

Understanding the Secret of the Sabbath

Part 1

by Rabbi David Fohrman



Introduction

For many observant Jews, myself included, the weekly Shabbat experience eventually becomes part of our regular routine. We refrain from performing labor on Shabbat almost instinctively. The light switch, the telephone, the car -- it seems as natural to avoid these things on Shabbat as it does to use them during the week.

So it can seem surprising to us when someone questions the meaning of our day of rest. In an office, on a plane trip – we’ll get questions from strangers about Shabbat. One of the most common questions concerns what seems like a quirk in the way observant Jews observe Shabbat: Switching on a light on Shabbat is for some reason considered “work,” and is off-limits during this Day of Rest. But dragging a heavy table from one end of a room to another somehow escapes classification as work, and is a permitted activity. This sounds bizarre and nonsensical. We are often asked: Is there any rhyme or reason to be found here?

But other questions abound, too. In this essay, we will explore the verses in the Torah that introduce Shabbat, and we shall do so through the prism of various conundrums we face when we try and define the Jewish concept of Shabbat to strangers. By so doing, we will gain a greater ability to explain Shabbat to both the strangers in our lives, and to ourselves.



Two Theological Question Marks



Let’s begin with an almost childlike, philosophical question:

“Why, exactly, would God feel it necessary to rest after creating the universe? Was He tired?”

The question isn’t as facetious as it sounds. We conceive of the Almighty as an All-Powerful Being. That, indeed, is why we call Him “the Almighty.” So if God is really All-Powerful, how difficult would it have been for Him to create a Universe? Presumably, this didn’t require a lot of exertion on His behalf. *Well, then, why did He need to rest afterwards?*

And here's another conundrum:

Most of us assume that our observance of Shabbat testifies to our faith that God is the Creator of the Universe. After all, the Torah explains the observance of Shabbat by telling us that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. But there is something odd about this.



“For why do we commemorate God’s Creation of the Universe through a day of rest? Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate to set aside, instead, a day of creation?”

In case this question doesn’t strike you as all that troubling, let’s make it more concrete. Let’s leave the realm of theology behind, and couch the problem in more mundane terms.

Imagine that the Federal government decided it would be a good idea to create an annual “Rosa Parks Day” on the calendar. On this day, all Americans would commemorate the civil rights triumph of Rosa, the black woman who refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. And imagine that a committee was casting about for some sort of symbolic activity that citizens could perform on this day to honor Rosa Parks’ great act. Some members of the committee suggested that concerned citizens could ride local city buses, and crowd to the front of the bus. For a symbolic trip around town, no one would sit in the back. But then, somebody in the back of the room had a different idea. It was this: On Rosa Parks Day, everyone should go home, and take a nap in bed. Why? Because, you see, after Rosa Parks took her historic ride on the bus, she was tired, and she went home to rest in bed. So let’s all nap, just like Rosa did.

Few people would consider this a spectacular idea. Yet somehow, on Shabbat, it seems like precisely this that is happening. We commemorate God’s historic act of creating the world – yet we do so by *resting*. But shouldn’t we instead remember creation by creating? The point isn’t that God rested – it’s that He made the world, right? Isn’t “rest” just incidental?

Back to the Text

Let's turn to the text of the Torah and see what it has to say to us about all this. In *Bereishit*, the Torah chronicles the coming into being of the very first Shabbat. Read the following verses carefully and pay attention to this question:

According to the text, what, exactly what is Shabbat designed to commemorate?

God finished on the seventh day the work that he had made, and He rested on the seventh day from all the work that He had made. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work that God had created to make (Bereishit, 2:1-3).

These verses tell us why God deemed the Seventh Day special: *Because on this day He rested...* As strange as it may seem, the Torah is telling us that the Shabbat Day is not, actually, a celebration of God's creation of the universe. It is a celebration of *His rest*.

This idea, when you reflect on it, is downright astounding. How could anyone think that God's rest is more important than His work – than the very act of creating the world? It sounds roughly like saying that the purpose of work is vacation. Vacation might be nice, but is vacation really what the work is all about? Yet, strangely, what the Torah is saying is clear: Shabbat is not a celebration of Creation; it is a celebration of rest.



In case you missed the point, the Torah emphasizes the same idea again, later on, in *Sefer Shemot*. In the verses we recite as Kiddush on Shabbat morning, the Torah tells us that Shabbat...

Is a sign between Me and the Jewish People that: Six Days, God Created the Heavens and the Earth; and on the Seventh Day He rested.

According to the verse, what is the essential fact that the "sign" of Shabbat testifies to? That God created the world in Six Days? No. Were that true, the Torah should have ended the verse halfway through. The emphasis of the text is

on the final clause ...*and on the Seventh Day He rested*. I.e. Shabbat commemorates that *after* God got through creating the world in six days, He decided to rest on the Seventh.

But what's the big deal about that rest? It just sounds anti-climactic.

Purposeful Rest

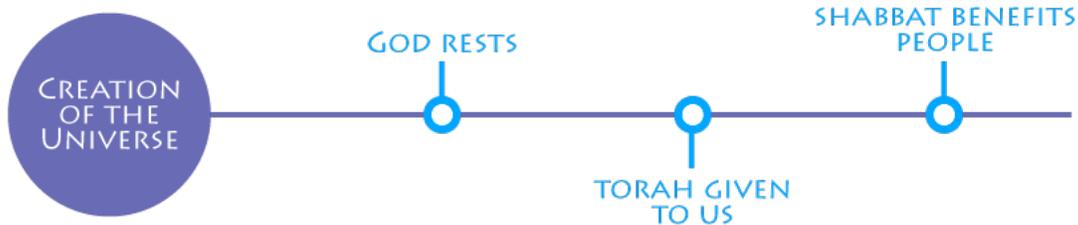
Evidently, the verses are telling us we need to re-assess our ideas about work and rest. God's rest, apparently, had very little in common with the idea of vacation. It was not something that merely happened after God created the world; it was not that God took some time off for a breather. The Creator's rest was a deliberate act. It was a kind of rest that was, somehow, an end in and of itself:

You made the Seventh Day Holy for Your Name, it being the very purpose of the Making of Heaven and Earth...

These words are recited each week as part of the Amidah prayer on Friday night. But listen to what we are saying. Shabbat, and its rest, is portrayed as the very purpose of creation, the end for which the entire heavens and earth were created.

What does it mean to see rest in this way and not as something you do to help you work, but something which is the very point of all your labor? Why would God consider His rest worthier of commemoration than His successful creation of a universe?

The question becomes even more insistent when we remember that God deemed Shabbat to be special long before there was any nation around to celebrate it. According to the verses in *Bereishit*, chapter 2, God blessed and made Shabbat holy immediately after creating the universe. He shared that day with us only centuries later, when He gave us the Torah, letting us in on His special secret. Thus, Shabbat was not crafted by God for the benefit of people -- that only happened later. Rather, this island in time was designed by the Creator for Himself, as it were.



Why would the Creator be so committed to His own day of rest? That question holds the key. If we can ponder that question, and find our way to a satisfying answer, then we'll be most of the way to understanding the secret of the Sabbath.

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