

CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 8(A): WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT SABBATH? PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Ten things were created on the Sabbath eve at twilight. They are: the mouth of the earth [which swallowed Korach and his co-conspirators] (Numbers 16:32), the mouth of the well [which accompanied Israel in the desert], the mouth of the donkey [which rebuked Balaam] (ibid., 22:28), the rainbow, the Manna, the staff [of Moses], the shamir worm, the script [of the Torah], the inscription [on the Tablets of the Ten Commandments], and the Tablets. Some say: also destructive spirits, the burial place of Moses, and the ram of our father Abraham [which he slaughtered in place of Isaac] (Genesis 22:13). And some say, also tongs -- which are made with tongs.

This mishna lists a number of "magical" objects which were created at the end of the Sixth Day of Creation immediately prior to the Sabbath. This time period -- which I translated above as "twilight" - - literally means "between the suns" ("bein ha'shemashos"). It refers to the period between sunset and nightfall and is considered the transition from day to night. In Jewish law, this entire period is considered a question mark -- possibly day and possibly night. (According to the Sages, the transition from day to night is only a moment long, yet we do not know precisely at which moment this occurs in this entire period.) We are thus stringent regarding its status in both directions. Thus, for example, we begin Sabbath observance before **sunset** on Friday evening and conclude it only after **nightfall** on Saturday.

The objects G-d created in this time period were unique. To understand the difference between them and the rest of the universe, created on days 1-6, I would like to first spend a number of paragraphs (the rest of this week's installment) discussing the difference between the workweek and the Sabbath. We will then be able to more fully understand the unique nature of those objects created so close to the Sabbath -- during the transition from mundane to sacred. (Much of the remainder of this class is based upon R. Aryeh Kaplan, "Sabbath -- Day of Eternity" (published by Artscroll Mesorah Publications in The Aryeh Kaplan Anthology; see also a shorter summary of it [here](#).)

Many people, Jews included, have a basic misconception regarding the Sabbath. We tend to think of it as simply a day off -- a day to relax our minds and bodies from the stress and tediousness of the workweek. Now that in itself would certainly be a wise religious injunction. People need time off from the daily grind -- a welcome interruption from our unending struggle to earn a living and fill our stomachs.

However, the many restrictions of the Sabbath seem to paint a rather different picture. We may think of relaxation as driving to the beach, watching a good movie, or going shopping. Yet none of these activities are permitted on the Sabbath. Alternatively, we might expect actions requiring exertion to be forbidden. Yet, technically speaking, a person may move heavy boxes or pieces of furniture on the Sabbath -- while he may not strike a match or flip a light switch. Likewise, we must travel on foot -- though this requires far more effort than driving a car. If so, what is the purpose of the Sabbath laws -- and how do they remind us that G-d "worked" for six days and "rested" on the seventh?

The idea is as follows. During the Six Days of Creation, the world was incomplete. G-d was constantly molding and acting upon the world, transforming it from more primitive to more advanced states-- light and darkness, heaven and earth, water and dry land, plants, aquatic life, terrestrials, and at last man.

When the first Sabbath arrived, G-d's work was finished: the world was complete and perfect. G-d no longer had to change the world and improve upon it. Everything the world required and would ever require existed and was put into place. G-d had only to leave go of the universe, so to speak, allowing all its components to function in harmony.

This was the idea of the "rest" that G-d enjoyed on the Sabbath (Genesis 2:2). It was not, of course, that G-d was "tired" and had to take a break from His exertion. It was that G-d had brought the world to a state of completion and perfection. He no longer had to intervene -- altering and modifying the world in order to improve it. G-d could sit back and admire, so to speak. His handiwork was complete; all of creation could now "rest": it could exist just the way it was -- and live together in peace and harmony.

This phenomenon is reenacted each week on the Sabbath. During the workweek we view the world as incomplete. We must labor: clear the land, till the soil, build shelter, plant, harvest, cook, manufacture -- all in order to make the world a suitable habitat for man. For six days, we -- as did G-d -- force our mark upon the world -- altering it from its natural state in order to make it a vessel worthy of man.

On the Sabbath we recognize that G-d's world is perfect.

When the Sabbath arrives, we are commanded to cease interfering with the world. We no longer assert our mastery over it, changing it from its natural state. We may not build, burn, work the earth - - or even pick a flower. Any act which changes the earth from its natural state in the smallest way contradicts the spirit of the Sabbath. We cease doing acts of **creation** -- and by so doing, gain the sense that the world as created by G-d is essentially perfect.

When Creation was completed and the world enjoyed its first Sabbath, it should have remained eternally in a complete and perfect state. An everlasting Sabbath should have ensued. However, with the primordial Sin of Adam and Eve (actually committed just before that first Sabbath), the world fell from this state. Man would no longer live in a perfect world -- dwelling in the Garden of

Eden, enjoying the ready-to-eat fruit of the Garden through no labor of his own. He would now have to work: to conquer the world and eat bread only through the sweat of his brow (Genesis 3:19).

Ultimately, we are taught, the world will again be perfected in the End of Days. Man will again live in harmony with the world and nature, devoting his being and his energies to G-d alone. That time period is known as "yom shekulo Shabbos" -- a time of eternal Sabbath, a time which we eagerly await today. (Israel returned to this state briefly at the revelation at Mount Sinai -- then lost it again with the sin of the Golden Calf. But these are all discussions of their own.)

Yet once a week, G-d granted Israel a small taste of that ultimate, blissful state -- the gift of the Sabbath. The Talmud writes that the Sabbath is 1/60th of the World to Come (Brachos 57b). On the Sabbath, the world reverts in a small way to its perfected state. The Jew who merits it can gain a sense of the world's perfection. He does not have to labor and be productive to sustain himself. All work is completed before the Sabbath: at least temporarily we live with a sense that G-d's world is perfect.

And even further, the Talmud states that expenses a person spends for his Sabbath needs are reimbursed by G-d (Beitzah 16a). We are thus granted a slight sense of a world in which man does not have to labor; in which all is provided by G-d through no effort of man. And to the extent the Sabbath is meaningful to us, such a plane of existence becomes our reality.

(As an aside, it was no accident that the Christians replaced Saturday with Sunday and the Muslims selected Friday. The Sabbath was G-d's special gift to Israel; He saw to it that it be shared with no other.)

We have now begun to understand the meaning and sanctity of the Sabbath. Next week, G-d willing, we will discuss the significance of the items of our mishna -- created immediately before the Sabbath. As we will see, they too share the special quality of the Sabbath -- and reflect a holiness and "completion" not found in the physical world. More G-d willing next week!

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