What Is the Jewish Sabbath and What Can We Learn from It?

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Most of you know the Sabbath originated in the Jewish faith as described in the Hebrew Bible. As we focus on the Sabbath during this month I thought it might be useful to explore this origin and to consider what meaning would be useful to UU’s. One of the “Six Sources” for UU’s is “Jewish and Christian teachings….” It is not an accident that this month’s theme of the Sabbath follows the theme of “God and the divine.” As I hope to show this morning, the purpose of the Sabbath is for people to experience and appreciate the sacredness and divinity of the planet and the life it holds. Last week Ian pointed out that it is less useful to name or try to define the sacred than to attempt to experience and appreciate it. Whatever we may or may not believe about a creator we all can experience the awe and splendor of creation.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath is “Shabbat,” and it means “cessation” and to also means “rest.” I will begin by looking at what the Hebrew Bible says about Shabbat. I will share some of my childhood memories of the Sabbath. Then I will discuss what a couple of Jewish thinkers on the subject have to say about it. Finally, I want to address what we UU’s might derive from Shabbat for our own spiritual development.

The Sabbath is mentioned in the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible, both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. In the Exodus version of the commandment, the explanation given for the observance is, just as God rested after taking 6 days to create the world, Hebrews are to follow that same practice and rest on the seventh day. In the Deuteronomy version of the Fourth Commandment the reason given for the Sabbath is to remember that the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt until God redeemed them. We will look at why there are 2 versions what does each add to the understanding of the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath. Another question we will explore is the peculiar way that forbidden work is defined by the rabbis. Some of the forbidden activities really do not involve much effort at all and don’t seem like work.

What does it mean to “guard the Sabbath and keep it holy,” as the Bible text of the commandment states it? The rabbinic tradition provides clarity and guidance to observant Jews on how to practice the laws of Moses. It is certainly the case with the observance of Shabbat*.* Much of the practice of Shabbat includes many activities one may not engage in. The list of activities that were prohibited in biblical times is 39 items long and includes, chopping wood, sewing, cooking and lighting or extinguishing a fire, carrying outside a perimeter, grinding grain, planting, reaping, shearing, writing and erasing. These activities were associated with building the ark of the covenant. Over centuries the rabbis have added further restrictions to the Sabbath observance, including spending or even holding money or engaging in commerce. In the past century rabbis have prohibited driving in a car, turning on or off appliances, including phones and devices, or lights. The rabbis view combustion in a car engine and electricity of any type, as a kind of fire. Starting or extinguishing a fire is prohibited on the Sabbath. The idea behind all these prohibitions on the Sabbath is not that they represent toil but rather that they have an impact on the world or are in some sense “creative.” So the Jewish idea is that on the Sabbath instead of acting upon the world in an transforming or creative way, one takes the world in; one simply revels in and appreciates.

My memories as a young child of Shabbat are wonderful. Following the Genesis creation story Shabbat begins just before sundown on Friday. (“It was evening and it was morning….”) My mother would spend the entire day of Friday cooking for the Shabbat evening meal which literally had 10 courses! She would light the candles just before sundown to mark the beginning. In the winter my dad would get home early from work on Friday afternoon. We all bathed. Since one may not shave on Shabbat my dad would also shave on Friday afternoon. We would get lights turned off around the house except for the few we left on through Shabbat. We had to unscrew the lightbulb in the refrigerator or else we could not open the refrigerator door. My mother would leave one stove burner on low all through Shabbat and use a cookie sheet to warm food for the Shabbat meals. If the phone rang on Shabbat we did not answer. I remember my father placing his hands on our young heads and blessing my siblings and me after blessing the wine on Friday eve. I remember walking to synagogue with my dad and sitting next to him. We always had dress up clothes to wear to synagogue. I also remember reading the Bible in Hebrew with my dad on Shabbat afternoons. We also sang hymns in Hebrew, some of which were composed by my grandfather, during the Sabbath lunch. As you can see, Shabbat was very much a family time for me growing up. It was truly a special day.

