

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2**  
**Class Notes 1/3/21**

We have seen that Jews celebrate the Sabbath as God's gift, a day of rest and joy, a festive time for family and friends. It is not just about what you can't or shouldn't do; it is about a different way of life for one day a week. The idea of the Sabbath and a seven-day week is unique to Judaism and reflects a unique way of viewing the world and God. It stands in sharp contrast to pagan ways of thinking about the world. The Sabbath is part of a weekly structure established by God and points to a God who is not part of the cycles of nature, the physical creation, a God who can not be represented by physical objects or contained in one space, but rather a God who is revealed by his actions in time.

In talking about the meaning of the Sabbath, Rabbi Sacks points out a striking aspect of the literary structure of Exodus. After giving the Law to Israel from Mount Sinai, God issues detailed instructions for building the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-40). The book ends with a long description of the Israelites following those instructions precisely. But sandwiched in between God's instructions and the actual building of the Tabernacle is the shocking incident of the Golden Calf, where Israel resorts to idolatry (Ex. 32). Many scholars have rightly pointed out that this literary sandwich structure contrasts true worship with false, the Tabernacle and the idol.

But Rabbi Sacks notices something additional. God has already given the Ten Commandments, including the commandment about the Sabbath. But immediately before the story of the Golden Calf (Ex. 31:12-17) and also immediately after (Ex. 35:1-3), the people are reminded of that one particular commandment. We saw that one important implication of this was that the Sabbath rest takes precedence even over doing God's work. But Rabbi Sacks also argues that this reminder frames the story to teach us that "*Shabbat* is the antidote to the Golden Calf" (*Exodus*, p. 261). *Shabbat* is the day we learn not to make an idol of gold, of the works of our hands, of the power of wealth, of created things.

Idolatry puts the creation, and created things, in the place of God. I want to highlight two aspects of this in our society: the idolatry of things and the idolatry of work. *Shabbat* is the antidote to both. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the mango in the garden, humans have been tempted to consume things, to grab hold of all the beautiful fruit in the world in the hope that it will satisfy our desires and make us like God, elevate our status and our sense of self worth.

Our culture in particular pressures us to buy more and more stuff and to find personal satisfaction in shopping, what has been called “retail therapy.” A good friend of mine used to say that advertising is actually reverse or negative therapy: it is designed to make you feel unhappy and discontented. Rabbi Sacks agrees: *“Through constant creation of dissatisfaction, the consumer society is in fact a highly sophisticated mechanism for the production and distribution of unhappiness. Shabbat is our refuge from...a consumer culture,[which is]the new religion”* (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 261-2). The consumer culture is indeed an idolatrous religion that ultimately makes slaves of its followers.

Rabbi Sacks goes on to argue that, as we are increasingly finding out, the enslavement to consumerism is *“unsustainable, economically, environmentally and psychologically. The most important contribution of Shabbat to the late capitalist societies of the twenty-first century is that it reintroduces...the idea of limits. There are limits to our striving, our labours, our consumption of the earth’s finite resources....Any culture that loses its sense of limits eventually self-destructs”* (p. 262). As we will see when we talk about the kosher laws, one of the ways in which Torah is training in righteousness is that it imposes necessary limits on what humans can do with regard to the physical world that has been entrusted to us. As we have seen in recent months, plenty of people are unwilling to accept any limits on their behavior, even if it leads to serious illness and death. *Shabbat* teaches us to limit our attachment to things. *Shabbat* is the antidote to the prosperity gospel that is America’s true religion, a false gospel that has infected even churches like Bethel.

*Shabbat* also declares a limit to our idolatry of work. In America, we are all defined and given social status by our jobs. First and foremost, people understand who we are on the basis of what we do for a living. People ask children: what do you want to be when you grow up? If a precocious child were to respond: “I want to be a loving servant to the poor,” the questioning adult would be mystified. “No, no, that’s not what I meant. I meant, what kind of a career do you want to have?” Children are pushed to be something as defined by a career, a job.

This notion is deeply ingrained in our culture, in our way of thinking about other people and about ourselves. Jobs define us, categorize us, give us social position and respect and meaning and if we lose our job, or even think we are in danger of losing it, we lose our self-confidence, our self-respect, our sense of who we are. People who lose jobs, even those who have more than enough to live on, often suffer severe depression. They have lost their sense of self and their anchor in life.

The prophet Isaiah warns about this idolatry of work: “Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses; there is no end to their chariots. Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made” (Isa. 2:7-8). This is the cause, the prophet says, for God’s judgment on the nation.

