

The Sabbath
by Abraham Joshua Heschel
Introduction by Susannah Heschel (p. vii-xvi)

When my father raised his kiddush cup on Friday evenings, closed his eyes, and chanted the prayer sanctifying the wine, I always felt a rush of emotion. As he chanted with an old, sacred family melody, he blessed the wine and the Sabbath with his prayer, and I also felt he was blessing my life and that of everyone at the table. I treasured those moments.

Friday evenings in my home were the climax of the week, as they are for every religious Jewish family. My mother and I kindled the lights for the Sabbath, and all of a sudden I felt transformed, emotionally and even physically. After lighting the candles in the dining room, we would walk into the living room, which had windows overlooking the Hudson River, facing west, and we would marvel at the sunset that soon arrived.

The sense of peace that came upon us as we kindled the lights was created, in part, by the hectic tension of Fridays. Preparation for a holy day, my father often said, was as important as the day itself. During the busy mornings my mother shopped for groceries, and in the afternoons the atmosphere grew increasingly nervous as she cooked. My father came home from his office an hour or two before sunset to take care of his own preparations, and as the last minutes of the workweek came close, both of my parents were in the kitchen, frantically trying to remember what they might have forgotten to prepare--Had the kettle boiled? Was the *bleck* covering the stove? Was the oven turned on?

Then, suddenly, it was time: twenty minutes before sunset. Whatever hadn't been finished in the kitchen we simply left behind as we lit the candles and blessed the arrival of the Sabbath. My father writes, "The Sabbath comes like a caress, wiping away fear, sorrow and somber memories."

My father rarely went to the synagogue on Friday evenings, preferring to pray at home, and our dinners were usually quiet, slow, and relaxed. My parents did not socialize very much, but every two months or so they would invite a few friends or colleagues to Shabbat dinner. The meal was always the same: our challahs came from our local bakery, and my mother made chicken soup, roast cornish hen, salad, and vegetables. For dessert, my father would peel a Golden Delicious apple, trying to keep the peel in one piece, and we would share apple chunks. My mother was not an enthusiastic cook and my father was always on a salt-free diet, so the food was not thrilling. Still, at the beginning of every meal, my father lifted his fork, looked at me, and said, "Mommy is a good cook."

We had one unusual custom at our Shabbat table: my father had received a gift from his brother-in-law, the Kopycznitzer Rebbe, of two long, braided silver spice holders, in which he kept myrtle and eucalyptus leaves. Although scented spices are usually blessed and smelled at havdalah, as Shabbat ends, we would bless and smell the spices just before kiddush, the prayer over the wine, in a Hasidic custom based on a rabbinic passage that my father discusses in *The Sabbath*.

When we had guests for dinner, they were nearly always academic refugees from Europe, and the conversation at the table was always focused on Europe. Invariably, they talked about German scholars they had known: Jews who had fled to the U.S. or Israel, others who had perished. They did not talk about the murder process of the Holocaust, nor did they use that word in those days, but they would talk about the non-Jewish scholars who had been exposed as Nazis in Max Weinreich's book *Hitler's Professors*. Like my father, most of my

parent's friends had studied before the war at German universities and they remained shocked, twenty and thirty years after the war ended, that scholars whose work they had admired had become Nazis. German culture always colored those conversations. I grew up hearing about Goethe and Heine, Schopenhauer and Husserl, long before I read Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, or Thoreau in school. Given the cultural world of my parents' home, I have always had a sense of being a tourist in America.

Just as often, the conversation centered on Eastern Europe, on the Hasidic world my father had come from. He loved to tell his guests stories about various Haside rebbes, or describe teachings from Hasidic texts. Few of my parents' friends came from that world, but for my father, the Sabbath was always a return to the Sabbaths of his youth and memories of his family and friends.

Indeed, on the Sabbath my father's reading habits shifted. He did not read secular books, works of philosophy or politics, but instead turned to Hebrew religious texts. Because writing is forbidden on the Sabbath, he would sometimes place a napkin or a paper clip to mark a page, so that years later I could tell which books had been his Shabbat reading. Those books brought him back each Sabbath to stories of his childhood and to the feeling that he had grown up surrounded by people of "religious nobility." (Something of a corresponding situation existed at one time with the French edition of *The Sabbath*, which was published in France under the title *Les Bâtisseurs du Temps* [Architecture in Time]. According to his letters, the great poet Paul Celan kept a copy of my father's book on his bedside table toward the end of his life.)

