

## **5 Principles of Shabbat**

By Rachel Nilson Ralston

Shabbat is simultaneously simple and complex. Let's unpack this ancient and frequent Jewish experience through Jewish texts, and focus on 5 core principles of what makes Shabbat, Shabbat. Think of these principles as a Shabbat checklist – it's really great when your Sabbath day incorporates all of them. How *you* define them or add them to your Shabbat experience? Well, that's entirely up to you.

### **Principle 1: Shabbat as Sacred Time**

#### **Source 1: *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel**

"He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self...The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.

...What is so luminous about a day? What is so precious to captivate the hearts? It is because the seventh day is a mine where spirit's precious metal can be found with which to construct the palace in time, a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine; a dimension in which man aspires to approach the likeness of the divine.

...The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God. All week we think: The spirit is too far away, and we succumb to spiritual absenteeism, or at best we pray: Send us a little of Thy spirit. On the Sabbath the spirit stands and pleads: Accept all excellence from me...

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily tuned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a great hope for man's progress than the Sabbath?"

[Heschel, A.J. *The Sabbath*. Canada: Harper Collins Publishers Canada Ltd., 1979, pp.13-14, 16, 18, 28.]

## **Principle 2: Shabbat as a Taste of the World to Come**

### **Source 1: Midrash Otiot d'Rabbi Akiva**

"In the hour God said to Israel, "I am giving you the Torah," God said, "If you observing the *mitzvah* (commandment) of Shabbat, I will give you *Olam Haba* (the world to come)." And Israel said before God, "Master of the Universe! Show us an example of this *Olam Haba*." God replied, "This is Shabbat."

### **Source 2: Talmud Brachot 57b**

"Five things are a sixtieth part of something else: namely, fire, honey, Shabbat, sleep and a dream. Fire is one-sixtieth part of Gehinnom. Honey is one-sixtieth part of manna. Shabbat is one-sixtieth part of the world to come. Sleep is one-sixtieth part of death. A dream is one-sixtieth part of prophecy."

### **Source 3: Bereshit Rabbat 17:5**

(5) "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall." Rabbi Joshua of Sichnin in the name of Rabbi Levi said: the beginning of a man's downfall is sleep. When asleep, he does not engage in study or work. Rav said: there are three types of deep sleep: the deep sleep of sleep; the deep sleep of prophecy; and the deep sleep of a trance. The deep sleep of sleep: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep [tardemah] to fall on Adam, and he slept" (Genesis 2:21). The deep sleep of prophecy: "And the sun went down and a deep sleep [tardemah] fell over Avram" (Genesis 15:12). The deep sleep of a trance: "And no one saw, and no one knew and no one awoke because all were sleeping, because the deep sleep [tardemah] of God has fallen on them" (Samuel I 26:12). The Rabbis said: [there is a fourth type] even the deep sleep of folly, as it is written: "Because God poured upon you the spirit of deep sleep [tardemah]" (Isaiah 29:9). Rabbi Hanina bar Yitzchak said: there are three varieties of analogy: A taste of death - is sleep; a taste of prophecy - is dreaming; a taste of the world to come - is Shabbat. Rabbi Avin added two more: a taste of the light of heaven - is the sun; a taste of the wisdom of heaven - is Torah.

### **Source 4: *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

"...According to the Genesis account, this world originally was and is still meant to be a paradise. But only when there is peace, with abundant resources and an untrammelled right to live, will the world be structured to sustain the infinite value of the human being. This is the heart of Judaism, the dream. Jewish existence without the dream is almost inconceivable. The drawing power of the vision has kept Jews faithful to their mission over several millennia. Expulsion, persecution, and destruction have assaulted but never obliterated the dream. Jews have repeatedly given everything, including their very lives, to keep it alive. And when catastrophe shattered the vision, Jews spent their lives renewing it. The question is: From where can these people draw the strength to renew their dream again and again? The answer of Jewish tradition is: Give people just a foretaste of the fulfillment, and they will never give it up.