How often do we make an idol of our own work? How often do our jobs come first when it comes to making choices and establishing priorities in our lives? What do we miss out on in life because of our obsession with our jobs? Do we sacrifice our families, our children, our friends, even our mental and physical health because of our careers? The very quality of life that people think they are pursuing through their work gets lost because of their devotion to that work.

When I was growing up, we spoke of the clergy as “full-time Christian ministers,” because they had a paid job doing ministry. They were “career Christians,” professional servants of the Lord, and by inference, all the rest of us were second-class citizens in the church. People often go into the ministry just because they think that is the way to be serious about their faith. Those who aren’t professional clergy usually don’t see themselves as ministers at all. Earning money even defines for us what it means to be a minister of Christ. *Shabbat* teaches us that our existence and personal value as human beings and as children of God cannot be defined or made dependent on our careers, even careers serving God.

Work, as Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 says, cannot give you ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Work is a good thing, a necessary thing, and we may achieve a certain level of satisfaction from our accomplishments. R. Heschel calls our attention to the first part of the Sabbath commandment: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work*” (Ex. 20:9). He says that work is also one of God’s commandments. As we have seen, humans were placed in the Garden of Eden and given work to do (Gen. 2:15). Work, Heschel says, has a divine dignity, but the Sabbath teaches us how to live with a certain amount of independence from our need to work. “The faith of the Jew is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above this world” (*Sabbath*, p. 27). It is precisely that detachment from enslavement to work that constitutes the joyful gift of the Sabbath.

An ancient rabbinic commentary on Ex. 20:9 is insightful: “‘Six days shall you work.’ Now is it possible for someone to do their work in six days? The meaning is, rather, Rest as if all your work has been done. Alternatively, rest from thoughts of work” (*Mekhilta* 20:9). We can never really get all our work done in six days; it always remains incomplete. The Sabbath teaches us *that is*

*okay*. The world depends on God, not on us, to keep going. Even the work we are doing for God must stop one day in seven.

## 7. Conclusions

### a. Should Christians Observe the Sabbath?

We have seen that Jesus does not overturn Sabbath observance but rather emphasizes its importance as a God-given gift in creation itself to all humans. Jesus' attitude towards Sabbath rules may be slightly less strict than some other Jews of his time, but he is not simply arguing that "anything goes" on the Sabbath. He only rejects stringent rules that put an undue burden on ordinary people and do not take into account human pain and suffering. We have seen that the later rabbis make similar concessions. The Sabbath was created by God for human benefit, for our good. In declaring himself Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is affirming that acts of mercy, both to humans and animals, are part of the essence of Sabbath observance.

The early Christians kept the Sabbath as well, and at the end of the Sabbath, Saturday night, also had a meal and service celebrating the resurrection (Acts 20:7). Once Christianity turned its back on its Jewish roots, the Sunday celebration was all that was left. I would argue that it was Christians who later made what they called the "Sabbath" a legalistic burden on people, a grim, somber day of mind-numbing religious instruction where no levity was allowed. That misunderstanding of the Sabbath was one of the legacies of the Puritans in America that has kept the church from seeing the biblical purpose and value of the day. In my lifetime that false perspective has largely been abandoned by Christians, but nothing positive has been put in its place.

So I cannot see any biblical reason why Christians should not observe the Sabbath. It is mainly the anti-Judaism of our tradition that has deprived us of this gift from God.

We see this bias in the traditional interpretation of Colossians 2:16-17, where we find the only other use of the word "sabbath" in the NT. Literally it reads: "Therefore let no one judge you in eating and in drinking or in respect to a feast or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of the coming things. But the body of Christ." (This last phrase hangs awkwardly in the text and there have been many creative ways to deal with it.) Despite the fact that some modern translations, like the NIV, translate this as "a Sabbath day," the word in Greek is plural (KJV, NRSV, and many others). Once again the NIV has imported its Protestant anti-Jewish theology into the translation, handing people an anti-Sabbath proof text. But Paul does not say "the Sabbath" here,

which he could easily have done if that is what he meant to say. The plural here has a much broader reference, especially when connected to the other two parallel phrases in the verse. The Old Testament regularly speaks of the Jewish feasts as sabbaths, especially the first and last days of a weekly festival (Lev. 16:31; 23:24, 23, 29). The Greek word for sabbath in the NT often means “a week,” and usually the word is in the plural as it is here (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; John 20:1; 19; Acts 20:7). So the primary reference in Colossians is not to “the Sabbath,” but to various religious celebrations and feasts.

