



The Sacredness of Shabbat: From the Torah, Rabbinic Sources and Beyond

A) Ezekiel 20:12

וְגַם אֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם לְהִיּוֹת לְאוֹת בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיהֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשָׁם:

Moreover, I gave them My sabbaths to serve as a sign between Me and them, that they might know that it is I the LORD who sanctify them.

B) Isaiah 58:13

אִם־תִּשָּׁיב מִשַּׁבַּת רַגְלְךָ עֲשׂוֹת חֶפְצְךָ בַּיּוֹם קֹדֶשׁי וְקִרְאתָ לְשַׁבָּת עֲנִי לְקְדוֹשׁ ה' מְכַבֵּד וְכַבְּדוֹ מֵעֲשׂוֹת דְּרָכֶיךָ מִמְצוֹא חֶפְצְךָ וְדַבַּר דְּבָר:

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
From pursuing your affairs on My holy day;
If you call the sabbath “delight,”
The LORD’s holy day “honored”;
And if you honor it and go not your ways
Nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains—

Questions for discussion

1. What are the key biblical words tied to Shabbat? What concepts about spirituality do they express?
2. How might you see these key concepts appearing elsewhere in Jewish tradition?
3. What does Shabbat say about Israel and God according to these texts?

C) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

“The Sabbath is not only a legal institution, a state of mind or a form of conduct, but a process in the world of spirit. At the beginning of time there was a longing, the longing of the Sabbath for [humanity].”

“The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere.”

“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.”

Questions for discussion

1. According to Heschel, what is the essence of Shabbat? What is its purpose?
2. How does Heschel reflect the biblical verses provided above?
3. How does Shabbat have a sort of transformative power to shape time and space?

D) Rabbi Mordechai Schwartz, “Ve-Shuv Limlakha U-Shvut: an Older Theoretical Framework”
“*Shevut* (literally “cessation” or “resting”) represents the positive side of the commandment to rest on Shabbat, while *melakhah* (literally “craft” or “task”) represents the negative side. In other words, *melakhah* is the sort of work one refrains from on Shabbat, while *shevut* encompasses the act of resting.”

E) Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Shabbat 21:1

נֶאֱמַר בַּתּוֹרָה (שְׁמוֹת כ"ב י"ב) (שְׁמוֹת ל"ד כ"א) "תִּשְׁבֹּת" אֶפְלוּ מִדְּבָרִים שֶׁאֵינָן מְלָאכָה חַיִּב לִשְׁבֹּת מֵהֵן. וְדְבָרִים הַרְבֵּה הֵן שֶׁאֶסְרֻהוּ חֻקִּים מִשּׁוּם שְׁבוּת. מֵהֵן דְּבָרִים אֲסוּרִים מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהֵן דּוֹמִים לְמְלָאכָה וּמֵהֵן דְּבָרִים אֲסוּרִים גְּזֵרָה שְׁמָא יְבוֹא מֵהֵן אֲסוּר סְקִילָה

It's said in the Torah *tishbot*--“rest,” meaning abstaining from even things that are not in the category of forbidden labors. And these many activities that the sages forbade are because of *shevut* “rest.” They are forbidden because they are similar to forbidden labors, and so all the more so they are forbidden lest one should come to do forbidden labor.

Questions for discussion

1. What are *melakhah* and *shevut*? Do these two concepts play a role in your Shabbat practice?
2. How do Rabbi Schwartz's and the Mishneh Torah's definition of *shevut* differ? How may focusing on these two concepts enhance your Shabbat practice and experience?

F) Talmud Bavli Berakhot 57b

שְׁבֹת — אֶחָד מִשְׁשִׁים לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. שִׁנָּה — אֶחָד מִשְׁשִׁים לְמִיתָה. חֶלֶם — אֶחָד מִשְׁשִׁים לְנְבוּאָה
Shabbat is one-sixtieth of the World-to-Come; sleep is one-sixtieth of death; and a dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy.