Shabbat is like backpacking. You have to spend a lot of time collecting what you need and packing it. You have to hike in and set up camp. But once you get there you can relax and take in the beauty around you, leaving the work world behind.

Shabbat ends, much as it begins, with the lighting of a candle. The blessing that is recited to mark the end of Shabbat praises God who “separates light from darkness, holiness from the secular, and the day of Shabbat from the six days of the making and doing.” The lighting of candles provides a clear demarcation to the start and end of Shabbat.

In his book The Forgotten Language, humanistic psychoanalyst and one-time rabbinical student Erich Fromm discusses the meaning of the Sabbath as a symbol. Usually with think of a picture or an object, or maybe a dream as a symbol but not usually a day. He points out he ancient Hebrew definitions of “work” and of “rest” in the context of Shabbat are different from the ordinary use we think of. “Work” as it is meant in the Sabbath commandment was not only about physical effort but rather about interference, either in a constructive or destructive way, in the natural world or into the public domain. The Sabbath restriction was intended for people to simply observe and appreciate nature. In Fromm’s words:

The Sabbath symbolizes a state of complete harmony between [people] and nature and between [one person and another] …by not participating in the process of natural and social change [a person] is free … from the chains of time, although only for one day a week.

As Fromm discusses it, rituals are a form of symbolic expression. Just as a dream can symbolize the dreamer’s strivings and concerns, a religious ritual observance can symbolize a spiritual concept or an important relationship for an entire culture. The actions of the ritual are intended to evoke a feeling. For example, a handshake is a ritual that evokes a feeling of friendliness. Shabbat was intended to evoke feelings of awe and gratitude at the splendor of creation of which we are a part. Fromm explains the symbolic significance of the Sabbath is not only the need for people to take a rest after a period of work, the feeling of freedom from oppression and the feeling of bliss and gratitude at the gift of life. This feeling is achieved by not doing. Here are Fromm’s words:

[People] must leave nature untouched, not change it in any way, neither by building nor by destroying anything; even the smallest change made by [humans] in the natural process is a violation of “rest.” The Sabbath is the day of peace between [humans] and nature; work is any kind of disturbance of the [human]-nature equilibrium. [Even] lighting a match and pulling up a grass blade, while not requiring effort are symbols of human interference with the natural process, a breach of peace between [humans] and nature…. Just as a [person] must not interfere with or change the natural equilibrium [one] must refrain from changing the social order. That means not only [refraining from] doing business but also the avoidance … of transference of property from one domain to another.

For Jews the Sabbath represents a return to the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve were expelled from. This too is a symbol. Shabbat provides, according to the traditional understanding, a taste of life to come with the arrival of the Jewish messiah. You may remember that when Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, they were condemned to suffering. Adam was told that he and his descendants would have to toil to eke out a living, “by the sweat of the brow.” Shabbat was a reprieve from that toil, once a week. The Sabbath is thus a symbol of freedom as the version of the Commandment in Deuteronomy puts it. God’s “rest” after the 6 days of creation does not mean that God was tired but rather that once creation was complete, harmony was the result, as in the Exodus version. As God “rested,” or “ceased,” he let the universe be without further intervention, to allow for natural harmony. When Jews “rest,” and “cease,” on the Sabbath they also are in harmony with God’s creation. Just as the two references to the 4th Commandment refer alternatively to rest and freedom, both are central to the meaning of the Sabbath. As Fromm expresses it the Sabbath represents “the victory over time.”

The Sabbath as a carve out of time from the hustle and bustle of daily life was also crucial to the understanding of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel was known to non-Jews for his civil rights work and notably participation in the march on Selma. His most revered book was named The Sabbath. Heschel believed the Sabbath was a complement and counterbalance to building civilizations and to the material world we inhabit. Also like Fromm, Heschel considered the Sabbath as a ritual, not a custom. The Sabbath is the embodiment of “holiness in time” provided by what he called, “the architecture of time.” Shabbat preserves “inner freedom” and protects against the enslavement of the material world. As God rested on the seventh day, when Jews observe Shabbat, they “imitate” God and in that way make connection to what is sacred and divine. I quote Heschel: “The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of [humanity].” It is intended to be not only a rest from work-- related activity but also a respite from worries and stress. For example, those mourning the loss of a loved are encouraged to postpone their grief for the day. Shabbat is also intended to provide a taste of what life would be like with the arrival of the Jewish messiah or of the afterlife in heaven for eternity. “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.”

