



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

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COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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Three Versions of Shabbat

There is something unique about the way Parshat Emor speaks about Shabbat. It calls it a *mo'ed* and a *mikra kodesh* when, in the conventional sense of these words, it is neither. *Mo'ed* means an appointed time with a fixed date on the calendar. *Mikra kodesh* means either a sacred assembly, a time at which the nation gathered at the central Sanctuary, or a day made holy by proclamation, that is, through the human court's determination of the calendar. Shabbat is none of these things. It has no fixed date on the calendar. It is not a time of national assembly. And it is not a day made holy by the proclamation of the human court. Shabbat was the day made holy by God Himself at the beginning of time.

The explanation lies in the context in which the passage containing these terms appears, the chapters of the Torah whose primary theme is holiness (Lev. 18–27). The radical claim made in these chapters is that holiness, a term normally reserved for God, can be acquired by human beings when they act like God. The festivals stand to Shabbat the way the Sanctuary stands to the universe. Both are humanly created domains of holiness constructed on the model of divine creation and sanctification as they appear at the beginning of Genesis. By inviting human beings to create a sanctuary and determine the monthly and yearly calendar, God invests us with the dignity of a holiness we have not just received passively as a gift, but acquired actively as co-creators with God.

Mikra kodesh and *mo'ed* as they appear in Leviticus have an extra sense that they do not bear elsewhere because they evoke the opening verse of the book: "He called [*Vayikra*] to Moses, and the Lord spoke to him in the Tent of Meeting [*Ohel Mo'ed*], saying..." (Lev. 1:1). The focus is on *mikra* as "call" and *mo'ed* as "meeting." When the Torah uses these words uniquely in this chapter to apply to Shabbat as well as the festivals, it is focusing on the encounter between God and humanity in the arena of time. Whether it is God's call to us or ours to Him, whether God initiates the meeting or we do, holy time becomes a lovers' rendezvous, a still point in the turning world when lover and beloved, Creator and creation, "make time" for one another and know one another in the special form of knowledge we call love. If this is so, what does Parshat Emor tell us about Shabbat that we do not learn elsewhere? The answer becomes clear when we look

at two other passages, the two versions of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, as they appear in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Famously, the wording of the two versions is different. The Exodus account begins with the word *Zachor*, remember. The Deuteronomy account begins with *Shamor*, “keep, guard, protect.” But they differ more profoundly in their very understanding of the nature and significance of the day. Here is the Exodus text:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.... *For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth... but He rested on the seventh day.* Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:7–9)

According to this, Shabbat is a reminder of creation. The Deuteronomy text gives a very different account:

Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant... *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there...* Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deut. 5:11–14)

Here there is no reference to creation. Instead the Torah speaks about a historical event: the Exodus. We keep Shabbat not because God rested on the seventh day but because He took our ancestors out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. Therefore, Shabbat is a day of freedom even for servants, and even for domestic animals. One day in seven, no one is a slave.

Of course, both are true, and we integrate both accounts into the text of the Kiddush we make on Friday night. We call Shabbat a remembrance of creation (*zikaron lemaaseh bereishit*) as well as a reminder of the Exodus (*zekher liyetziat Mitzrayim*). However, once we set the Leviticus account in the context of these other two, a richer pattern emerges.

If we play close attention, we can hear three primary voices in the Torah: those of Kingship, Priesthood, and Prophecy. These are the three fundamental leadership roles and they have distinctive modes of knowledge.

Priests, Prophets, and the governing elite (the wise, the Elders, Kings and their courts) each have their own ways of thinking and speaking. Kings and courts use the language of *chochmah*, “wisdom.” Priests teach Torah, the word of God for all time. Prophets have visions. They have “the word” of God not for *all* time but for *this* time. Prophecy is about history as the interaction between God and humanity.

Is it merely accidental that there happen to be three voices, when there could have been four, or two, or one? The answer is no. There are three voices because, axiomatic to Jewish faith is the belief that God is encountered in three ways: in creation, revelation, and

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redemption.¹

Wisdom is the ability to see God in creation, in the intricate complexity of the natural universe and the human mind. In contemporary terms, *chochmah* is a combination of the sciences and humanities: all that allows us to see the universe as the work of God and human beings as the image of God. It is summed up in a verse from Psalms (104:24), “How many are Your works, O Lord; You have made them all in wisdom.”

