

The Observance of the Sabbath in Light of Modern Technology and Culture

At the root of the Ten Commandments and the basis of Judaism is one of the most central messages of the Torah: the sanctity of Freedom. The irony of the modern world is that those advances that have been so influential in the furthering of our society have also become a sort of enslaving entity from which we all struggle to free ourselves. It would appear, however, that ancient Judaism had the foresight to predict such struggles of the modern world, and therefore commanded the keeping of the Sabbath. In carrying out the mitzvah of observing Shabbat, modern Jews are freed from the trappings of technology for one day each week, subsequently strengthening their interpersonal connections with family and friends, their connection with themselves, and their connection to G-d.

In Genesis 2:2-3 we are told that “By the seventh day G-d completed His work which He had done, and He abstained on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it¹.” Later, in Exodus 20:11, Moses receives the fourth commandment from G-d, to remember the Sabbath and maintain it as a holy day. G-d subsequently uses his own pattern of creation to explain this mitzvah, as his choice to rest and bless this day sets it apart from the other days of the week. Therefore, the Jewish Sabbath, or Shabbat, is considered the holiest Jewish holiday and is observed each week from sundown each Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening.

¹ JPS Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. 1st. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985. Print.

Shabbat is considered a holy day of rest and spiritual enrichment, as is reflected in the root of the Hebrew word Shabbat, Shin Beit Tav, which means to rest or to cease².

As Rabbi Grey discussed in this fall's Sinai Scholars classes, one of the cornerstones of the Jewish faith is the concept of freedom, particularly as it has been bestowed upon the Jewish people by merciful acts from G-d. For this reason, it is significant that the Ten Commandments are given to Moses in the book of Exodus, after G-d has freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt. In the book of Genesis we learn that humans have been created in the image of G-d, yet it is still necessary that G-d give us the commandments, instructing us on how to honor and sanctify our lives. While we have been created in G-d's image, He has endowed us with free will, and therefore must guide us with His commandments.

Before receiving the commandments, we were slaves. After, we are free. The Ten Commandments are thus a beacon of freedom and serve to remind us that in freedom we have a responsibility to ourselves, to our people, and to the Creator who freed us. It might, then, seem paradoxical that the commandment to keep the Sabbath is riddled with prohibitions. But, much like the Ten Commandments themselves, while on first glance the rules and guidelines of keeping the Sabbath seem restrictive, they ultimately serve to free us in a deeper, more meaningful way.

In Exodus 31 and 35-38 we are instructed as to the basic rules of observing Shabbat, such as that it is to be "a Sabbath of complete rest," and that "you shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day." The Mishnah goes on to

² Rich, Tracey R. "Shabbat." Judaism 101. N.p., 1995-2005. Web. 10 Jan 2011. <<http://www.jewfaq.org/shabbat.htm>>.

elaborate the restrictions of Shabbat, enumerating 39, including the writing or erasing of letters, the kindling or extinguishing of a fire, the transportation of objects within or into the public domain, and a variety of other restrictions on various types of work or labor. The Rabbis have not only restricted these specific actions, but also any action which serves in the same purpose or spirit, as well as prohibiting the handling of any implements intended for a restricted purpose. It thus follows that the use or even handling of electricity or electronics is restricted during Shabbat.

Nonetheless, the advent of technology has raised a variety of questions in the Jewish community as to the nature and spirit of Halakhic law. For instance, in a room where a sensor detects an entrant, which subsequently triggers the turning on of a light, does an entrant break the laws of Halakha even if he or she has not directly touched any switch to turn on this light³? It is not unimaginable that in the near future, technology will allow the religious Jew to perform on Shabbat all of the tasks he or she performs during the week without technically breaking any laws of Halakha. The question, then, becomes whether the extent to which the spirit of the Sabbath and the meaning behind the holiness of the day is, in fact, more important than the actually Halakhic rules and restrictions that delineate its observance.

After eight weeks of Sinai Scholars courses, and based on Rabbi Grey's discussion of shomer Shabbat and the Halakhot, it is clear that to properly sanctify the Sabbath day we must abandon the use of all means of technology in the spirit of observance. Despite the fact that it might be possible to utilize technology while not

³ Gerstenfeld, Manfred, and Avraham Wyler. "Technology and Jewish Life." *Jewish Political Studies Review* 18.1-2 (2006): n. pag. Web. 10 Jan 2011. <<http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/18403.pdf>>.

actually breaking any of the Halakhic laws, doing so would destroy the unique atmosphere that is created by abstaining from technology. Shabbat is a time to enjoy elements of the natural, not of the mechanical or technological.

As Dr. Laura Schlessinger points out in her book *The Ten Commandments: the Significance of G-d's Laws in Everyday Life*, we live in an age defined by our technology, where expedience and efficiency are highly valued⁴. Spending all week in the high-speed, high-achieving world where we are the creators, the workers and the conquerors, it is only natural that human beings would become rather impressed with themselves to the point of egocentrism. However, in taking one day a week to step back from the human-and-technology-centric world, we allow ourselves a chance to truly appreciate the creating, working and conquering that was originally done by G-d. It thus becomes a way to alleviate the pressures of our fast-paced world, and allows us to recall our ultimate purpose, to serve G-d and humanity.

In addition to placing a high value on efficiency, the age of technology also bears significant consequences on our relationships with others. As Ian Barbour discusses in his work *Ethics in the Age of Technology*, modern society breeds relationships that are based on functionality and ease, not necessarily strong interpersonal connections⁵. It is undoubtedly easier to send someone a text than it is to call, to Skype with someone rather than visit, or to catch up with via Facebook rather than meeting up for coffee. As children of the age of technology we have often listened to the elder generations

⁴ Schlessinger, Laura. *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Law in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Books, 1998. Print.

⁵ Barbour, Ian G. *Ethics in the Age of Technology: The Gifford Lectures*. 2. New York, NY: HarperCollins Books, 1992. Print.

admonish our technological savvy, warning about the skills of writing, language and, of course, those interpersonal connections, that we might lose in our heavy reliance on computerized and cellular communication. Much to our chagrin, they admittedly have a point. While technology was originally meant to liberate us and make our lives easier, modern society has become so reliant on it that most people would feel helpless without it. In many ways we have become slaves to modern technology.

For this reason, it is important that we continue to sanctify Shabbat, both to the letter and the spirit of Halakhic law. In keeping the Sabbath by abstaining from the use of technology, we allow ourselves one day each week that is free from the pressures and the immediacy of our modern world. Being “disconnected” in this way can, in fact, be a gratifying experience insofar as it can help to reconnect us spiritually. We are further free to explore our roots as well as our relationships, as the Sabbath allows for introspection as well as spending time with family and friends on a more personal level.

The Ten Commandments that G-d gave to Moses on Mount Sinai are not simply arbitrary Mitzvot that were enumerated before all the others; they were methodically chosen to represent the underpinnings of our religion. The fourth commandment, to sanctify the Sabbath day and make it holy, was given as one of these ten not as an instrument by which God could restrict the Jewish people, but instead as a way to further the Jews in their pursuit of freedom. In keeping the Sabbath we free our minds, as well as ourselves, from the fast-pace of the modern world.