

# THE EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES OF THE SABBATH

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The Ten Commandments are found in two places in the Bible; in Exodus 20: 2-14 and in Deuteronomy 5:6-18. Both versions are essentially similar, with the glaring exception of the commandment regarding the Sabbath.

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates; **For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore The Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy** (Ex. 20:8-11).<sup>1</sup>*

In Exodus, the commandment to rest on the Sabbath is based upon the Creation of the world, on the Creator resting on the seventh day, the Sabbath. The Ten Commandments thereby relate man's resting on the Sabbath to a lofty metaphysical concept. In a form of *Imitatio Dei*, man ceases creative work on the seventh day, as did the Creator [thereby acknowledging God as the Creator].

In Deuteronomy, however, a remarkable change is recorded.

*Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your ass, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is inside your gates; that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. **And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and***

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*with a stretched out arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day* (Deut. 5:12-15).

There is an apparent lack of connectivity between the two accounts. In Deuteronomy, the establishment of the Sabbath is no longer based upon the Creation of the world. The *causa* of *Imitatio Dei* in Exodus, as related to the Sabbath, is no longer indicated here. The Deuteronomy version relates reasons for the Sabbath to God's Almightyness, to Israel's redemption from Egypt and ensuing freedom from slavery. The sanctification of the Sabbath is now primarily described as a sociological scheme protecting slaves and workers.

A number of issues present themselves. The significance of this differential recording of reasons for the sanctification of the Sabbath warrants clarification. The relationship of the two texts should be elucidated as to whether they are essentially separate, or there is some connection between them, and is the connection developmental, or what?

An ancillary problem presents itself when it is realized that the commandment for Sabbath observance was given prior to the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In the story of the giving of the manna to the children of Israel, the people were informed of the prohibition of gathering the manna on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:22-30). The central verse reads as follows:

*And he [Moses] said to them, 'This is what the Lord has said, Tomorrow is the rest of the holy Sabbath to the Lord; bake that which you will bake today, and boil what you will boil today; and that which remains over lay up for you to be kept until the morning' (16:23).*

In this entire incident, however, nowhere is a reason given for the observance of the Sabbath. It is unclear if the people had any understanding of the command, either in terms of the future articulation of the Ten Commandments in Exodus or in Deuteronomy. Their ready acceptance of the seventh day as a day of *rest of the holy Sabbath to the Lord*, suggests the pre-existence of an oral tradition of the prohibition of work on the Sabbath.

A midrash in Exodus Rabbah provides a somewhat different approach to the people's understanding of the Sabbath rest.

R. Simeon b. Yohai said: He [Pharaoh] began to gnash his teeth at them [Israelites] . . . This is to teach us that the Israelites possessed scrolls<sup>2</sup> with the contents of which they took pleasure each Sabbath, assuring them that God would redeem them. Thus **because they rested on the Sabbath**, Pharaoh said to them: Let heavier work be laid upon the men, that they may labor therein; and let them not regard lying words [Ex. 5:9], let them not take delight or **rest on the Sabbath day** (Exodus Rabbah – §V: 18).

The implication seems clear. There was a time when the slaves in Egypt rested specifically on the Sabbath, and this right was taken away from them by an oppressive pharaoh. R. Simon's midrash adds the element of pre-existing scrolls which may have suggested to the slaves in Egypt a ceremonial association with the Sabbath of Creation, so that the reference to *the holy Sabbath to the Lord* in Moses' admonition not to gather the manna on the morrow was not really that strange to them. One can confidently conjecture that the scrolls contained the "Vayechulu" summary of the Creation in the Book of Genesis:

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He had rested from all his work which God created and made. (Gen. 2:1-3)*

Thus, a developmental chain of the Sabbath tradition is suggested: from Creation to slavery in Egypt, and then from freedom from that slavery to the manna narrative, and then to the commandment given on Sinai in Exodus, and ultimately to the commandment in Deuteronomy.

Nevertheless, the primary implication in Deuteronomy and in the midrash associates the Sabbath rest solely with freedom from the slavery of Egypt, with no word of the earlier association with Creation. Additionally, this implies that the people perceived redemption as necessary for the celebration of the Sabbath, and the Sabbath as a celebration of the redemption. Unclear, however, is the element of freedom from slavery as the climax of Creation.

To understand this connection necessitates an understanding of the nature of the Book of Deuteronomy.

The obvious textual difference between the first four books of the Torah and Deuteronomy is seen in Moses addressing the people in the first person. Examples are as follows:

***And I commanded** you at that time, saying. . .*

***And I commanded** Joshua at that time, saying . . .*

***And I pleaded** with the Lord at that time, saying . . .* (Deut. 3:18; 21; 23)

It is only in the last section of Deuteronomy that there is a return to the usual biblical format: ***And the Lord spoke to Moses** that same day, saying . . .* (32:48).

