not free. No matter what you think. I know how hard it is to make Shabbat in our world. I had to leave a tenured full-professorship, my principal trumpet chair in a symphony and an opera company and a dance company. I had to leave a community that I loved. I did it “on spec.” I did it because I needed to live as a free man and as a Jew. I needed Shabbes, but I did not know how much I needed it until I had finally achieved it.

God has given us Shabbat – a double portion on Fridays so that we can prepare and so that we can make Shabbat different from the other days of the week. Different. Separate. Kadosh. Holy. Different for us as a sign of our special and sacred relationship with God and the universe that God created, weekly oases of timelessness in our time-bound lives, twenty-five hours out of every 168 that give meaning and sanctity to those other 143 in which we do the work of living.

I remind you of the powerful words of that cultural Zionist Achad HaAm: “More than Israel has kept the Shabbat has the Shabbat kept Israel.” Shabbat has kept the Jewish community alive.

But Shabbat has also kept individual Jewish souls alive. And so, for those who have chosen to minimize or ignore Shabbat completely, for those who have chosen to enslave themselves in a world of the profane, I can only say, with profound sadness and with confusion as to why any human being would choose to enslave himself this as did that Chassidic Rebbe to his cigarette-smoking-on-Shabbat congregant: “Shabbes!?”