

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Yitro

The Torah mentions the mitzvah of keeping Shabbat many times, perhaps most famously in the Ten Commandments of our parsha. This particular description of the mitzvah has become part of the daytime Shabbat kiddush we say every week. The constant repetition of the mitzvah of Shabbat, coupled with the fact that it appears in the Ten Commandments, underscores the centrality of Shabbat observance in Jewish life.

If we examine the Torah's description about Shabbat both in Yitro and when the Torah repeats the Ten Commandments later in Va'etchanan, we find a major difference between the two passages. In Yitro, the Torah says we should keep Shabbat because G-d created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. But in Va'etchanan, it says that we should remember how G-d redeemed us from the slavery of Egypt in order for us to keep the Shabbat. Is Shabbat something meaningful for all of humanity, which the passage in Yitro could imply, or is it a mitzvah unique for Jews, which the passage in Va'etchanan would seem to indicate?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b) says a gentile should not observe Shabbat, and we even mention in the standing prayer of Shabbat morning that G-d did not give this mitzvah to the gentiles. The midrash (Breishit Raba 11, 8) reinforces this idea by metaphorically comparing the Jewish people to the spouse of Shabbat.

The midrash says each of the six days of creation have a partner or spouse, except for the seventh day. The first day, when G-d separated between light and dark, partners with the fourth day, when G-d created the sun, moon, and stars. The second day, when G-d separated between the upper and lower waters, joins with the fifth day, when G-d created the water creatures and the birds. The third day, when G-d created dry land with grass and trees, partners with the sixth day, when he created animals and man. Shabbat, which does not have a parallel day, needs the Jewish people to be its partner. What does it mean for a day to have a partner?

In a marriage, the union of husband and wife helps each of them achieve completion and enables them to actualize their potential in the fullest sense. Similarly, in the creation of the world, the luminaries of fourth day completed the creation of light on the first day. The water creatures of the fifth day completed the lower waters of the second day. The animals and human beings created on the sixth day completed the land and its growth of the third day. Shabbat, the only day in the process of creation devoid of all



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continued ...

creative activity, needs the Jewish people to complete it. How do the Jewish people complete and bring out the potential of the seventh day of creation?

In order to explain the role of the Jewish people in completing the goal of Shabbat, we need to understand the role of Shabbat in the seven days of creation. Rashi (Genesis 2:2) explains that when the Torah says “G-d finished his work on the seventh day,” it means that actually a whole new dimension was brought to the world on the seventh day. Otherwise, the Torah should have simply said that G-d finished the work of creation on the sixth day. Rashi calls this element ‘menucha,’ which we typically define as rest, but really means much more than not working. The seventh day gives direction and meaning to the six days of creation and work, and the rest on Shabbat gives us the opportunity to discover this purpose.

We refer to Shabbat in the mincha prayer as a day of “menucha u’kedusha,” which means rest and holiness. Cessation from work on Shabbos gives man the opportunity to reflect on the holy purpose of the world. For this same reason, we call the seventh day of the week “Shabbat kodesh,” the holy Shabbat. The Vilna Gaon teaches that the first time a word appears in the Torah shows us the deeper meaning of the word. The Torah first mentions kedusha (holiness) in relation to G-d sanctifying the Shabbat, implying that the concept of holiness is uniquely tied to Shabbat.

The purpose and meaning that Shabbat brings to the world stems from the fact that it is the source of all kedusha. Holiness means not to escape the physical world, but to transcend the physical properties of existence and live spiritually meaningful lives. The seventh day of rest and holiness puts the other days of creation into the proper perspective, directing all of the creative activity of those days towards the goal of living transcending, spiritual lives.

Before giving them the Torah at Sinai, G-d tells the Jewish people, “You will be for me a holy nation.” Clearly, the goal of all of the mitzvot of the Torah is to infuse the world with holiness, and G-d charges the Jews with the mission to work towards the realization of this lofty goal. When a Jew keeps the holy Shabbat, he shows everyone around him that the world has this holy dimension.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

3921 Fabian Way Suite A-017
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94303
www.jsn.info