

# *Ve-Shamru: Towards an Understanding of What It Means to “Do” Shabbat*

The insertion (or omission) of the biblical passage known as -*Ve-Shamru* (*Shemot* 31:16–17) at right before *Shemoneh Esrei* during the Friday night service has been the subject of much discussion due to its potential status as a verbal interposition between the blessing of *ge'ulah* (redemption) and the *Amidah*. While the Vilna Ga'on, his followers, and others objected to reciting the passage, a number of authorities have defended the practice by noting that the verses serve as an extension of the theme of redemption in line with *Chazal's* dictum (*Shabbat* 118b), “if only Israel observed two Sabbaths punctiliously, they would be immediately redeemed.”<sup>100</sup>

Additionally, *Chazal* derived from these verses a number of important halakhic and aggadic aspects of Shabbat, including: the obligation to violate one Shabbat in order to observe many additional *Shabbatot* in the future (based on the word “*ve-shamru*”);<sup>101</sup> the limiting of Shabbat observance to the Jewish people exclusively (from the phrase “*beini u-vein Benei Yisrael*”);<sup>102</sup> the exemption from wearing phylacteries on Shabbat (based on the word “*ot*” [sign]);<sup>103</sup> and the concept of *neshamah yeteirah* (an additional soul present on Shabbat, from the word “*va-yinafash*”).<sup>104</sup>

The most expounded upon, and difficult to comprehend, phrase in these verses is the imperative to make or “do” the Sabbath, as a way of observing the Shabbat (“*la-asot et ha-Shabbat*”). How, indeed, does one actually “do” the Sabbath? What active behavior is a manifestation of guarding Shabbat? Isn't observance of Shabbat only expressed through refraining from activity?<sup>105</sup> The *Mekhilta* (ad loc.) cites two interpretations of the problematic formulation, each of which adds significantly to our understanding of Shabbat:<sup>106</sup>

רבי אליעזר אומר, לעשות את השבת לדורותם ברית עולם,

R. Eliezer suggests that there is indeed a single act which can be classified as “doing” Shabbat, namely the performance of circumcision on Shabbat. R. Eliezer's position is rooted in the -continuation of the verse – “*-le-dorotam berit olam*,” “for their gene-rations, an eternal covenant” – i.e., the way one actively fulfills Shabbat is through the performance of an eternal -covenantal act, namely, *berit milah*.

This reading suggests a novel understanding of the confluence of *milah* on Shabbat. Rather than the standard talmudic approaches which view this scenario as either a clash of halakhic values (*milah* vs. transgressing Shabbat) with *milah* overriding Shabbat (“*dechuyah*” in halakhic parlance), or as a case where the status of the *melakhah* is

<sup>100</sup>. For further discussion of the controversy, including the additional verses added on various holidays, see Yissachar Yaakovson's *Netiv Binah*, vol. 2, pp. 86–87.

<sup>101</sup>. See *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Ki Tisa* and the application to a situation of life-threatening illness in *Yoma* 85a.

<sup>102</sup>. See *Mekhilta* ad loc.

<sup>103</sup>. See *Eiruv* 96a.

<sup>104</sup>. See *Beitzah* 16a.

<sup>105</sup>. It should be noted that the act of sanctifying the Shabbat through reciting *Kiddush* is not viewed by rabbinic sources as an expression of “observing” Shabbat; rather, it is derived from the word “*zakhor*” (*Shemot* 20:7) – to remember the Shabbat, and is therefore not considered an expression of “*asiyah*” – “making” or “doing” Shabbat.

<sup>106</sup>. Medieval commentators offer other explanations. For example, Rabbenu Bachya (*Shemot* 31:16) interprets the phrase as referring to preparing all of one's needs for Shabbat in advance to ensure full observance on Shabbat. Seforno (ad loc.) suggests that the verse be read as follows: Observe the Shabbat in this world so that one can participate in the eternal Shabbat in the next world.

undermined completely by the *mitzvah* of *milah* (“*hutrah*”),<sup>107</sup> R. Eliezer’s position asserts that there is no tension or clash whatsoever. Instead, performing circumcision constitutes an active fulfillment (*kiyum*) of Shabbat.<sup>108</sup> Even more, it represents the singular mode to actually “do” Shabbat. This position infuses a Shabbat *berit* with a whole new dimension of halakhic and philosophical significance.<sup>109</sup>