In the larger context of this discussion, Paul expresses two concerns. First he establishes that because of the cross and their baptism, Gentile followers of Jesus need not fear condemnation for their sinful lives in the past (Col 2:11-14). So he insists that they should not let others condemn them for their observance of special holidays. He never indicates whether the judgment is because they are not observing the holidays or because they are, but I think it much more likely that they are being criticized for their feasting, for their observing of these holidays. It is also not clear if those judgments are being made by people within the church or by non-Christians. Either way, the passage insists: don't let people judge how you observe sabbaths and other religious feasts.

Second, Paul does not want them to be led astray by human traditions and worldly philosophies that are not in accordance with Christ. For Paul, the regulations and practices that people are trying to impose on the Colossians are human teachings and commandments (vv. 8, 22). If he were speaking here about the feasts outlined in Torah, including the Sabbath, then Paul would be flagrantly and inexplicably contradicting the Scripture, which clearly indicates that these are God's commandments. Paul would also be contradicting Jesus himself, who not only observed those feasts but also assumed his disciples would as well, and who spoke specifically about the Sabbath as God's gift to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

Third, Paul is talking about what we think of as ascetic regulations, restrictions on what you can eat and drink (v. 21). That has nothing to do with the weekly Sabbath or any of the other Jewish feasts. The rabbis specifically prohibit fasting on the Sabbath, because it is out of character with the joyous nature of the day. So it is hard to connect what Paul says here with a condemnation of Sabbath observance. It is only the anti-Judaism of our tradition that has taught us to read Paul this way and then to use Paul not only to override the Old Testament but also the teaching and practice of Jesus.

What is significant to me about this whole chapter is the kind of language Paul uses to make his argument. Unlike other places where Paul discusses the

relationship of Gentiles to the Law of Moses, here he does not engage in any discussion of Scripture at all. He uses strange phrases like “elementary principles of the cosmos” and “rulers and authorities” that seem to come more from esoteric Greek philosophical discussions than from Torah. Would Paul really refer to observing the Sabbath, Yom Kippur, Passover, or Pentecost as “empty deceit” that comes from the “elemental spiritual forces of the cosmos” (v. 8)? Is Paul really arguing here that spiritual disciplines like fasting have no value for the Christian?

I don't think Paul is criticizing mainstream first-century Jewish practices here or arguing against Torah itself. I think he is speaking to Gentiles who more than likely have learned to observe the feasts in Torah from Jewish Christians. Others, who hold to esoteric Greek philosophical ideas such as ascetic practices, angel worship, and mystical visions (2:18), are criticizing those observances. Clearly there are people teaching certain types of religious piety and observance that Paul does not think fit with the gospel of Christ, but the specific circumstances are not clear. Biblical scholars continue to debate the precise nature of what they call the “Colossian heresy.” Perhaps his readers understood him better than we do two thousand years later. But Paul here is not overturning the observance of the Sabbath. To do that he would have to make a completely different type of argument.

#### b. Training in Righteousness

We have seen that the apostle Paul declares all Scripture to be useful for teaching and correction and for training in righteousness. The Sabbath is just such a discipline. It is training in a holy detachment from endless striving and labor. It teaches us a healthy perspective on wealth and money. It insists that we pay attention not just to our own needs but also to the needs of others, including foreigners, people not like us, and also including the non-human parts of creation.

And the Sabbath, like so much of Torah, teaches us limits. Limits to what we acquire and consume. We recognize our own limits: we can only do so much in this world and then we have to stop. By limiting what you can do in a given week, the Sabbath forces you to give up the illusion of being in control over your life. Can we give up one day a week and just STOP working ourselves to death?

For one day in seven stop trying to change the world and learn to be in harmony with it. For six days a week we act as stewards of the world, developing it, taking care of it, and using its resources to satisfy our human needs. But the Sabbath puts all that in perspective. Rabbi Samson Raphael

Hirsch (1953) says, “Every Sabbath, return to God His universe, acknowledge the Lord your God, and remind yourself yet again that this universe is borrowed from God. Remember who is its Master, that this borrowed universe belongs to the Lord, and that He, not you, rules everything” (*Sefer Horev*, pp. 69-70).

The Sabbath has always been a countercultural, subversive institution that sets people apart from the way the world operates, the way it literally does business. Sabbath observance is part of the larger purpose of Torah to create a nation unlike others, a people who serve God, not Mammon.