The first four books of the Torah are usually understood as a direct dictation to an amanuensis, God to Moses. In the fifth book, it is ostensibly Moses who speaks independently. Some of the classical commentaries offer surprising suggestions. The Ramban (Nachmanides), in the midst of the beginning of his commentary on Deuteronomy, writes the following: ". . . because [Moses] wanted to **explain** [interpret] the Torah, expressed it in this manner because he himself decided to do this [to teach the contents of Deuteronomy] and he was not commanded by God to do so."<sup>3</sup>

In a similar manner, but with a significant addition, Abarbanel writes:

The substance of this book [Deuteronomy] and its authenticity is that Moses said these sayings and **explained** [interpreted] the commandments noted here to Israel because of the need of his [impending] parting. And the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted that after the completion of his **saying** them to Israel, **that he should write in the scroll of the Torah all of this that Moses had said.**<sup>4</sup>

Joseph B. Soloveitchik,<sup>5</sup> focusing on the use of the word *ba'er* [to explain or interpret], understood the above comments as follows: Before his death, Moses gave a series of lectures using the Oral Law. He thereby explained and interpreted numerous laws that had previously been transmitted to the people. In addition, he transmitted laws that were previously in the realm of the Oral Law [*torah she'be'al peh v'halakha l'moshe mi'sinai*]. Afterwards, God con-

gratulated Moses on his accomplishment and told him, "Write it all down in the scroll of law."

This approach clarifies the nature of Deuteronomy: Though Moses spoke in the first person, the content was elements of the Oral Law from Sinai, as sanctioned from Heaven. It therefore follows that the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy ought to be considered in the realm of Oral Law, an interpretation of the Commandments recorded in Exodus. The Deuteronomy explanation of the Sabbath as derived from Israel's redemption from Egypt and ensuing freedom from slavery, can be theorized not as a correction or parallel to Exodus, but as an enriching explanation, an expansion and a development. There evidently was a need to clothe the lofty metaphysical concept of *Imitatio Dei*, of resting on the Sabbath as a reminder of God's Creation and His subsequent resting on the seventh day as noted in Exodus, with the sanctification of the Sabbath described as a sociological scheme protecting slaves and workers.

But why was the Sabbath as a celebration of God's Creation of the world by itself basically insufficient? Actually, it seems that this insufficiency is already evident in Genesis, when the Torah proclaims after the completion of the Creation: *And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good* (Gen. 1:31).

Empirically speaking, however, life after Eden and to this day is frequently not "very good," and at times it is not even good. On the contrary, life can be replete with suffering and subjugation. Therefore, the Deuteronomy version of the sanctification of the Sabbath, with its focus on deliverance from Egypt and slavery, completes the previous Creation version by informing us of a promise of an end to pain and suffering, of a vision of redemption. The Creation of the world cannot be completed without introducing the notion of that *great and terrible day of the Lord*, of redemption (see Joel 3:4; Malachi 3:23). Even though God completed the Creation of the world on that primeval Sabbath after six days, He in fact is "continually renewing in His goodness the work of creation" (from the Siddur).

It seems that this concept appropriately motivated Psalm 92 to traverse the same sequence of teachings of the Sabbath commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, it expresses passionate praise of the Creation of the world:

- v. 1. *A Psalm for the Sabbath Day,*  
 v. 2. *It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord,  
 and to sing praises to your name, O most high!*  
 v 5. *For you, Lord, have made me glad through your work;  
 I will triumph in the works of your hands.*  
 v 6. *O Lord, how great are your works! And your thoughts are very deep!*

But then the Poet charges:

- v 7. *A stupid man does not know; nor can a fool understand this.*  
 v 8. *When the wicked spring like grass, and when all the evildoers flourish;*

Evil and suffering entered early in this created world and still persists. Nevertheless:

- . . . *it is that they [the wicked] shall be destroyed forever;*  
 v. 9. *But you, O Lord, are most high for evermore.*  
 v 10. *For, behold, Your enemies, O Lord, for, behold,  
 Your enemies shall perish; all the evildoers shall be scattered.*

Thus, the Psalm evokes a theme of redemption as the biblical commandments do, echoing the redemption from Egyptian slavery by a mighty God proclaimed in the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy.

As for us and the future:

- v. 15. *[The righteous] shall still bring forth fruit in old age;  
 they shall be fat and flourishing;*  
 v. 16: *To declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock,  
 and there is no unrighteousness in Him.*

All this makes this psalm appropriate for the Sabbath day. It is an ancient custom to focus the theme of this psalm when said on the Sabbath. "On the Sabbath they would say: A psalm for the Sabbath Day. A psalm for the future to come, to the day that is a complete Sabbath and rest for eternity" (Siddur).

Deuteronomy's recollection of freedom from slavery can be seen as a link in the chain from Creation to a redemptive future. To this theme does the Sabbath give witness.

#### NOTES

1. Soncino translation, Judaic Classics Library CD-ROM
2. The suggestion that in Egypt the people had scrolls that they read on the Sabbath may have interesting implications on the future construction of the Bible. [See Rashi, Ex. 24:7]

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3. Ramban on Deuteronomy 1:1; author's translation and emphasis.
4. Abrabanel, Introduction to Deuteronomy; author's translation and emphasis.
5. Yarchei Kalah, Boston 1982, available in audiotape; *M. Nordlicht* series.