

## ***Parashat Emor***

### **The Erev Shabbat Jew**

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik famously wrote about the missing “*erev Shabbat Jew*” in America:

It is not for the Sabbath that my heart aches, it is for the forgotten eve of the Sabbath. There are Sabbath-observing Jews in America, but there are not “eve-of-the-Sabbath” Jews who go out to greet the Shabbat with beating hearts and pulsating souls.<sup>1</sup>

Some have said he intended to convey that America has Shabbat, but in Europe of old they had Shabbat eve. They spent more time on Friday preparing for Shabbat, so much so that one could feel it in the air. There is no comparable feeling in the streets of the *goldene medine*. Let us not forget, however, the rest of his wistful reflection. How many American Jews welcome the earthly Shabbat “with beating hearts and pulsating souls”? Perhaps if we explore the true nature of Shabbat, we will merit doing so.

#### *Two Shabbatot*

The command to observe Shabbat appears throughout the Torah. *Parashat Emor* employs the doubling of *shabbat shabbaton* (Leviticus 23:3), and *Parashat Kedoshim* uses the plural *shabbetotai* (Leviticus 19:3). The *Zohar* interprets this duality or multiplicity to refer to a Shabbat on high, *shabbata ela*, and to our earthly Shabbat, *shabbata tata*.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand the supernal Shabbat, let us begin with the more familiar one.

The Rav explained that Shabbat relieves us of the curses placed on humanity after Adam’s sin. Adam was sentenced to hard labor—“by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” (Genesis 3:19)—both back-breaking and endless. He was further cursed to suffer anguish (Genesis 3:17), described in the Rav’s inimitable prose as “the restlessness, fear, and suffering that characterize competitive society, or the conflict between human beings.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, “for dust you are and to dust shall you return” (Genesis 3:19) initiated the cycle of life and death for humanity.

The “earthly Shabbat” releases us from the curses of toil and trouble. The monotony and rancor of trying to attain prosperity and maintain its security fade into the background. Work is dignified so long as we know how to leave it at the front door of our home. As the Rav observed, “endless work estranges people from their families.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Torah commands us to rest together on Shabbat as a family, and renew ties within parents, siblings, and children. The Shabbat atmosphere is one of serenity.

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<sup>1</sup> Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 88\*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Zohar*, II:137b–138a.

<sup>3</sup> David, *Darosh Darah Yosef*, 251.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

The “supernal Shabbat” is what suspends the curse of human mortality. In our prayers on Shabbat night, we ask God to spread His *sukkat shalom*, the shelter of peace, over us. This special insertion implies that we anticipate a time when evil will be no more and we will be free of suffering and death. This is not a reference to the earthly Shabbat but to the eternal, supernal Shabbat.<sup>5</sup>

When God finished creation, the Torah concludes that He saw that everything He had made was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The world was in a state of unity and perfection. However, when Adam and Chava disobeyed Him by sinning, they introduced disunity into the world. Shabbat is a time when the state attained on the sixth day of creation is relived, even if only for one day. The universe will revert to that state for eternity in the World to Come, which is why the Mishnah links the two: “A psalm, a song for Shabbat’ (Psalms 92:1)—a psalm, a song for the future, for the day which will be entirely Shabbat and rest for life everlasting.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, our weekly Shabbat offers us a taste of the peace and perfection of the messianic period, the age which will be entirely Shabbat.

### *The Shabbat to Come*

Shabbat reminds us that we must plan ahead for the ultimate redemption. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan found this idea embedded in the way we prepare for Shabbat every week. Since we cannot cook on Shabbat, all of the food must be ready or partially cooked prior to Shabbat. In the wilderness, we are told that the Jewish people would prepare what they brought home of the double portion of manna (Exodus 16:5). Fifty-two times a year we ready ourselves for the earthly Shabbat, and as we do so we are reminded that our time on this earth will come to an end and that a supernal Shabbat is coming. And, as the Talmud says, “He who prepares on Friday, will eat on Shabbat.”<sup>7</sup>

Every week we refer to Shabbat in prayer and Kiddush by its biblical designation as an *ot olam* (Exodus 31:17). The phrase is usually translated as an “eternal sign,” meaning, an enduring sign between the Jewish people and God. However, Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas wrote in his *Reshit Chochmah*, a kabbalistic and ethical volume, that the phrase means a “sign of eternity.”<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Kaplan expounded upon this idea:

On Shabbat, the door opens a crack, and we see a spark of the eternal. We feel a breeze blowing from the future world, when all is Shabbat. The Shabbat feeling is a sign of the future, when man and God will be in total harmony.”<sup>9</sup>

The Rav saw references to this Shabbat to come in the Shabbat liturgy. Before the Amidah on Friday night, we say that God spreads the “canopy of peace” over the Jewish people and Yerushalayim, which alludes to the end of days. In the morning, we recite Psalm 92, which is about the everlasting Shabbat. In Mincha, the eschatological theme takes center stage. We begin the central section of the Amidah by saying “You are one and Your name is one,” echoing the time when God and His name will finally be unified. We then say that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Mishnah, Tamid*, 7:4.

<sup>7</sup> *Avodah Zarah* 3a.

<sup>8</sup> *Reshit Chochmah, Sha’ar ha-Kedushah*, §3, 131a.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *Sabbath*, 127.

“Avraham will rejoice, Yitzchak will sing, and Yaakov and his progeny will rest on [Shabbat].” This somewhat mystifying line alludes to the end of days when the great figures will join us again. After the Amidah, we recite three verses that typically understood to be an acceptance of God’s judgment, perhaps because Moshe died on Shabbat afternoon. Yet again, the Mincha prayer of Shabbat is connected to the ultimate divine justice.

After Mincha, as Shabbat rapidly approaches its end, there is a widespread custom to recite Psalm 23, which expresses these lofty themes as well. The shepherd symbolizes the Almighty who remains close to His flock. His providence is manifest even in the valley of death, the long night of exile. We will eventually “dwell in the house of the Lord” with the rebuilding of the Temple.

### *Exploring the Rav’s Insight*

In the same way we are meant to greet Shabbat with yearning and joy, so should we prolong our visit with the Shabbat queen. In this connection, the Rav shared the following memory from his childhood:

In Warsaw we lived three houses away from a Modzhitzer *shtiebel* (a small, unassuming place of prayer). Generally, I would go to this Modzhitzer *shtiebel* for the *se’udah shelishit* (the third meal) of the Sabbath. They would sing all the *zemirot* (songs) for *se’udah shelishit* [...].

I knew these Jews well and I constantly spoke with them. [...] I once spoke with one of them who was frail and short. He constantly carried heavy metal pieces and I wondered where he got the physical strength to support this weight. His load was always tied around him with a thick cord.... On the Sabbath, I saw this very Jew and I did not recognize him. He came over to me in his tattered kapote. It was covered with endless patches, and even the patches had patches. Yet his face shone with the joy of the Sabbath. I recognized in a tangible fashion that a person’s Sabbath countenance is totally different than his weekday appearance.

So I asked him: “When will we daven Maariv [to conclude the Sabbath]?”

He answered: “What is with you? Are you already longing for the weekdays to begin? What do you mean when will we daven Maariv, are we lacking anything now?”<sup>10</sup>

The Chassidim did not want to let Shabbat go and face the weekday. Their rapturous singing at the third meal brought them into contact with the spiritual plane of true bliss—the supernal Shabbat. If we resurrect the “*erev Shabbat Jew*” within us, perhaps we too will sense this higher reality, and be reluctant to take our leave of Shabbat the moment night falls.

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<sup>10</sup> Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 1:160–161.