Revelation, Torah, the speciality of the Priest, is the ability to hear God in the form of the commanding voice, most characteristically in the form of law: “And God said,” “And God spoke,” “And God commanded.” Revelation is a matter not of seeing but of listening, in the deep sense of hearing and heeding, attending and responding. Wisdom tells us how things are. Revelation tells us how we should live. Prophetic consciousness is always focused on redemption, the long and winding road towards a society based on justice and compassion, love and forgiveness, peace and human dignity. The prophet knows where we came from and where we are going to, what stage we have reached in the journey and what dangers lie ahead. The prophetic word is always related to history, to the present in relation to the past and the future: not history as a mere succession of events, but as an approach to or digression from the good society, the Promised Land, and the Messianic Age.

Creation, revelation, and redemption represent the three basic relationships within which Judaism and human life are set. Creation is God’s relationship to the world. Revelation is God’s relationship with us. When we apply revelation to creation, the result is redemption: the world in which God’s will and ours coincide.

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We now understand why the Torah contains three distinct accounts of Shabbat. The account in the first version of the Ten Commandments, “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth,” is the Shabbat of creation. The account in the second version, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord, your God, brought you out,” is the Shabbat of redemption. The Parshat Emor account, spoken in the Priestly voice, is the Shabbat of revelation. In revelation, God calls to humankind. That is why the middle book of the Torah (that more than any other represents *Torat Kohanim*, “the law of the Priests,”) begins with the word *Vayikra*, “and He called.” It is also why Shabbat is, uniquely here, included in the days “which you shall proclaim (*tikre’u*) as sacred convocations (*mikra’ei kodesh*),” with the double emphasis on the verb *k-r-a*, “to call, proclaim, convoke.” Shabbat is the day in which, in the stasis of rest and the silence of the soul, we hear the Call of God.

Hence too, the word *mo’ed*, which in general means “appointed times,” but here means “meeting.” Judah Halevi, the eleventh-century poet and philosopher, said that on Shabbat, it is as if God had personally invited us to be dinner guests at His table.² The Shabbat of revelation does not look back to the birth of the

¹ Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (1366–1441) argued that all of Maimonides’ *Thirteen Principles of Faith* could be reduced to these three. See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization; New Ed edition, July 22, 2004). In the modern era, this idea is primarily associated with Franz Rosenzweig.

² Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, II:50.

universe or forwards to the future redemption. It celebrates the present moment as our private time with God. It represents “the power of now.”

Not only is this threefold structure set out in the Torah, it is embodied in the prayers of Shabbat itself. Shabbat is the only day of the year in which the evening, morning, and afternoon prayers are different from one another. In the Friday night *Amidah*, we refer to the Shabbat of creation: “You sanctified the seventh day for Your name’s sake as the culmination of the creation of heaven and earth.” On Shabbat morning we speak about the supreme moment of revelation: “Moses rejoiced at the gift of his portion....He brought down in his hands two tablets of stone on which was engraved the observance of the Sabbath.” On Shabbat afternoon we look forwards to the ultimate redemption, when all humanity will acknowledge that “You are One, Your name is One, and who is like Your people Israel, a nation one on earth.”³

Creation, revelation, and redemption form the basic triad of the Jewish faith. They are also the most fundamental structuring principle of Jewish prayer. Nowhere is this clearer than in the way the Torah understands Shabbat: one day with three dimensions, experienced successively in the experiences of evening, morning, and afternoon. What is fragmented in secular culture into science, religion, and political ideology is here united in the transforming experience of God who created the universe, whose presence fills our homes with light, and who will one day lead us to a world of freedom, justice, and peace.

Shabbat shalom

“Shabbat: one day with three dimensions, experienced successively in the experiences of evening, morning, and afternoon.”

Jonathan Sacks



www.rabbisacks.org     @rabbisacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

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³ The phrase *goy echad baaretz*, which appears three times in Tanakh, has two meanings: “a nation unique on earth” (II Sam. 7:23, I Chr. 17:21), and “a nation reunited” after its internal divisions (Ezek. 37:22). It bears both meanings here.