

Parshiot Vayakel-Pekudei, 5775, 2015:

The Message of Shabbat

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Moses assembled the entire Israelite community and said to them, “These are the words that G-d has commanded for [you] to do: ‘You may do work during the six weekdays, but Saturday must be kept holy as a Sabbath of Sabbaths to G-d. Whoever does any work on [that day] shall be put to death. Do not ignite any fire on the Sabbath, no matter where you may live.’” (Parashat Vayakel, *Sefer Shemot* 35:1-3, this and all Torah translations, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

These *pasukim* (verses) in our *parasha* stress the singular significance of Shabbat. Therefore, we may well ask ourselves, “How can we keep the requisite recognition of Shabbat front and center in our minds?” Since Shabbat takes place each and every week, year in and year out, and we thereby run the risk of encountering it in a rote and uninspired manner, this leads us to a second question, “How can we invest Shabbat with the spiritual excitement and holiness it deserves?” While these are far from simple queries to answer, I would like to suggest a few beginning points to help us formulate authentic responses.

Perhaps most importantly, the key to approaching Shabbat with passion and joy can be found in intensive and existentially-engaging Torah study. As *Chazal* (our Sages may their memory be blessed) taught us: “*l’fum tzarah agrah*” (“According to the effort will

be the reward,” *Pirkei Avot* 5:23). The effort, in this case, is Torah study. The reward is a new and dynamic appreciation and understanding of Shabbat, coupled with a more intense relationship with the Master of the Universe.

In order to contribute in some small way to such an approach, I would like to briefly examine three essential concepts of Shabbat. In doing so, I am following the lead of one of the greatest masters of Jewish ethical literature, the brilliant Italian thinker Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1746), often known as the “Mesilat Yesharim” after the title of his most famous book. Rav Luzzato noted, in his celebrated introduction to this work, that his goal “...was not to teach people that which they do not know, but rather, to remind them of that which is already known to them and publicized to them in a freely available manner.” This is my approach, as well, regarding Shabbat.

Shabbat is fundamentally a reminder that Hashem created the Universe *yaish m'ayin* (out of absolute and total nothingness). The Torah presents this idea in the well-known and oft-recited passage known as “*Vayechulu*” (“and there were finished /completed”) that we encounter in Parashat Bereishit:

Heaven and earth, and all their components, were [thus] completed. With the seventh day, G-d finished all the work that He had done. He [thus] ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had been doing. G-d blessed the seventh day, and He declared it to be holy, for it was on this day that G-d ceased from all the work that He had been creating [so that it would continue] to function. (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:1-3)

Fascinatingly, the Ramban (1194-1270) develops this connection between Shabbat and the creation of the universe when he quotes *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 92:4 portraying Yosef as a *shomer Shabbat* (a Sabbath observer) - even in Egypt. This was remarkable in many ways, given Yosef’s status as second in command to Pharaoh. Why was he so

insistent on guarding Shabbat? This question resonates even more powerfully when we remind ourselves that Yosef lived prior to *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah). The Ramban teaches us: "... this is because Shabbat is equivalent [in its importance] to all of the Commandments, since it is testimony to the creation of the universe (*eidut al chidush haolam*).” In addition, "... he [Yosef] did this to teach his children the belief in Creation in order to remove from their minds any notion of idol worship and Egyptian concepts [of truth].” (Commentary to *Sefer Bereishit* 26:5)

In his introduction to the Laws of Shabbat, Rabbi Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Halevi Epstein (1829-1908) notes that the *kedushah* (holiness) of Shabbat is second to none. Little wonder, then, that the *bracha* (blessing) for one who strives to observe it is also unequalled. Thus Rav Epstein states:

The holiness of Shabbat is greater than all other kinds of holiness and its blessing is higher than all other blessings. Therefore, it was sanctified and blessed from the very beginning of Creation. As the Torah states: “G-d blessed the seventh day, and He declared it to be holy.” [In addition,] it is the source of all blessing throughout all the days of the week... (*Aruch HaShulchan*)

We must be honest and forthright with ourselves. How many of us truly conceptualize and experience Shabbat in this manner? How many of us feel its *kedushah* emanate and guide us throughout all the days of the week? If we can successfully integrate this idea into the inner core of our beings, and train ourselves to feel the holiness of Shabbat, even during the week, we will be well on our way toward a more profound appreciation of the depth and meaning of Shabbat in our lives.

The final concept that I would like to briefly examine is the special sign (*ot*) that Shabbat represents. In reality, it is one of the greatest symbols of our chosen status (*am*

hanivchar) and the unbreakable bond that obtains between *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) and the Jewish people. Once again, this idea is found in a very familiar passage that we recite each and every Shabbat morning, both in *Tefilat Shacharit* (the morning prayer) and the morning *Kiddush*:

G-d told Moses to speak to the Israelites and say to them: You must still keep My Sabbaths. It is a **sign** between Me and you for all generations, to make you realize that I, G-d, am making you holy. Do your work during the six week days, but keep the seventh day as a Sabbath of Sabbaths, holy to G-d. The Israelites shall thus keep the Sabbath, making it a day of rest for all generations, as an eternal covenant. It is a **sign** between Me and the Israelites that during the six weekdays G-d made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day, He ceased working and withdrew to the spiritual. (*Sefer Shemot* 31:12-13, 15-17 bolding my own)

Here, too, Rav Epstein's insights prove invaluable to our understanding of the tripartite relationship that obtains between Hashem, Shabbat and the Jewish people:

The holy Shabbat is the great sign between the Holy One Blessed be He and His people Israel... This is the case even though Shabbat serves as a reminder of [absolute] Creation...since it is written in the context of the Creation of the Universe. Therefore, one might think that Shabbat is universally relevant to all mankind since it is unlike the Festivals that remind us of the Departure from Egypt. [The Festivals] are thereby irrelevant to the other nations of the world since they did not leave Egypt – but in the case of the Creation of the Universe everyone [and everything] was created. [Therefore, I might have thought that Shabbat, too, belonged to everyone.] Nonetheless, the Holy One Blessed be He gave the holiness of Shabbat solely to the Jewish people in order to know that I, G-d, am making you holy...

With the help of the Master of the Universe, may we learn to be *shomer Shabbat*, both spiritually and in practice. Moreover, may Shabbat remind us that Hashem is the Creator and Master of the World who has chosen us as His holy nation, to be His *shlichim* (messengers) to all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom

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