

# The Shabbat Influence

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In the blessing preceding Shema each morning, we request of HaShem, "Illuminate our eyes with Your Torah, and may our hearts cling to Your mitzvot." Similarly, we follow the Amidah with a personal plea, "Open my heart with Your Torah, and my spirit will pursue Your mitzvot."<sup>32</sup> As noted by Rabbi Dovid Avudraham,<sup>33</sup> this structure follows the traditional approach to study: one learns Torah, and therefore one is able to practice mitzvot.

The Talmud itself endorses this sequence. Rabbi Akiva told the elders in Lod,<sup>34</sup> "Study is greater than actions," because study enables actions. Rabbi Yosi added that the Jews received the Torah in the wilderness so that they could study it before implementing its many agricultural commandments.

On Shabbat,<sup>35</sup> though, we reverse the classic order. In each Amidah we request of HaShem, "קדשנו במצוותיך ותן חלקנו בתורתך", Sanctify us with Your mitzvot and place our portion in Torah." Is this reversal intentional? If so, how do the mitzvot of Shabbat serve to allot us a portion in Torah?<sup>36</sup>

## The practical influence of Shabbat

On a simple level, fulfilling the mitzvot of Shabbat sets us aside from the rest of the world for the day, as noted by Rabbi Baruch haLevi Epstein in a comment regarding the class of mitzvot which are "between man and G-d":

*The language of the blessing, "Who sanctified us with His mitzvot and commanded us," teaches that the mitzvah we are performing causes us to be sanctified and set apart from the other nations, which do not practice this.*

**Torah Temimah to Shemot 24:12**

בכלל לשון הברכה אשר קדשנו במצותיו  
וצונו מורה דבמצוה זו שאנו עושים אנו  
מקודשים ומובדלים משארי האומות שאינן  
נוהגות כן.  
תורה תמימה על שמות כד:יב

Regardless of a Jew's weekday employment, community involvement and entertainment, for one day the Jew is a citizen only of the Jewish world, his conduct a language foreign to the rest of society. This aids us in investing ourselves in Torah, as we are sequestered from our neighbors.

<sup>32</sup> Praying for aid in our studies is consistent with Rabbi Natan's comment on Tehillim 32:6, "Every pious person should pray for this, [at] the time when You are found"; Rabbi Natan explains that "this" refers to success in one's learning (*Berachot* 8b).

<sup>33</sup> Sefer Avudraham, Shemoneh Esreih.

<sup>34</sup> *Kiddushin* 40b.

<sup>35</sup> We reverse the order on Yom Tov, as well, and much of this article relates to Shabbat and Yom Tov equally.

<sup>36</sup> See *Zera Yaakov*, *Orach Chaim* 268 and *Tzitz Eliezer* 13:37:4 for approaches I will not explore here.

Rabbi Yitzchak Ginzburgh recognizes this in our Havdalah ceremony, writing, "Why do we mark the distinction between Israel and the nations at the conclusion of Shabbat, specifically, and not on Shabbat herself? Because on Shabbat this is unnecessary; there is an inherent distance, we are in a private domain. Only at the conclusion of Shabbat do we need to make an explicit distinction..."<sup>37</sup>

On Shabbat, we are truly capable of claiming our portion in Torah, as the day's mitzvot free us of worldly obligations. On this day we pray, "Set us apart with the mitzvot of Shabbat, and thereby provide our portion in Torah."

## The spiritual influence of Shabbat

On another level, Shabbat grants us a spiritual identity unique among the world's nations, and thereby encourages us to immerse ourselves in the Torah that is our unique heritage.

In truth, the mitzvot of Shabbat ought not to be the province of the Jew; Shabbat should be a global commemoration of Creation. That Shabbat is given to us exclusively<sup>38</sup> is a demonstration of Divine affection, as noted by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein in his *Aruch haShulchan*:

*This sacred Shabbat is the great sign shared by the blessed Holy One and His nation, Israel, as it is written [Exodus 31:13], "For she is a sign between Me and you, to know that I am your G-d, who sanctifies you."*

