

Sabbath rest

Given the frenetic pace of the society in which we live, it might seem obvious to point out the importance of rest and ‘time-out’ for the refreshment of the human spirit. But it is interesting to visit this insight from the perspective of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, or what we Christians usually call the ‘Old Testament.’

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the Sabbath day. (Exodus 35:2-3)

In the Exodus narrative, these verses appear as part of the Israelites’ struggles in the wilderness. Having just survived the crisis of the Golden Calf, the story returns to the construction of the Tabernacle. At God’s detailed direction through Moses, the people come together to build a portable shrine. Just before the building instructions commence, God reminds the people to keep holy the Sabbath in the words quoted above (35:2-3).

What is the significance of the placing of these verses? This question has intrigued the Jewish sages who have creatively interpreted this biblical text through the ages, down to our own day. Let’s listen to some of those voices here.

The sages note that the command to keep holy the Sabbath has already been given in the book of Exodus (20:10; 23:12; 31:15; 34:21). Why repeat it here? We know from the story so far that the people have sinned, repented and are ready to set themselves to the sacred work of building the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle signifies God’s presence among the people of Israel. One could be

forgiven for thinking that a work of such sacred value would be more important than the inactivity of resting on the Sabbath. And this, say the rabbis, is exactly why the Sabbath commandment is repeated here: to insist that *even the work of building the Tabernacle* is not to interfere with the holiness of Sabbath rest.¹

Why is the Sabbath so important? Says Abraham Heschel,² one of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the Hebrew word *kadosh* (‘holy’). What was the first holy thing in the history of the world? A mountain? An altar? Rather, a day.

And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gen. 2:3).

In the bible, *holiness in time* is what comes first, over places and objects. When we give this time to God, our priorities and lives find their proper order. Sabbath observance prevents us from becoming enslaved to the things and activities of this world.

In one of the lovely storytelling traditions of Judaism (*midrash*), we hear the people of Israel say to God:

‘The kings of the pagans have their palaces and altars, candlesticks and other royal trappings. Should not You, our King, possess the same royal trappings?’ God answers: ‘Human beings require these trappings but I, who created and give light to the whole world, have no need. But, if you feel that you need them, by all means make them, but make them according to my designs...’³

In other words, there is a distinction in the biblical text: at Israel’s insistence holiness was applied to a place; but the holiness of *time* was pronounced by God at the

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beginning of the world. It was Moses who sanctified the Tabernacle when it was completed (see Num.7:1-2), but it was God who sanctified the Sabbath.

And what are we to make of this verse: *Whoever does any work on [the Sabbath] shall be put to death* (Ex. 35:2)? Speaking to us from an ancient culture, what sounds harsh to our ears begins to make sense when we recall the ‘deathly’ effects of *not* heeding Sabbath rest: burn-out, lack of energy, susceptibility to illness or accident, alienation from loved ones. We pass a ‘death sentence’ on our own divinely-imaged identity when we don’t imitate God’s example of sanctifying rest. Put another

way, to live life to the full we need to work with, and not against, the rhythms of life and love as designed by our Creator God. This insight, handed down to us in the Hebrew Scriptures, finds marvellous and joyful witness in the Sabbath traditions of the Jewish people today. •

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1. See Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996).
 2. Abraham Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (New York, 2007). Heschel was a leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century.
 3. A paraphrase of Midrash Aggadah: Terumah. See Leibowitz, 658.
Scripture: NRSV.

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