

Guiding Question

Why does the Torah give two different reasons for Shabbat, and what changes when rest becomes an obligation?

Torah Text I: Exodus 20:8-11

זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֹאכְתְּךָ: יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ-וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וּבְהֶמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בָּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

Remember the Sabbath day and make it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of Adonai your God. You shall not do any work, neither you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your animal, nor the stranger within your gates. For in six days Adonai made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore Adonai blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Torah Text II: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

שָׁמֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר צֻוֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֹאכְתְּךָ: יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל-בְּהֶמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ כָּמוֹךָ: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי-עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצֵאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה עַל-כֵּן צֻוֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

Observe the Sabbath day and make it holy, as Adonai your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of Adonai your God. You shall not do any work, neither you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or donkey, any of your animals, nor the stranger within your gates, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and Adonai your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore Adonai your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Questions

1. Are these two reasons for the same practice, or do they offer two different definitions of what Shabbat is meant to accomplish?
2. Is Moses merely repeating the commandment, or is he claiming the authority to reinterpret Sinai for a new generation?
3. Which vision of Shabbat do we need more today: a day that connects us to creation or a day that releases us from the demands we place upon one another?

Rashi

[1040-1105, France]

“Remember” and “observe” were spoken in a single utterance and heard in a single hearing. The two words are not competing versions of the commandment; they belong together.

Maimonides

[1138-1204, Egypt]

Shabbat serves more than one purpose. It affirms creation, recalls God's liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and gives every person regular relief from exertion.

Questions

1. Does combining the explanations deepen Shabbat, or does it allow us to avoid asking why Moses changed the emphasis?
2. What do we lose when we avoid asking about Moses' change?

Ibn Ezra

[1089-1167, Spain]

The Israelites must rest because rest itself becomes an act of memory. Each week, a person who is now free is reminded that freedom was not always theirs.

Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno

[1475-1550, Italy]

The animals must rest for the sake of the people who work them. The slave's rest recalls Egypt: do not treat another human being as you were treated when you were enslaved.

Question

What responsibility do we bear when another person's inability to rest has become part of what makes our own rest possible?

Ramban

[1194-1270, Spain]

The Exodus does not replace creation as the reason for Shabbat. God's command over nature in Egypt confirms that the Redeemer is also the Creator. The second account adds historical experience to the theological claim of the first.

Questions

1. Does Ramban's reconciliation account for Deuteronomy's new concern with the enslaved person, or does the text make a moral claim that theology alone can't absorb?
2. Is Ramban interpreting the Exodus through the lens of creation, or interpreting creation through the experience of liberation?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

[1907-1972, Poland/United States]

The Sabbath is our great cathedral. Holiness first appears in the Torah not in a place but in time. Shabbat interrupts the human drive to conquer, produce, and possess, creating a period in which existence matters more than accomplishment.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

[1948-2020, United Kingdom]

In Exodus, Shabbat is an act of creation. In Deuteronomy, it becomes an act of liberation. Its social meaning can be stated simply: "One day in seven, no one is a slave."

Question

Does Shabbat make an enslaved person free for one day, or does it expose the injustice of a society in which freedom is only temporary?

Judith Shulevitz

[21st Century, United States]

Rest cannot be entirely private. When one person stops but commerce continues around them, other people must keep working. A Sabbath culture requires shared time in which a community agrees to stop making demands of one another.

Rabbi Jim Morgan

[21st Century, United States]

Remembering that we were slaves is not enough. Deuteronomy also asks us to notice when our own comfort depends upon labor, inequality, or systems we would rather not see. The phrase “as you do” turns memory into responsibility.

Questions

1. Whose labor makes our Shabbat possible, and what would it mean to ensure that they can rest “as you do”?
2. Is private Shabbat observance morally compromised when it depends upon delivery workers, caregivers, restaurant employees, or others continuing to work for us?