*Shabbat commemorates the deeds of Bereishit, "For HaShem created Heaven and Earth in six days, and halted and rested on the seventh [Exodus 31:17]," and therefore, "HaShem blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on that day He halted [Genesis 2:3]," and therefore Shabbat relates to all who were created. She is not like the holidays which commemorate the exodus from Egypt, to which the rest of the nations have no relationship, for they did not leave Egypt. Through the deeds of Bereishit, though, all of them were created!*

*Still, the blessed Holy One gave the sanctity of Shabbat only to Israel, "to know that I am G-d, who sanctifies you," meaning [for you to know] that you are sacred to Me...*

**Aruch haShulchan 242:1**

שבת קדש הוא האות הגדול שבין  
הקב"ה ובין עמו ישראל כמו שכתוב  
[שמות לא, יג] כי אות היא ביני וביניכם  
לדעת כי אני ד' מקדשכם כלומר אע"ג  
דשבת הוא זכר למעשה בראשית כי  
ששת ימים עשה ד' את השמים ואת  
הארץ וביום השביעי שבת וינפש [שם  
יז] ולכן ויברך אלקים את יום השביעי  
ויקדש אותו כי בו שבת וגו' [בראשית ב,  
ג] כדכתיב במעשה בראשית וא"כ היא  
שייך לכל ברואי עולם ואינה דומה  
למועדים שהם זכר ליציאת מצרים שאין  
לשאר האומות שייכות בזה שהם לא  
יצאו ממצרים אבל במעשה בראשית  
כולם נבראו מ"מ לא נתן הקב"ה קדושת  
השבת רק לישראל בלבד וזהו לדעת כי  
אני ד' מקדשכם כלומר שאתם קדושים  
אצלי...

**ערוך השולחן, אורח חיים רמב"א**

Thus, the mitzvot of Shabbat sanctify us, converting what ought to be a universal relationship with G-d into our private preserve. These mitzvot mark the Jew as spiritually special, and encourage him to devote himself to the Torah which documents his relationship with HaShem. Our new identity urges us to cast our lot with the Torah, and so we pray, "Sanctify us

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.malchuty.org/> מלכות-ישראל/בין-ישראל-לעמים

<sup>38</sup> Talmud, *Shabbat* 58b offers a stark example of this exclusivity.

as Your people via the relationship represented by the mitzvot of Shabbat, and so provide our portion in Torah."

## The intellectual influence of Shabbat

And beyond the practical and spiritual influences of Shabbat lies another level: Shabbat offers us an intellectual boost.

Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra made this observation in his comments to Bereishit, on the passage<sup>39</sup> in which HaShem "blesses the seventh day":

*"Blessing" means an increase in goodness. On this day, bodies are revitalized with a force of procreation, and souls are revitalized with a force of understanding and intellect.*

**Ibn Ezra, Bereishit 2:3**

פירוש ברכה תוספות טובה, וביום הזה  
תחדש בגופות דמות כח בתולדות  
ובנשמות כח ההכרה והשכל.  
**אבן עזרא, בראשית ב:ג**

Further, in commenting on the fourth commandment at Sinai, Ibn Ezra declared that this opportunity to study is the very purpose of Shabbat:<sup>40</sup>

*Shabbat was given for us to comprehend the deeds of HaShem and speak of His Torah... All through the week one involves himself in his needs, and this day is suited for being apart and ceasing for the sake of the honor of HaShem. One should not involve himself [in weekday matters] for naught, even in his past needs or his plans for future actions... Jewish custom was to visit the prophets close to Shabbat...*

**Ibn Ezra, Extended Commentary, Shemot 20:7**

השבת נתנה להבין מעשי השם ולהגות  
בתורתו... כל ימי השבוע אדם מתעסק  
בצרכיו, והנה זה היום ראוי להתבודד  
ולשבות בעבור כבוד השם, ולא  
יתעסק לשוא אפילו בצרכיו שעברו,  
או מה יועץ לעשות... ומנהג ישראל  
היה ללכת סמוך לשבת אצל  
הנביאים...  
**אבן עזרא, פירוש הארוך, שמות כ:ז**

Ibn Ezra used this concept to explain a prayer authored by Nechemiah, the leader who returned from the Babylonian exile to direct the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. Following a national celebration of Succot, Nechemiah beseeched HaShem to aid the Jewish nation. As part of this prayer, he re-told Jewish history, including the presentation of the Torah at Sinai:

