

Shabbos: an Active Day of Rest

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I would like this morning to discuss a routine matter: Shabbos. After the past month of holidays, each of which is exciting and new and fresh, coming only once a year, it can seem boring to be observing now just a regular old Shabbos, the routine weekly event we think we know so well. So it is a good idea to spend some time gaining a better idea of the immense power of Shabbos, especially in light of the fact that the essential nature of Shabbos is discussed in this week's Torah reading.

Only on the surface is Shabbos boring. When we begin to delve a bit more deeply into its meaning and significance, we find that not only is it more complicated than expected but it is a most confusing subject. Shabbos, we know, is the day of rest. But this rest is the subject of great debate. Orthodoxy maintains that rest on Shabbos is a carefully defined notion. There are hundreds of laws which carefully delineate what one can do and what one must not do and what one must do. Every activity of the day is carefully circumscribed and weighed as to its utility and permissibility.

In the modern world most Jews have not ascribed to this conception of Shabbos rest. They argue that they know best how to relax and spend their "day of rest." They do not need rules in order to relax, they need the opposite: time off, a day to spend in the way they choose to. This seems an immensely logical argument. Is not every person the best judge of how to spend their day of rest? Do we need hundreds of rules to ensure we rest and can we even rest with so many rules weighing on our free time?

Rest is an important principle of human life. Without rest we cannot be productive, since we soon run out of energy and motivation. We need to rest. But rest comes in two forms. There are passive forms of enjoyment and relaxation: watching TV, listening to pop music or reading pop novels. These types of pleasure give us a brief opportunity to forget the stresses of the day and whatever is on our minds; they allow us to "clear our mind" for a few moments, and can, in moderation, be very useful. But the paradox of these activities is that in large quantities they backfire - we begin to feel less relaxed, less engaged with the world, more frustrated. We see this with the extensive addictions to TV and internet, people who were looking for some fun who now frantically spend more and more hours searching for that elusive feeling of peace.

But there is another type of pleasure - an active form, one in which we are active participants in creating the enjoyment. For example, someone who exercises or rides a bike, one who paints or creates music, one who reads great classics and listens to profound music, all are involved in "active pleasure." These activities are enjoyable, they help us rest, but we are actively involved in making them pleasurable. They demand our participation. Unlike the passive pleasures, where we sit and take them in, without being asked to contribute, the active pleasures engage us in creating their enjoyment.

The renowned psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, distinguishes between Pleasure and Joy. Pleasure is the "satisfaction of an activity which does not require activity (in the sense of aliveness) to be satisfied." Joy on the other hand is a form of productive, engaged enjoyment. "It is not a 'peak experience' which culminates and

ends suddenly... Joy is the glow that accompanies being." (*To Have or To Be?*, pg. 100-101) Pleasure is short lived and creates frustration; Joy leads to serenity and enjoyment. One of the great mistakes we make is focusing our limited energy on pleasures which bring Pleasure, which are easy, which play upon us and makes no demands; to the exclusion of Joy, which requires more of us, but makes a greater impact.

We read in this morning's Torah portion a famous description of God's resting on that first Shabbos; it is a reading we say each week in our Shabbos liturgy at Friday night Kiddush. But one of the crucial verses in this section seems to contradict itself:

ויכל אלהים ביום השביעי מלאכתו אשר עשה וישבת ביום השביעי מכל מלאכתו אשר עשה

And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. (Bereishis 2:1)

The problem is glaring. Either God worked on the seventh day or He did not. It can only be one or the other. Yet, the first part of this verse claims He completed His work on the seventh, while the second part maintains He didn't work on the seventh, he rested instead? Rashi offers us two answers. The first is a halachic answer and distinguishes between God's ability to parse time and human ability to do so. From here we derive an important halacha that one must accept Shabbos earlier than nightfall, otherwise they may unintentionally violate Shabbos by miscalculating the starting time. Rashi's second answer though gets more to the essence of Shabbos.

דבר אחר מה היה העולם חסר, מנוחה, באת שבת באת מנוחה, כלתה ונגמרה המלאכה

Rashi explains that rest is itself an object of creation! God both completed His work and rested on the seventh because, completing His work meant creating the final piece of the world - which was rest. God's rest on the Shabbos was not the absence of work and productive activity, it was instead the culmination of productivity. The rest of Shabbos - God's and our own - is a form of productivity, what we called before an "active pleasure." Shabbos is not a "day off," a day to do nothing, a day absent work, it is a "day of rest," which is entirely different.

So we return to the Shabbos - a day of rest with more rules than any of us would have thought necessary. But this was part of God's genius. He understood leaving Shabbos up to everyone's personal discretion would produce a day of careless, lazy, passive rest; a day where we pursue Pleasure instead of Joy. The Shabbos as it was given to us with all its commandments and rituals and dos and don'ts and musts and must nots, is a day which points us towards active rest, towards meaningful rest, towards Joy.

On the Shabbos we do not choose whether we want to spend the day sleeping, or reading silly novels. We are commanded to spend the day a certain way. We use the time to pray, to go to shul, to study, to think, to reflect, to eat well and dress nicely, to follow the rules of the Torah and the guidelines God has given us to properly use the day. One of the modern tragedies is those who think they can obey the Shabbos without any of its rituals - by sleeping the day away or other innocuous activities. They quickly end up itching for the end of Shabbos, it is painful to have to last 25 hours without TV or internet. The beauty of Shabbos comes from following its traditional rituals and those who do so often find the times flies by and they cannot wait for the next Shabbos - with all of its myriad of rules again.

If we seek to emulate God's model of rest on the Shabbos, and not just do nothing for one day a week. If we seek the prescription for Joy, for active rest, for contentment, we can do no better than follow the Shabbos proscriptions of the Torah.