



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
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Shabbat Without Heaven

Parashat Ki Tisa contains the fourth mention of Shabbat within a span of six parshiyot. No other halachah in the Torah appears with such frequency in so short a stretch.

SHABBAT GRADUALLY TAKES SHAPE

The first mention of Shabbat appears in the desert, as we journey toward Har Sinai—at the encampment of Marah and again at Alush. These two references, taken together, form the Torah’s first sustained introduction of Shabbat observance. Before we arrive at Har Sinai, Shabbat has already begun to take shape along the journey.

The parsha of Yitro returns to Shabbat observance, presenting it as the mitzvah of Zachor, later reframed as Shamor on the second Luchot, and placed at the heart of the Aseret HaDibrot.

Subsequently, in Parshat Mishpatim, after an extended presentation of social and civil law, the Torah once again returns to Shabbat, embedding its laws within the fabric of

societal obligations. In Parshat Ki Tisa, Shabbat is mentioned for a fourth time.

SERENITY, FAMILY, COMMUNITY

In the desert encampments, Shabbat offered the chance to finally rest. Since leaving Egypt, our lives had been frenetic and unsettled, moving from place to place across an unforgiving landscape. First came the hurried flight from Egypt, then the crossing of the sea, followed by relentless travel. Shabbat allowed a release of tension and the return of calm to a people who had been living at full throttle for weeks on end.

In Yitro, within the Aseret HaDibrot, Shabbat is presented through the lens of family. The entire household—parents and children, servants and animals—comes to a halt together. Daily labor pauses, and the family regathers. For this reason, the mitzvah of Shabbat follows immediately after the commandment of kibbud av va’eim. Honoring parents strengthens the family structure; Shabbat observance then creates the time and space for that structure to be lived and experienced. It carves out family presence within an otherwise demanding workweek.

Shabbat in the early desert provided rest and serenity. Shabbat at Har Sinai promised renewed connection within the family.

In Mishpatim, a different angle of Shabbat emerges. The laws of Mishpatim provide the blueprint for building an ethical society.

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They lay out the laws of damage, theft, torts, and guardianship, and they describe the judicial system charged with enforcing them. They insist that we attend to the needs of society's most vulnerable—slaves, widows, orphans, and the impoverished—and they envision moral conduct as the foundation of a strong and enduring society.

However, societies require more than a moral foundation in order to flourish. They also need a shared narrative and a common story. For this reason, at the conclusion of Mishpatim, the Torah turns to the chagim, moments that commemorate our collective story of being chosen. Shabbat is included here as well, anchoring that shared narrative in the belief in a single Creator who fashioned the world and rested on the seventh day.

In Mishpatim, Shabbat is embedded within a social framework. It fosters strong communities alongside strong families. The halachot of Shabbat require that guests remain for the duration of Shabbat, creating space not only for extended family presence but also for hospitality and generosity.

Up to this point, Shabbat has been presented as a day oriented toward human need. It provides a twenty-four-hour pause from labor, time for family bonding, and the space necessary for communal gathering and connection.

Is that all there is to Shabbat?

REST AND RETREAT

About ten years ago, an Orthodox woman published an article in the New York Times describing the beauty of an observant Shabbat. She portrayed a day spent at home with teenage daughters, lingering in sleepwear, unhurried and unpressured. Shabbat created space to catch up on busy lives, to play board

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games, and—perhaps most appealingly—to unplug for twenty-four hours. It was a warm and lovingly drawn picture of family life and relationship-building.

The article was elegantly written and clearly valuable for its intended audience, most of whom were not Jewish. It argued for the importance of a weekly pause in a society addicted to work and trapped in an endless cycle of pressure. Charlie Kirk makes a similar case in his book *Stop, in the Name of God*, presenting Shabbat as a corrective to modern exhaustion.

SHABBAT WITHOUT HEAVEN

Yet reading that New York Times piece, I found myself asking: How did Shabbat lose its sense of transcendence?

Shabbat is also a day for Hashem—a day to suspend human mastery and remember Divine creation. It is a day to step back from the comforts and preoccupations of this world



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and to redirect time and attention toward larger spiritual pursuits. That dimension of Shabbat, its orientation toward Heaven rather than merely toward human well-being, was almost entirely absent from the portrait.

Ki Tisa restores this forgotten dimension of Shabbat. The Torah describes Shabbat as 'שבת שבתון קודש לה'. Rashi comments, 'שמי, רת קדושה לשמי ובמצותי', emphasizing that the day is to be dedicated to Hashem and to His mitzvot.

On this day, tefillah should be more deliberate and focused. Talmud Torah, often neglected during the week, should move to the center. Speech should be guarded more carefully. Shabbat is meant to feel otherworldly, marked by sanctity. To achieve that sense of otherworldliness, we must step back from immersion in this world.

Shabbat, however, is not meant to negate the physical. It is a balance. The mitzvah of oneg requires eating and enjoyment. Unlike Yom Tov, which is defined as a day of simcha, Shabbat is defined as a day of oneg. On Yom Tov, a person who experiences simcha through fasting may do so; on Shabbat, fasting is forbidden. Yet even the physical pleasure of Shabbat must be held in tension with transcendence, not allowed to eclipse it.

This is the added feature of Shabbat articulated in Ki Tisa. Shabbat is not only a day

of rest, family, and community. It is a day of transcendence—לשמי.

MODERN SHABBAT

Has modern Shabbat drifted too far from transcendence? Have we emphasized oneg at the expense of לשמי?

That concern is not abstract. Modern Shabbat has become remarkably comfortable. Our ancestors experienced Shabbat with limited light and heat. Much of their food—certainly the daytime meal—was cold. Without eiruvim, movement was restricted to a narrow physical space. Today, mechanization has transformed that experience. Shabbat clocks, heating systems, and air conditioning have rendered Shabbat nearly indistinguishable from the weekday. The sharp shutdown of human activity has largely faded.

As a result, it has become harder to experience 'שבת לה' in the way earlier generations once did. With the rise of self-driving vehicles, new questions will inevitably be raised about their use on Shabbat. If halachic travel on Shabbat ever becomes possible, the final barrier separating Shabbat from the weekday will have fallen.

Shabbat has become emulsified. Ki Tisa urges us to restore some of the balance. To use Shabbat for rest and for unplugging from a frantic, wired, and constantly connected world. To build deep and lasting family experiences, so necessary in an age of pressure, anxiety, and insecurity. To fashion robust communities shaped by shared values and mitzvot. But also to make Shabbat genuinely different, by reclaiming it as a more spiritually centered experience.

Many of the decisions we face—or are already in the process of making—about Shabbat will turn on this tension. Particular activities and experiences may be halachically

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permissible. Yet at what point do they further emulsify Shabbat by layering on additional pleasure and convenience? Can too much oneg shabbat deplete and dilute shabbat of its purpose? Will Shabbat become too enjoyable and too worldly?

What is lost if Shabbat is stripped of its remaining transcendence? Will we lose Shabbat La'Hashem? ■



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