*And You descended upon Mount Sinai and spoke to them from the Heavens, and You gave them just laws and true teachings, good statutes and commandments. You informed them of Your holy Shabbat, and You instructed them in commandments, statutes and Torah, via Your servant Moshe.*

**Nechemiah 9:13-14**

ועל הר סיני ירדת ודבר עמהם משמים  
ותתן להם משפטים ישרים ותורות  
אמת חקים ומצות טובים: ואת שבת  
קדשך הודעת להם ומצוות וחקים  
ותורה צוית להם ביד משה עבדך:  
**נחמיה ט:יג-יד**

The Sages were troubled by the way Nechemiah isolated Shabbat from among the Ten Commandments, and they offered various explanations, including:<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Bereishit 2:3. See also Seforno to the same passage, who links this with the *neshamah yeteirah* added on Shabbat; I am indebted to Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe for pointing this out.

<sup>40</sup> See, too, the introductory poem to Ibn Ezra's *Igeret haShabbat*, "Every day, gates of comprehension are available, but on my day one hundred gates are opened."

- Nechemiah meant to equate Shabbat with the entire canon of mitzvot.<sup>42</sup>
- Nechemiah gave Shabbat special mention because it is repeated in Shemot 23:12 after the Ten Commandments.<sup>43</sup>
- Nechemiah emphasized Shabbat because many Jews of his day were lax in observing it. Nechemiah offered multiple rebukes for those who engaged in commerce on Shabbat, and he is credited with establishing the laws of muktzeh to protect Shabbat.<sup>44</sup>

Echoing his comments from Bereishit and the Revelation at Sinai, Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra contended that Nechemiah highlighted Shabbat in the presentation of the Torah because Shabbat enhances our Torah study:

*He isolated Shabbat from the Ten Commandments because it is honored with rest and with added intellect.*

**Ibn Ezra, Nechemiah 9:14**

הזכיר השבת לבד מעשרת הדברים כי היא נכבדת במנוחה ותוספת שכל.  
אבן עזרא, נחמיה ט:טז

Of course, other mitzvot - such as prayer<sup>45</sup> and honoring one's parents<sup>46</sup> - are also credited with aiding Torah growth. However, in those cases our Torah success is a reward for our mitzvah; in this case, the presence of Shabbat directly empowers our Torah study. Recognizing this unique character of Shabbat, we request of HaShem, "Sanctify us with Your mitzvot of Shabbat, and thereby provide our portion in Torah."<sup>47</sup>

## We will do, and therefore we will hear

We see that Shabbat aids our learning on multiple levels. Shabbat places us in a world of our own, and so provides time for us to study our heritage. Shabbat identifies us as HaShem's special nation, inspiring us to study our heritage. And Shabbat blesses us with a gift of spiritual augmentation, empowering our study of our heritage.

These approaches may add a layer of meaning to the Jews' "We will do and we will hear" acceptance of the Torah.<sup>48</sup> On a simple level,<sup>49</sup> the Jews committed to action before knowing what would be demanded of them, and this willingness to serve was praiseworthy. On Shabbat, though, that historic commitment takes on new meaning; our doing **enables** our learning, and assists us as we reach for ever greater heights.

<sup>41</sup> In addition to the explanations brought here, Dr. Mordechai Zer-Kavod suggests in the *Daat Mikra* edition of Nechemiah that the Shabbat reference might be to the teaching of Shabbat with the introduction of the manna. It is true that 9:15 describes the gift of the manna, but fitting this into 9:13-14 seems difficult.

<sup>42</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi *Nedarim* 3:9.

<sup>43</sup> Malbim to Nechemiah 9:14.

<sup>44</sup> *Shabbat* 123b. The link between Nechemiah's general emphasis on Shabbat and his special mention of Shabbat here is my own.

<sup>45</sup> Yerushalmi *Berachot* 5:1; I am indebted to Rabbi Baruch Weintraub for pointing out this source.

<sup>46</sup> *Kiddushin* 31b.

<sup>47</sup> One might also contend that the requests included in this entire liturgical paragraph are designed to follow the progression of Nechemiah 9:14-20.

<sup>48</sup> Shemot 24:7.

<sup>49</sup> Talmud, *Shabbat* 88a.