רבי אלעזר בן פרטא אומר, כל המשמר את השבת כאלו

R. Elazar ben Parta rejects the premise of the question by asserting that *shemirat Shabbat* can indeed constitute a “-making” or “doing” of Shabbat. How can being *shomer Shabbat* be the equivalent of making Shabbat? Perhaps we must reassess our definition of *shemirah*. Rather than translating *shemirah* as merely guarding, watching, or observing, *shemirah* should be understood as cultivating an inner consciousness of the exalted status of -Shabbat. This mindfulness constitutes an active making of Shabbat by accessing the opportunity for an encounter with the Divine Presence rather than just passively safeguarding by avoiding transgressions.<sup>110</sup>

R. Elazar ben Parta’s timeless message regarding the deeper -meaning of *shemirat Shabbat* is particularly poignant for our era. In an age of global communication and technological advances facilitating constant connectivity to the world, the challenge and opportunity of Shabbat observance is to transcend the don’ts of the day by seizing the -opportunity to actively connect with the Divine. “ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת לעשות את השבת.”

<sup>107</sup>. The full range of approaches to the *dechuyah*, *hutrah*, *bi-khlal lo ne’emrah* and *kiyum* questions are beyond the scope of this essay. Other examples of these phenomena include: *piku’ach nefesh* on Shabbat, the *mitzvah* of *yibbum* and the prohibition of *eishet ach*, the case of *tzitzit* and *sha’atnez*, as well as many others. See *Yevamot* 3b–8a and *Shabbat* 131a–133a for important discussions of these issues.

<sup>108</sup>. It is certainly possible that this position of R. Eliezer is the basis for his view (see *Mishnah Shabbat* 19:1) that one is permitted on Shabbat to perform *melakhah* for preparatory elements of the *milah* (such as sharpening the knife), even if one could have prepared these items prior to Shabbat (and perhaps these acts even constitute a *kiyum*! See *Shabbat* 130a). This view may also be supported by the hermeneutical derivation supporting *milah* on Shabbat from the three descriptive words common exclusively to Shabbat and *milah* – “*ot*,” “*berit*,” and “*dorot*” (see the view of R. Nachman bar Yitzchak in *Shabbat* 132a–b and the *Meshekh Chokhmah Shemot* 31:16 s.v. *ve-shamru*, who notes this link). The question of the relationship of *milah bi-zmanah* (on the eighth day) and *shelo bi-zmanah* (after the eighth day), which is not permitted on Shabbat, as well as the issue of *milah* on *Yom Tov* need to be examined thoroughly in light of this perspective of R. Eliezer.

<sup>109</sup>. As a personal aside, as the father of children born on Shabbat (including two boys who were subsequently circumcised on Shabbat), I can attest that this perspective impacted my own experience of *berit* on Shabbat. My experience of these Shabbat *beritot*, informed by this notion of *kiyum*, was vastly different than my experience of the *piku’ach nefesh* scenarios that preceded them.

Moreover, the perspective of R. Eliezer towards *milah* on Shabbat not only impacts one’s understanding of Shabbat, but also informs one’s view of *milah*. According to this view, *milah* is a bi-lateral covenantal act which encompasses and transcends dialectical views of *milah*; *milah*, according to the view that sees it as fully compatible with Shabbat, reflects both the human aspiration for perfection via an act that completes creation while simultaneously demonstrating self-sacrifice and the purposeful diminishing of the human body in the service of God.

<sup>110</sup>. It is in this vein that we can understand a number of other instances where the verb *sh-m-r* is used. The first appearance of the verb – the command to mankind in the Garden of Eden “*le-avdah u-le-shamrah*” (*Bereishit* 2:15) – is problematic if translated as “watching” (from whom did Adam have to watch the garden?). Similarly, the night of the Exodus is described as “*leil shimurim*” – a night of vigil or “watching” (*Shemot* 12:42). In each of these instances, the verb *sh-m-r* suggests more than guarding or watching. It suggests an awareness and appreciation of the Divine Presence being manifest in a particular space (*Gan Eden*) and time (fifteenth of *Nisan*).