On Shabbat morning we attended services at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where my father taught, and in the congregation sat faculty and students from the seminary and from Columbia University. It was an Orthodox service, conducted entirely in Hebrew, and men and women sat separately. Many weeks we heard a sermon delivered by a graduating rabbinical student, and on the walk home from the synagogue faculty members commented, often severely, on the quality of the sermon. The walk took only fifteen minutes, but my father had a habit of taking a few steps, then stopping to talk over a point before moving on, so that the walk often lasted half an hour. When I was small, he sometimes carried me on his shoulders, and as I grew older, his colleagues helped him entertain me.

Shabbat lunch was informal and lighthearted, a time for joking and teasing. After lunch my parents took their weekly nap, followed by tea and a walk in Riverside Park, across the street. There we would meet friends and colleagues taking their Shabbat afternoon strolls.

There are really two kinds of Shabbat experiences: those of the fall and winter months, when the Sabbath begins around four o'clock on Friday afternoons and ends around five o'clock on Saturday, and those of the spring and summer, when the Sabbath starts at eight or eight-thirty and ends at nine o'clock or even later. In the winter months, our Friday nights continued long after dinner as my parents sat at the table, drinking tea and reading. During the spring months, the long Shabbat afternoons became the peaceful and quiet focus of the day.

Often my parents would invite students for a Shabbat afternoon high tea. My mother served cheese and crackers, various cakes, sometimes even a magnificent *Herrentorte* - a loaf of bread sliced lengthwise and filled with layers of various kinds of fish and egg salads and frosted with a cream-cheese-and-anchovy spread. My father was attentive to each student, asking about his studies, hometown rabbis, and goals for the future. As the afternoon turned dusky, he offered each one a Siddur, to pray the evening service. Together we made havdalah, the prayer concluding Shabbat, and then the students departed.

Sunday was once again a weekday. During the winter months, my father sometimes taught on Sunday mornings, and my mother was at her piano, practicing. Nearly every summer, however, my parents rented a house in Los Angeles, to be near my mother's brothers and their families. The houses were occasionally too far from a synagogue to walk, so friends would come to my parents' home for services on Shabbat morning. My mother would prepare a light kiddush for everyone, and guests stayed well into the afternoon. By the time the Sabbath ended on Saturday night, it was late and we went to sleep. Sunday mornings became the post-Shabbat moments of transition as my father went to his study and my mother to her piano. Sunday afternoons in the summer were filled with music: we would go to the home of my mother's brother, a physician who played the violin. He had a large music room with two pianos, and his friends would arrange themselves in trios, quartets, and quintets, and spend the day playing chamber music. The house had a large swimming pool just outside the music room, and my father and I would float in the water, read a book, and listen to the music while my mother played.

At the time *The Sabbath* was published, in 1951, my father had been in the United States for only eleven years. When he had arrived in 1940, his English had been weak, but he mastered the language remarkably quickly and went on to write in an extraordinarily rich and poetic style. Indeed, my parents would often laugh because early readers of the book couldn't imagine my father was the author--they thought my mother had ghostwritten it! The book's language is intrinsic to its meaning; its elegiac, poetic tone evokes the mood of the Sabbath that he describes.

The Sabbath appeared at a time when American Jews were assimilating radically and when many were embarrassed by public expressions of Jewishness. Even among rabbis and Jewish leaders, a rejection of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism, and even of theology and spirituality was common. It was as if they desired a religionless Judaism--a Judaism without God, faith, or belief. For them, the Sabbath interfered with jobs, socializing, shopping, and simply being American.

In trying to reintroduce the importance of the Sabbath, my father did not berate Jews for their neglect of religious observance, nor did he demand obedience to Jewish law based on the absolute authority of rabbinic texts. Writing in an era in which books by clergy advocating the psychological health promoted by religion were coming into vogue, my father went against the trend. He insisted that the Sabbath is not about psychology or sociology; it doesn't serve to make us calmer or to hold the family together. Nor does the Sabbath represent a rejection of modernity or the secular world--for him, the Sabbath was a complement to building civilization, not a withdrawal from it. In contrast to more recent approaches to the Sabbath, my father did not emphasize the importance of "ritual" (he believed that the words "customs" and "ceremonies" should be eradicated from the Jewish vocabulary), nor did he view the Sabbath as a vehicle for solidifying Jewish continuity.