The Shabbat is that taste...The world of the Shabbat is totally different than the weekday universe: There is no work to do, no deprivation. On Shabbat, there is neither anxiety nor bad news. Since such a world does not yet exist in space, it is first created in time, on the seventh day of the week. Jews travel through time in order to enter a perfect world for a night and a day. The goal is to create a reality so complete and absorbing that these time travelers are caught up in its values and renewed. The Shabbat is the foretaste of the messianic redemption."

### **Principle 3: Shabbat as Rest**

#### **Source 1: Exodus 20:8-11**

(8) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. (9) Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; (10) but the seventh day is a sabbath unto the LORD thy God, in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; (11) for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

#### **Source 2: Exodus 16:21-26**

(21) And they gathered it morning by morning, every man according to his eating; and as the sun waxed hot, it melted. (22) And it came to pass that on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one; and all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. (23) And he said unto them: 'This is that which the LORD hath spoken: To-morrow is a solemn rest, a holy sabbath unto the LORD. Bake that which ye will bake, and seethe that which ye will seethe; and all that remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning.' (24) And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses bade; and it did not rot, neither was there any worm therein. (25) And Moses said: 'Eat that to-day; for to-day is a sabbath unto the LORD; to-day ye shall not find it in the field. (26) Six days ye shall gather it; but on the seventh day is the sabbath, in it there shall be none.'

### **Principle 4: Shabbat as Joy**

#### **Source 1: Isaiah 58:13-14**

(13) If thou turn away thy foot because of the sabbath, From pursuing thy business on My holy day; And call the sabbath a delight, And the holy of the LORD honourable; And shalt honour it, not doing thy wonted ways, Nor pursuing thy business, nor speaking thereof; (14) Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD, And I will make thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, And I will feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father; For the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

#### **Source 2: Shibblei HaLeket**

"Rabbi Akiva used to sit and cry on Shabbat. His students came to him and said: Rabbi! You taught us to call Shabbat a delight!"

He replied: "this is my delight."

### Source 3: Mah Yedidut

How beloved is your contentment, you Sabbath Queen!  
So we run to greet you: Come, anointed bride!  
Dressed in beautiful garments to kindle the flame with blessing.  
And all labor has ceased, [for it is written:] "You shall not do work."

[It is a time] to delight in pleasures: fatted birds, quail, and fish.

From the day before [the Sabbath], they prepare all kinds of delicacies.  
While still day fattened chickens are made ready;  
And setting up diverse kinds [of foods], drinking wines; all sweet-smelling.  
And we enjoy luxurious delicacies at all three meals.

[It is a time] to delight in pleasures: fatted birds, quail, and fish.

The heritage of Jacob shall they inherit; an inheritance without constraints.  
Both rich and poor shall honor it and [thereby] merit redemption.  
If you observe the Sabbath Day [God says:] "You shall be for Me a treasure."  
"Six days you shall do your work" but on the seventh we will rejoice.

[It is a time] to delight in pleasures: fatted birds, quail, and fish.

Your mundane matters [on it] are forbidden, and even figuring accounts.  
Contemplation is permissible, and arranging marriages.  
And to arrange for a child to be taught a holy book and how to chant,  
and to engage in beautiful words [of Torah] in all corners and gathering places.

[It is a time] to delight in pleasures: fatted birds, quail, and fish...

### Source 4: Talmud, Ketubot 62b

"How often are scholars to perform their marital duties? — Rav Judah in the name of Samuel replied: Every Friday night.

That bringeth forth its fruit in its season, Rav Judah, and some say R. Huna, or again. as others say. R. Nahman, stated: This [refers to the man] who performs his marital duty every Friday night.

Judah the son of R. Hiyya and son-in-law of R. Jannai was always spending his time in the school house but every Sabbath eve he came home."

**Source 5: "Powering Down" by Jennifer Bleyer, *Tablet Magazine***

"Shabbat is like exercising. You avoid it. You groan about it. You think of a million other things you would rather do. Finally, you drag yourself to do it and you feel amazing. You vow that you will keep doing it over and over again and become a whole new super healthy glowing you. You approach Oprah-ish levels of inner calm and rejuvenation. And you may just feel so present that you forget about your plugged-in life altogether. It's a religious ritual that even an atheist can love."