For Heschel, Shabbat is a reminder of our human place in existence. When we live in the “world of space” as he referred to it, we feel powerful, we make things happen. In the world of space we create or repair things, whether they be food, software, cars, works of art, furniture, clothing etc. In doing so we may lose our perspective in the sense that we feel more in control than we actually are. As we acquire more comforts and conveniences, we may come to delude ourselves that we have conquered time. I quote Heschel:

“To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.”

Heschel believed that the biggest challenge we face in our contemporary world is the loss of the sense of the sacred: “We have become desensitized to the natural beauty of the world and of life. We have lost touch with our sacred responsibility to become co-creators with the Divine in the establishment of a just and compassionate world.” Heschel regarded Shabbat as the means for Jews to reconnect to the sacredness of life. Having done so we can not avoid our responsibility to help preserve the world and its people. I believe this is the motivation that led Heschel to march on Selma with MLK.

Having given a Jewish understanding of Shabbat I would like to try to relate it to spiritual practice in general and to see if there may be take-aways for UUs. The first point I want to make is that it really should not matter at all what you believe or don’t about God. I think we all need to take deliberate steps to get in touch with the sacredness of life and the natural world. We seem to lose touch as we go about our daily tasks and routines. Many of us spend an enormous amount of time in front of screens each day, keeping us detached from nature. I hope you will agree we need ways to reconnect with that which is greater than ourselves and to let go of our desire to control things.

I believe that Buddhism and Judaism offer similar paths back to the sacred. What does Buddhist mediation have in common with Shabbat? I can think of several things. Both are deliberate “set- asides” from our daily routines. Just as with Shabbat, in meditation one makes a clear commitment to dedicate a period of time. Both recognize a sacred reality beyond our focus on ourselves and our routines. Both traditions involve being part of a congregation or a group. Both practices point to an eternity beyond our earthy lives. Both emphasize “being” over “doing.” Both talk about a state of bliss: The Buddhists call this state Nirvana and the Jews call it “the Garden of Eden.” Although there would be those in both traditions that would take issue with this comparison, that is how it seems to me.

If you are interested in trying your own version of Shabbat as a spiritual practice here are a few suggestions: You might consider starting out with a 3 or 4-hour period. The thinking is it will be difficult to last a whole day without doing your usual things like working, shopping, driving, listening to news, using cell phones, tablets and laptops.

Here are some questions to ask yourself if you are considering practicing a Shabbat: What would you like your Shabbat to be? What kind of experience are you hoping to have? Are you seeking a respite from work? Do you want to create family time? Are you seeking a spiritual experience? Will a special meal be part of your observance?

How long would you like it to last? How will you usher in its beginning? It will be important to mark the start with a particular ritual. Without a ritual it might be too easy for you to slip out of it. Among Jews, the woman of the house lights candles and says a blessing on Friday evening to mark the beginning. Might you light a chalice? Also it will be important to be mindful of how you mark the end of your Sabbath. What activities will you abstain from? For example, will you avoid screens? Will you avoid phone calls? Will you spend money or not? Will you use your car? What activities will you engage in to promote your personal concept of *Shabbat*? Will your Shabbatbe a weekly observance?

I believe that some of you have a daily or weekly practice that might fall under “Shabbat” in a broad sense. Perhaps you will be willing to share that during our discussion.

In closing, although I have focused primarily on the Jewish understanding of the Sabbath I hope I also inspired you to think about establishing a sanctuary in time that allows you to move into a spiritual experience. Shabbat is about being rather than doing and it is part of what gives our lives meaning. One does not have to be “religious” in a traditional sense to derive the benefit of some form of Shabbat. As we proceed through the month of services I hope you will be inspired to make a Shabbat of your own.