Yet my father's approach to the Sabbath did reflect some of the political concerns and language of the day; the themes of freedom and liberty recur in the book. He writes that we need the Sabbath in order to survive civilization: "Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty" to remain independent of the enslavement of the material world. "Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem-- how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent."

My father defines Judaism as a religion centrally concerned with holiness in time. Some religions build great cathedrals or temples, but Judaism constructs the Sabbath as an

architecture of time. Creating holiness in time requires a different sensibility than building a cathedral in space: "We must conquer space in order to sanctify time." My father did not mean to imply, as some have suggested, a denigration of space or a denial of the significance of the land of Israel. His commitment to Israel and its sanctity is attested to in his book *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. In the cases of both the Sabbath and Israel, he emphasizes that sanctification is dependent upon human behavior and attitude. Sanctifying the Sabbath is part of our imitation of God, but it also becomes a way to find God's presence. It is not in space but in time, he writes, that we find God's likeness. In the Bible, no thing or place is holy by itself: not even the Promised Land is called holy. While the holiness of the land and of festivals depends on the actions of the Jewish people, who have to sanctify them, the holiness of the Sabbath, he writes, preceded the holiness of Israel. Even if people fail to observe the Sabbath, it remains holy.

How do we bring about the elusive atmosphere that is the Sabbath? Sanctity is a quality, my father emphasized, that we create. We know what to do with space, but how do we shape sacred time? Six days a week we live with a fury of acquisitiveness, he writes; Shabbat renews the soul and we rediscover who we are. "The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man." God is not in things of space, but in moments of time. How do we perceive God's presence? There are some helpful Sabbath laws--those that require shutting off secular demands and refraining from work. In enumerating the categories that constitute "work," the Mishnah describes types of activities necessary to build technological civilization. Yet my father goes further. Not only is it forbidden to light a fire on the Sabbath, but, he writes, "Ye shall kindle no fire - not even the fire of righteous indignation." In our home, certain topics were avoided on the Sabbath--politics, the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam--while others were emphasized. Observing the Sabbath is not only about refraining from work, but about creating *menuha*, a restfulness that is also a celebration. The Sabbath is a day for body as well as soul. It is a sin to be sad on the Sabbath, a lesson my father often repeated and always observed.

With the Sabbath comes a miracle: the soul is resurrected, an additional soul arrives, and the effulgence of Sabbath holiness fills every corner of the household. Anger is lifted, tensions are gone, and there is a glow on the face.

Creating Shabbat begins with a sense of longing. Strikingly, my father turns our expectations around. It is not we who long for a day of rest, but the Sabbath spirit that is lonely and longs for us. We are the mate of the Sabbath, and each week, through our sanctification of the Sabbath, we marry the day. That marriage shapes us: "What we are depends on what *the Sabbath* is to us." Similarly, the Sabbath does not simply come into being on Saturdays; the depth of its experience is created, he writes, by how we behave on the other six days of the week; they are a pilgrimage to the Sabbath.

Shabbat comes with its own holiness; we enter not simply a day, but an atmosphere. My father cites the Zohar: the Sabbath is the name of God. We are within the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being within us. For my father, the question is how to perceive that holiness: not how *much* to observe, but *how* to observe. Strict adherence to the laws regulating Sabbath observance doesn't suffice; the goal is creating the Sabbath as a foretaste of paradise. The Sabbath is a metaphor for paradise and a testimony to God's presence; in our prayers, we anticipate a messianic era that will be a Sabbath, and each Shabbat prepares us for that experience: "Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath . . . one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come." It was on the seventh day that God gave the world a soul, and "the world's] survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day." The task, he writes, becomes how to convert time into eternity, how to fill our time with spirit: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we

especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.”

On my father's last Shabbat we had a wonderful dinner with many friends, after which one of our guests read aloud some of my father's Yiddish poems, written when he was a young man. He went to sleep that night and never woke. In Jewish tradition, dying in one's sleep is called a kiss of God, and dying on the Sabbath is a gift that is merited by piety. For the pious person, my father once wrote, it is a privilege to die.

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