Most importantly, the Sabbath is a day for rest and refreshment and rejuvenation of our lives. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky gives his personal testimony about the Sabbath: “Maybe it is middle age, but I can actually feel my body beginning to shut down as I make my way home each Friday afternoon in anticipation of Shabbat. I can push all week long—early mornings and late nights—but, come Friday, I am ready to completely unwind. It isn’t just the bodily rest that I crave: it is the deep spiritual nourishment the Sabbath provides. By separating myself from the frenzy of the world that surrounds me all week long, I can focus on the needs of my soul throughout Shabbat. It is an island away from the secular intrusions on my spiritual world” (*Jewish Holidays*, p. 115).

His co-author, Rabbi Daniel Judson, speaks about the different ways in which Jews choose to observe the Sabbath. Some follow a strict set of rules that greatly limit their activities, while others focus more generally on doing pleasurable things that they don’t have time for the rest of the week. He says he tries to combine both approaches. “I try to do things that bring me joy while simultaneously recognizing that withdrawing myself from daily activities frees me to experience inner peace in a profound way. Practically, I observe two primary rules to separate myself during Shabbat from my regular days. First, I do not spend any money. This keeps me away from movies, shopping malls, and restaurants. Second, I do not turn on my computer, which keeps me from the temptation to check e-mail, pay a bill online, or finish up that essay or lesson I am preparing. . . . For some people it is almost incomprehensible to spend Friday night or Saturday not going out or working. Occasionally, when I see a listing for a concert or show, or I am invited to a friend’s party on a Friday night, I momentarily regret my decision not to participate in these activities on the Sabbath. *But, for me, the spiritual discipline of not spending money and not socializing in ways not related to the Sabbath provides me with benefits that transcend the transient joys of a party or a movie. In consistently observing the Sabbath, you can feel an ‘intuition of eternity,’ as Heschel calls*

it” (*Jewish Holidays*, pp. 119-120). For Rabbi Judson, the discipline of the Sabbath creates for him an “island of peace.” This is the consistent testimony of Jews who observe the Sabbath.

Krister Stendahl, Swedish Lutheran pastor and NT scholar, urged people to develop a “holy envy,” a willingness to recognize elements in other religious traditions that you admire and wish could be reflected in your own faith. This study is a product of such holy envy.

Imagine what our lives would be like if one day a week we all did not use our phones or computers or televisions, if you could completely shut off all the noise of the world around us. If you did not do anything related to your job, not even think about it. If you did not engage in any kind of financial or commercial endeavors. If for 24 hours we stopped trying to get things done, trying to cross things off our to-do lists, and instead spent the time appreciating and enjoying what we have, our families and friends and church fellowships. If at brunch after Shabbat services you could sit around and talk with each other because you have nothing else to rush off to or get accomplished. If you could take a nap and not feel guilty about it.

I don’t think this can be done simply as individuals deciding from time to time to take a day off, although it is certainly a healthy thing for individuals to do. But that solution reflects a typically modern Western perspective: we can do all this biblical stuff on our own. I think part of what makes the Sabbath work as it is supposed to, work as the Bible intended it to, is that a whole community is doing it together, because that is part of what the Sabbath is about. Israel was to be an alternative community, one not enslaved by the endless labor of Egypt. What kind of community might we create if we all shared in this *menuha*, in this Sabbath rest, in this *shabbat shalom*? What kind of witness to the world might that community be, a witness about its insane pursuit of wealth and the power and status that wealth confers, about its unrelenting demands for work and its belief that we find our value and identity as human beings in our work? What kind of light and salt might we become for the world if we were to keep the Sabbath holy?

And what kind of community might we need to be in order to create a world in which people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale are not forced into the burdensome enslavement of having to work two or three low-paying jobs just to feed and house their families? What kind of witness for social justice, for liveable wages, for decent working conditions, might this commandment be—that everyone, even the foreigners living in your midst, are to be allowed to keep the Sabbath? In following Jesus’ example, what other



acts of mercy and healing might we embrace as part of our Sabbath observance? How might the Sabbath become a day of restoration to wholeness, both for ourselves and for others?

I offer these reflections to you as a challenge and an opportunity, remembering the prophet's words: "If you hold back your foot on the Sabbath from following your own pursuits on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable; if you honor it not by following your own ways or seeking your own interests, then you will delight in the Lord" (Is. 58:13-14).