

# A WEEKLY HOLIDAY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: 'the festivals of G-d which you shall announce, the Holy Gatherings, these are My festivals. Six days shall you do labor, and on the seventh day, it is a Holy Sabbath, a Holy Gathering; you shall not do any labor, it is the Sabbath to G-d throughout your dwellings.'" [23:2-3]*

What is puzzling about this is that the Torah begins to discuss the holidays, the "appointed times," and immediately turns instead to the Sabbath day. The holidays were "announced," because they fall on particular days of the month. The New Moon was proclaimed by the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Rabbinical Court in the Temple, and signals or messengers had to be sent out to announce the new month so that people would know when to celebrate the next holiday. The Sabbath, by contrast, falls every seven days -- it needs no announcement. So how, then, can the Torah include it among "the festivals of G-d which you shall announce?"

The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, had a wonderfully creative answer to this question. He said that this passage is not talking about the Sabbath at all. According to the Torah, there are six holidays during which the labors necessary to prepare food are permitted: one day of Rosh HaShanah, Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres (the "eighth day" immediately after Sukkos), the first and last days of Pesach, and Shavuot. With the exception of Rosh HaShanah (again related to the declaration of the new months in the Sanhedrin), all of these are celebrated in the Land of Israel for one day even today.

So during all of these six days, one may do labor -- as necessary to prepare food. The seventh holiday, however, is Yom Kippur -- called a "Shabbos Shabbason," a Sabbath of rest -- and on Yom Kippur all labor is prohibited! So this, said Rabbi Kramer, is the Holy Sabbath intended by this verse -- the day of Yom Kippur!

Nonetheless, a straightforward explanation of this verse is that we are indeed discussing the Sabbath day, and that Shabbos is indeed tied to the holidays at a very fundamental level.

Shabbos reminds us that "these are My festivals" -- they are G-d's. Because the Sanhedrin announces the New Moon, and thus tells us when the holidays will fall in a given year, we might think that they are merely "ours" -- holidays of commemoration, remembrance. They are much more than that. The holidays are HaShem's, days when HaShem renews special connections between the world and aspects of Holiness. On Passover, our Sages teach that it is easier than other times to

break the ties that imprison us to our evil inclination. On Shavuot, there is a special connection between the Jews and the Torah. We are not simply commemorating for millennia something that happened one year -- we re-experience a spirit that comes back every year at that time.

Shabbos is our reminder that this is so. Shabbos is not dependent upon human beings and the Sanhedrin's decisions -- yet this, too, is a festival. If the holiness of the Sabbath returns every week, this reminds us that the holiness of the festivals returns every year.

In the prayers and Kiddush for a holiday which falls on Shabbos, we praise G-d "Who Sanctifies the Sabbath, Israel and the Appointed Times." The order of these three speaks to this distinction between Sabbath and the other holidays. HaShem sanctifies the Sabbath -- He alone. He sanctifies Israel -- and then He and Israel together determine when the sanctity of the holidays shall come to the world.

When I was a college student, it turned out one year that Freshman Orientation Week was to begin on Monday -- the first day of Rosh HaShanah. As you might imagine, this was greeted with much dismay by Jewish students. After much discussion the school administration decided to accommodate Jewish freshmen -- by moving the first day of orientation two days earlier, to Shabbos.

Every week of the year, we have the opportunity to celebrate, to rejoice, to experience the special relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. The Sabbath is certainly no less a holiday than all of the others that come but once per year, and one that speaks to the nature of all the holidays. The fact that it comes so often only means we are very fortunate -- if we make the most of this opportunity!

A Good Shabbos,  
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