

Shabbat as Preview of the Perfected World

BY RABBI THEODORE FRIEDMAN

While Rabbi Friedman's use of the masculine to represent all people may well strike today's reader as antiquated, his exposition of this concept through the range of traditional Jewish sources, and its implications for our time, hopefully will not. Excerpted with permission from Judaism 16:4 (Fall 1967).

The laws of the Sabbath, according to the graphic description of the Mishnah, are like mountains suspended by a hair. By that description, the Mishnah intends the fact that the Sabbath *halakhah* [complex of laws], exceedingly extensive, complex, and detailed, stands on a very narrow, limited biblical base—actually, the merest handful of biblical verses. So paradoxical a situation can only be explained by the assumption that at work in the enormous proliferation of the Sabbath *halakhah* in the talmudic period was some general concept of the nature of the Sabbath which the [ancient] Rabbis sought to concretize in detailed halakhic terms.

In his classic essay, “Halakhah and Aggadah,” [the 19th-20th century Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman] Bialik lays down this sweeping generalization, “The *halakhah* is the final, inevitable concretization of the *aggadah* [the non-legal portions of Jewish writings].” No more striking and cogent illustration of the truth of this statement can be found than that offered by the *halakhah* of the Sabbath. What was that general concept?

While it finds a variety of expressions in talmudic literature, all of them, in the end, give voice to the idea that the Sabbath is the anticipation, the foretaste, the paradigm of life in the world-to-come. The very abundance of such statements is the surest evidence of how deep-rooted and widespread that notion was in the early rabbinic period. A few of the more typical statements may be quoted.

We meet the concept in the Mishnah [the earliest rabbinic law code, c. 200 C.E]. We find it in the Gemara [or Talmud, commenting and expanded on the Mishnah] and [in the classical works of rabbinic] Midrash, and we encounter it, again and again, in kabbalistic literature. At the end of [the mishnaic tractate] *Tamid* we read: ” ‘A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath day’ [Psalms 92:1]—a song for the time-to-come (*le'atid lavo*), for the day that is all Sabbath rest in the eternal life.” The Sabbath, the Gemara asserts [in *Berakhot* 57b], is one-sixtieth of the world-to-come.

Here the rabbis are talking about 1/60 in the context of things that gives us a foretaste of larger things — one of which is Shabbat, which offers a small taste of the World to Come. In Jewish thought, the world to come can refer to the afterlife, or to the end times when the world will be perfected and free of suffering.

We often hear this teaching used to describe the myriad ways Shabbat allows us to live differently: spending extended time with those we love, eating delicious meals, singing — all things that bring great pleasure and delight, enabling us to experience a bit of the world to come on a weekly basis. **Yet in describing Shabbat as 1/60 of the world to come, the rabbis also seem to be saying that our experience of Shabbat cannot even compare to the enormity of the experience of the world to come.**

So what might it mean to inhabit a Shabbat that enables us to experience even a tiny sense of the world to come?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously taught that Shabbat is a palace in time, a day in which we can revel in both worldly and spiritual delights. Whether we believe in the literal truth of a world to come or not, we can all imagine Shabbat as a time to choose serenity and joy. And in a world in which so many of us are constantly distracted, pulled in a million directions, and not present to the ones we love in the ways we'd like to be, experiencing Shabbat in this way can be quite the gift.

Whether we mark Shabbat every week or only occasionally, and whether we do so in the traditional manner with food and prayer or in our own unique way, the Gemara here is suggesting that by inhabiting this palace in time, we can all experience the ease and freedom of a perfected world, a world (we hope) to come.

Out of midrashic literature, in which the concept is to be met in a variety of forms, one selects a rather late midrash, because of its imaginative, dramatic form. “Israel said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He: ‘Master of the world, if we observe the commandments, what reward will we have?’ He said to them, ‘The world-to-come.’ They said to him: ‘Show us its likeness.’ He showed them the Sabbath.” (Otiot de-Rabbi Akiva). **From later kabbalistic writings, we cull the comment of Rabbi Moshe Recanati in his commentary on the Torah (*ad* Genesis 2:3):** “*‘And God blessed the seventh day.’ — The Holy One, Blessed Be He, blessed the world-to-come that begins in the seventh millenium*”—that is to say, the Sabbath of Genesis alludes to the world-to-come. **In this, he is anticipated by [the medieval commentator] Nahmanides in his comment on the same verse: “The seventh day is an indication of the world-to-come that is all Sabbath.”**

Its Meaning for Us

If the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world-to-come, we may now ask ourselves: What, given the actualities of modern living, ought the world-to-come be like? Or, to put the matter negatively, what are the conditions from which a man in the 20th century might seek release? Do the essential aspects of the traditional Sabbath offer such release, physical and psychological? The answer to the question entails the construction of an ideology of the Sabbath astonishingly parallel, in a number of respects, to the ancient, traditional *aggadah*. In its analysis of modern man's condition, the ideology draws on the insights of contemporary sociologists and psychologists. In the response it offers, we draw upon the traditional concept of the Sabbath.

What are the three essential conditions which make for the anxiety, discontent, and unhappiness of modern man? They may be summarized as his consciousness of time, the competitiveness that pervades every sphere of life, and the diminishing pleasure man finds in work....

On the Sabbath, the observant Jew moves out of secular time into holy time. We know what secular time is—unrelenting speed-up. How fast can we work, how fast can we travel, how fast can we communicate? What is holy time? It is the suspension of our normal awareness of time, the absence of its normal pressure. “A man must enter the Sabbath as if all his work were done” (Mekhilta, Masekhta Ba-Hodesh). “A man must not walk on the Sabbath with hurried gait” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 113a). These statements drawn from the tradition—they may readily be multiplied—all point to the nature of the sacred time that is the Sabbath. To enter upon it is to know a level of existence that disposes the soul towards the timeless things.

Another phenomenon no less corrosive of joy for modern man is competitiveness.... The Sabbath is the sphere of the non-competitive, for all its emphasis is on man’s communion with man and God. It is no accident that traditional Sabbath activities are located in those spheres in which there is no competition, or a very minimum of competition—the family, the circle of friends, the House of Prayer, and the House of Study. At the very least, the Sabbath withdraws us from the world of work, currently termed the “rat-race” or the “game.”

A third essential source of modern man’s malaise is the area of his work.... From sunset to sunset, the Sabbath withdraws man from the world of work and transfers him to the world of pleasure; from the world of tension to the world of delight; from the world of doing and making to the world of being. It was Marx who said that all philosophies differed only in interpreting the world, while the important thing to do was change it. To which one ought add that it is no less important for man to enjoy it—the world, man, and God. And the two basic Sabbath concepts are *oneg* (delight) and *kavod* (the reverential acknowledgement of man and God).

In sum, the Sabbath can be for modern man the expression of his cosmic dimension—the faith that he is more than a creature of time, the faith that his true but as yet unfulfilled nature is to be found in his solidarity with the human family and his affinity to the Eternal, the faith that, in enjoying the world and God, he fulfills his true destiny in time and eternity.