



Shabbat - The Sabbath

By Steve Cohen

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The Significance of Shabbat

Shabbat is a joyful day of rest. Shabbat is two commandments: to remember and to observe. Shabbat is observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday each week. Shabbat is a time to refrain from work, spend time with family and attend synagogue.

For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested. -- Exodus 31:15-17

The Sabbath is one of the best known and least understood of all Jewish observances. People who do not observe Shabbat think of it as a day filled with stifling restrictions, or as a day of prayer. But to those who observe Shabbat, it is a precious gift from God, a day of great joy eagerly awaited throughout the week, a time when we can set aside all of our weekday concerns and devote ourselves to higher pursuits.

In Jewish literature, poetry and music, Shabbat is described as a bride or queen, as in the popular Shabbat hymn Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah (come, my beloved, to meet the [Sab- bath] bride). It is said “more than Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel.”

Shabbat is the most important ritual observance in Judaism. It is the only ritual observance instituted in the Ten Commandments. It is also the most important special day, even more important than Yom Kippur. This is clear from the fact that more aliyot (opportunities for congregants to be called up to the Torah) are given on Shabbat than on any other day.

Shabbat is primarily a day of rest and spiritual enrichment. The word “Shabbat” comes from the root Shin-Beit-Tav, meaning to cease, to end, or to rest.

Shabbat is not specifically a day of prayer. Although we do pray on Shabbat, and spend a substantial amount of time in synagogue praying, prayer is not what distinguishes Shabbat from the rest of the week.

Observant Jews pray every day, three times a day. To say that Shabbat is a day of prayer is no more accurate than to say that Shabbat is a day of feasting: we eat every day, but on Shabbat, we eat more elaborately and in a more leisurely fashion. The same can be said of prayer on Shabbat.

Shabbat involves two interrelated commandments: to remember (zakhor) Shabbat, and to observe (shamor) Shabbat.

Zakhor: To Remember

Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it (Hebrew: Zak- hor et yom ha-Shabbat l'kad'sho) - Exodus 20:8



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We are commanded to remember Shabbat; but remembering means much more than merely not forgetting to observe Shabbat. It also means to remember the significance of Shabbat, both as a commemoration of creation and as a commemoration of our freedom from slavery in Egypt.

In Exodus 20:11, after Fourth Commandment is first instituted, God explains, “because for six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and on the seventh day, he rested; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.”

By resting on the seventh day and sanctifying it, we remember and acknowledge that God is the creator of heaven and earth and all living things. We also emulate the divine example, by refraining from work on the seventh day, as God did. If God’s work can be set aside for a day of rest, how can we believe that our own work is too important to set aside temporarily?

In Deuteronomy 5:15, while Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments, he notes the second thing that we must remember on Shabbat: “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God brought you forth from there with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

What does the Exodus have to do with resting on the seventh day? It’s all about freedom.

Shamor: To Observe

Observe the Sabbath day to sanctify it (Hebrew: Shamor et yom ha-Shabbat l’kad’sho) -
Deuteronomy 5:12

Of course, no discussion of Shabbat would be complete without a discussion of the work that is forbidden on Shabbat. This is another aspect of Shabbat that is grossly misunderstood by people who do not observe it.

Most Americans see the word “work” and think of it in the English sense of the word: physical labor and effort, or employment. Under this definition, turning on a light would be permitted, because it does not require effort, but a rabbi would not be permitted to lead Shabbat services, because leading services is his employment. Jewish law prohibits the former and permits the latter. Many Americans therefore conclude that Jewish law doesn’t make any sense.

The problem lies not in Jewish law, but in the definition that Americans are using. The Torah does not prohibit “work” in the 20th century English sense of the word. The Torah prohibits “melachah” (Mem-Lamed-Alef-Kaf-Hei), which is usually translated as “work,” but does not mean precisely the same thing as the English word. Before you can begin to understand the Shabbat restrictions, you must understand the word “melachah.”

Melachah generally refers to the kind of work that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over your environment. The word may be related to “melekh” (king; Mem-Lamed-Kaf). The quintessential example of melachah is the work of creating the universe, which God ceased from on the seventh day.



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Note that God's work did not require a great physical effort: he spoke, and it was done. The word melachah is rarely used in scripture outside of the context of Shabbat and holiday restrictions. The only other repeated use of the word is in the discussion of the building of the sanctuary and its vessels in the wilderness. The rabbis concluded that the work prohibited on Shabbat is the same as the work of creating the sanctuary. They found 39 categories of forbidden acts, all of which are types of work that were needed to build the sanctuary:

1. Sowing
2. Plowing
3. Reaping
4. Binding sheaves
5. Threshing
6. Winnowing
7. Selecting
8. Grinding
9. Sifting
10. Kneading
11. Baking
12. Shearing wool
13. Washing wool
14. Beating wool
15. Dyeing wool
16. Spinning
17. Weaving
18. Making two loops
19. Weaving two threads
20. Separating two threads
21. Tying
22. Untying
23. Sewing two stitches
24. Tearing
25. Trapping
26. Slaughtering
27. Flaying
28. Salting meat
29. Curing hide
30. Scraping hide
31. Cutting hide up
32. Writing two letters
33. Erasing two letters
34. Building
35. Tearing a building down
36. Extinguishing a fire
37. Kindling a fire
38. Hitting with a hammer



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39. Taking an object from the private domain to the public, or transporting an object in the public domain.

Shabbat ends at nightfall, when three stars are visible, approximately 40 minutes after sunset. At the conclusion of Shabbat, the family performs a concluding ritual called Havdalah (separation, division). Blessings are recited over wine, spices and candles. Then a blessing is recited regarding the division between the sacred and the secular, between Shabbat and the working days.

Then [Jesus] said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." -- Mark 2:27-28



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