**Principle 5: Shabbat as Community**

**Source 2: The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays, Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

"The Shabbat is the foretaste of the messianic redemption. But even as this enclave of perfection is carved out in the realm of time, the world goes on as usual in the realm of surrounding space. That is why Shabbat needs a community in order to be credible. By an act of will, the community creates this sacred time and space, and agrees to live by its rules. For nineteen hundred years, before saying grace after meals on weekdays, Jews in the exile chanted Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remember Zion...How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" But on Shabbat, as the sun set and the power of evil was shut out, Jews were transported in their imagination to a perfect, rebuilt Jerusalem. It was so real to them that on this day, before saying grace, they sang Psalm 126: "When the Lord returned us to Zion, we lived as in a dream; then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongue flowed with song."

**Source 1: "Shabbat and Zionism," Achad Ha'am 1898**

"There is no need to be overly concerned with *mitzvot* in order to know the value of Shabbat. Whoever feels in their heart a true connection with the life of the [Jewish] Nation in all generations, cannot in any way imagine a reality for the people of Israel without Shabbat. One could say, without any exaggeration, that more than Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel, and if it hadn't returned to them their souls and renewed the lives of their spirit each week, all the sufferings of the "days of creation" would drag us farther and farther downward, until they would eventually descend to the bottom floor of materialism, and ethical and intellectual baseness."

**Source 3: "Shabbat for the World", Rabbi Steve Greenberg**

When thinking about community, it is easy to miss a crucial form of the communal life that has no particular place, tends to bring a different group of people together every time, has no particular political or social agenda and is still an epitome of Jewish life. What could this be? The Shabbat table, of course. We don't normally think of Shabbat as such a wild frame of community making, but it is. Let me paint the picture.

Imagine a Shabbat table filled with lots of great food, surrounded by friends and accompanied with great singing and divrei Torah. Shabbat dinner for me last week surely fit this rather homey Orthodox image. Okay, so not all the folks around the table were Orthodox; in fact, a good third of the participants was not Jewish at all. There were Catholics and Protestants joining the mix of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and just over half of those present were gay and lesbian. Add to this that the German, Dutch, American, British, Israeli, Australian, gay and straight Jews and non-Jews were celebrating Shabbat in, of all places, Berlin.

"Shabbat table community" was especially evident in Berlin. Secular Israelis who had been raised in anti-religious homes spent the evening talking to German Lutherans who were trying to square the Bible with their lives, while, on the other side of the room, a gay Jesuit priest explained a rabbinic interpretation of Genesis to an Australian Jew raised in the Melbourne Orthodox community.

...The Shabbat table community defies easy categorization. First, it can happen anywhere that there are people, wine, hallah and good food. It helps, too, to set the mood, to prepare white tablecloths and flowers, but with these ingredients and a measure of good cheer, a Shabbat community is created. The rituals of Shabbat dinner themselves, while being very Jewish, seem nonetheless to speak a much wider language. For example, netilat yadaim, the custom of washing hands before eating bread, marks the table as an altar, the hallah bread as sacrifice, and members of the Shabbat community as priests, responsible for all the families of the earth. With that introduction, along with Jews who had never washed before, all the non-Jews felt privileged to join in. Everyone was reminded that Shabbat was a day of Edenic joy, a taste of a perfected world to come. To celebrate such a day, everyone was obligated to share with friends, eat more than they would ordinarily, drink a few glasses of wine, and then go home to the intimate embrace of a loving partner.

...A Shabbat community is convened in a single evening and then disappears; still, its power to shape identity and experience is remarkable. While other forms of community may be able to generate a more sustained set of relationships, Shabbat dinner is a freer venue. Since the Shabbat dinner community has no fixed membership rules, anyone can join and feel like a member in good standing. It engenders great pride in Jewish tradition and culture, while stretching the very meaning of Jewishness in marvelous ways. Shabbat dinner provides us with a sense of nostalgic Jewish homecoming wherever we are, and is, at the same time, a most amazing gift to almost anyone.

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