G) Kedushat Levi, 18th century Ukraine

However, we have a rule that the reward for performance of the commandments of the Torah is not given in this world, i.e. during a person's lifetime on earth. So God therefore gave the enjoyment of the spiritual pleasure on the Sabbath as a gift (not as a reward). God arranged for this “foretaste” of what to expect in the afterlife, the principal reward being preserved for when the person's soul returns to its celestial origins.

When a Jew experiences that as a result of observing the Sabbath he enjoys an additional dimension of spiritual and physical wellbeing, he does not need to be an intellectual in order to fantasize about how much more of this he will experience in the world to come, where he has been assured that the principal reward for Sabbath observance as well as mitzvah observance generally will be shared out.

Questions for discussion

1. Does the idea of Shabbat as a taste of *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, play a role in your experience of Shabbat? Can you think of this coming up in any discourse around Shabbat in your communities?
2. How can you create a sense of the taste of *Olam Haba* in your Shabbat observance?

H) Light a Candle, Zelda, 20th century Ukraine, translated by Marcia Falk

הדליקו נר
שתו יין.
השבת קטפה בלאט
את השמש השוקעת.
השבת יורדת לאט
ובידה שושנת הרקיעים.

איך תשתל השבת
פרח עצום ומאיר
בלב צר ועיוור?
איך תשתל השבת
את ציץ המלאכים
בלב בשר משגע והולל?
התצמח שושנת האלמות
בדור של עבדים
להרס,
בדור של עבדים
למות?!

הדליקו נר!
שתו יין!
השבת יורדת בלאט
ובידה הפרח,
ובידה
השמש השוקעת...

Light a candle,
drink wine.
Softly the Sabbath has plucked
the sinking sun.
Slowly the Sabbath descends,
the rose of heaven in her hand.

How can the Sabbath
plant a huge and shining flower
in a blind and narrow heart?
How can the Sabbath
plant the bud of angels
in a heart of raving flesh?

Can the rose of immortality grow
in a generation enslaved
to destruction,
a generation enslaved
to death?

Light a candle!
Drink wine!
Slowly the Sabbath descends
and in her hand the flower,
and in her hand
the sinking sun.

יום שבתון אין לשכוח הנוסח המלא מתוך אתר זמרתשת:

יום שבתון אין לשכח
זכרו כרים הניחוח
יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

היום נכבד לבני אמונים
זהירים לשמרו אבות ובנים
חקוק בשני לחות אבנים
מרב אונים ואמיץ כח

יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

ובאו כלם בברית יחד
נעשה ונשמע אמרו כאחד
ופתחו וענו אדני אחד
ברוך הנותן ליעף כח

יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

דבר בקדשו בהר המר
יום השביעי זכור ושמור
וכל פקודיו יחד לגמר
חזק מתנים ואמיץ כח

יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

העם אשר נע וכצאן תעה
זכר לפקדו ברית ושבועה
לבל יעבר בו מקרה רעה
כאשר נשבע על מי נח.

יונה מצאה בו מנוח
ושם ינוחו יגיעי כח

You, dear Shabbat,
are always here for me;
How fragrant
you linger in my awareness.
Noah's dove found rest and so can we,
Weary ones from the toil of the week.

Honored are you by us,
the believers,
Parents and children,
who keep you with zeal.
Powerful is its message
on the Tablets of stone;
We sing your praises
in prayer and at meals.

When at the Mount Sinai
in covenant we pledged
We promised in one voice
to do and to listen,
Responding to Your challenge
we answered together:
You God are the One
who imbues us with strength.

Dear and Holy at Sinai
You spoke to us;
"Remember and Keep
this Day one of Seven,
When fully you keep
the Shabbat together,
You will be refreshed
and with vigor imbued.

How just like a lost sheep,
so aimless, you wandered
Remember the Shabbat
your promise and pledge
No evil will hurt you
if you keep the Shabbat
My rainbow will hold you
in safety forever.

Questions for discussion

1. How does Shabbat relate to life and death for Zelda and Yehudah haLevi?
2. In Yom Shabbaton, who is speaking in the final paragraph, and what does that voice promise to the addressees?
3. Which images in these poems resonate with your Shabbat experience?