
Sabbath & Sunday: two days of holiness

Jewish observance of the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday evening and closes nightfall Saturday. On this day, work is suspended, families gather to celebrate and bless one another, a festive atmosphere prevails, candles are lit, blessings recited, bread and wine shared. At home and at synagogue God is worshipped, Scripture (Torah) is read.

Christianity grew out of Judaism and, for perhaps as long as three to four hundred years, Jewish disciples of Jesus continued to observe the Sabbath while also commemorating the death & resurrection of Jesus on Sunday. Over time, the Christian focus on Sunday as the liturgical highpoint of the week eclipsed the Christian practice of celebrating Sabbath on the seventh day. Today, however, there is a gradually emerging recovery in the Church of a respectful recognition of Sabbath and Sunday as two distinct days, each with its own meaning (acknowledged, for example, in Pope John Paul II's 1998 Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 'The Day of the Lord').

If we think of the Sabbath as a celebration of creation, tied also to the liberation themes of the Exodus story, we Christians can appreciate all the more clearly Sunday as a celebration of the world's 're-creation' in the liberating love of Jesus Christ. The Sabbath (Saturday) remembers God's creative act in bringing forth the world. Sunday (The 'Day of the Lord') recalls God's redemptive act in raising Jesus from the dead.

Sunday is a celebration specific to Christians. Meanwhile, the Sabbath, according to Jewish belief, is a gift to all human beings by virtue of their creation. However, the Sabbath is remembered and observed in a unique way by the Jewish people as part of their covenantal relationship with God.

Today some Christians have taken to honouring both days, appreciating the deep spiritual links between Judaism and Christianity.

Sabbath: a time for love-making

Our lives, indeed the whole world it seems, are busier than ever. We need no convincing about the importance of taking 'time out' for rest and renewal, even if that 'time out' is difficult to achieve in practice.

Less known, perhaps, is that the experience of taking a 'breather', a moment of re-creative rest in contrast to our weekly work schedule, is divinely enshrined in our very make-up as human beings. Taking 'time out', a day set apart from the routine of other days, is not just a good thing to do, it is expressive of who we are, created in the divine image.

The Jewish people—in their time-honoured weekly observance of the Sabbath as a day of holiness, rest, family time and prayer—grasp and model this wisdom. This observance is grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, which of course form part of our Christian Bible. In the Book of Genesis, for instance, we read the account of God creating the world, day by day. On day six, God surveys his crowning creative achievement: man and woman. And in that moment, what does God do? We read:

Completed now were heaven and earth and all their host. On the seventh day, God had completed the work that had been done, ceasing then on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, and ceased from all the creative work that God [had chosen] to do. (Gen 2:1-3)

After six days of creative labour, from which man and woman emerge as the

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highpoint, God rests, God blesses and God makes holy the seventh day.

Why would God rest? Because God is tired? Had enough? Lost interest in the project? Rather, God's 'rest' is all about God's desire to enjoy, celebrate and marvel at the beauty of man and woman created in the divine image. What Scripture speaks of as 'resting' is all about 'revelling'.

The Jewish rabbis who pondered this passage put it in more intimate terms: the Sabbath was the betrothal between God and the human person. Every Sabbath celebrated thereafter was to be a renewal of the love-relationship between God and people, between individuals, and involving the whole created universe. Sabbath is all about lovemaking!

And how beautifully this theme weaves its way through Jewish ritual. As the Sabbath begins, the Song of Songs is recited: *'Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving is better than wine...'*

In synagogue worship, the congregation sings love songs, a popular one being *Lecha Dodi*: *'Come, my beloved, to meet the bride; the Sabbath presence, let us come.'* In the *Shema*, a prayer central to

Jewish worship, the congregation is exhorted to love God *'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The love referred to here is one of intense, passionate involvement.

The Sabbath table at home is laid with symbolic twosomes - two candles, two loaves of bread (*challah*) made from two intertwined strings of dough – all suggesting the intertwining of lives, such as husband and wife, united on the Sabbath. Then again, the two can represent Scripture's two versions of the fourth commandment: to remember (Exodus 20:8) and observe (Deuteronomy 5:12) the Sabbath. The Sabbath meal itself is a feast of love, filled with blessing, song, Torah and lifegiving conversation.

Sabbath observance, then, is not just a 'day off' but a day for focusing on our most intimate relationships by which we experience God's love for us, and through which we reach out and share in the gift of our neighbours and all creation.

Can we think of a better plan for restoring balance and healing to our world? It's right there in Scripture. And impressively modelled in Jewish homes in our midst. *

By Teresa Pirola, drawing on lecture material by Sr Maureena Fritz, NDS, Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem, 2007. Further reading: Maureena Fritz, "Sabbath and Sunday Worship: We are Entitled to Both" in *The Way Supplement* (2000/97).