

On Being a Jew, Part 2

We have observed that the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) is central to the lifestyle of an observant Jew. The Law, along with supporting texts such as the Torah, the Mishna, and other rabbinic opinions, forms the Halakah. This term refers to “the way” a Jew is expected to conduct themselves in all areas of life, including worship, business, and relationships. For the Jew, Halakah is an essential guide for living that influences every part of their life. We will continue our study by examining how Halakah applies to the life of an observant Jew.

Holiness

Regarding the Jew, what exactly does the term “holy person” mean? We Christians tend to interpret “holy” as stemming from asceticism and pious conduct, with the holy person distancing themselves from pleasures in life. However, this is not an accurate way to view holiness. The Jews reject this definition and disapprove of such a perspective in Judaism. To quote Rabbi Donin,

“The Jewish definition of holiness may be put in these three terms: Holiness does not lie in the ascetic, saintly withdrawal from life, or in excessive denial to oneself of all human pleasures, or in the repression of all human drives. It consists, rather, of full participation in the stream of human community life, sharing the joyous as well as the sorrowful experiences which life has to offer, denying oneself no legitimate pleasures, but at the same time so developing one’s sense of discernment as to be able to distinguish and choose the right from the wrong, the true from the false, the good from the bad, the sacred from the profane, the pure from the impure, and the clean from the unclean. The greater the sense of ethical-moral-religious discrimination, the greater the holiness of the individual.” (pg 36)

Rabbi Donin goes on to further define holiness for the Jew as *being removed from idolatry, being removed from secularism, being removed from the vulgar and the profane.*

Holiness is thus not a system of piety, as seen in the monastic system of Christianity, where initiates withdraw from life and adopt a lifestyle

characterized by the denial of all pleasures. The Christian and the Jew are called to take the truth to the rest of the world. That cannot be done from the cloistered halls of a monastery.

The goal of holiness, of course, is to sanctify the individual Jew (and Christian) to create a more sanctified society. This faced some resistance from the Jewish community. God foresaw this and spoke to Moses about it.

Deuteronomy 30:11 “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹⁴ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Basically, God is telling them that they can do it if they have the desire, the will, and the faith. Man’s tendency, however, is to think and act like those around them and follow the cultural “norms.” Thus, it behoves us to choose our friends and associations wisely, because culture can corrupt us.

Kindness

Zechariah 7:9 Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another...”

At the heart of Jewish relationships is the idea of kindness. It is found in the Hebrew word *hesed*. They believe that the overall objective of life is to perfect human relationships to create a better society. The idea is well captured in a statement by the great sage Hillel: “What is hateful in you, do not do to others.”

Sound familiar?

Mathew 7:12 So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Luke 6:31 And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

We call it the “Golden Rule.” They call it *hesed* — kindness.

Matthew 22:37 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Leviticus 19:18 ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The observant Jew strives to be three things: merciful, modest, and perform good works, summed up in the idea of having a “good heart.” Of course, we know that the Law was a works system through which the observant Jew enjoyed positive feedback in the form of blessings for being “merciful, modest, and performing good works.” Failure to conduct oneself in such a manner would result in discipline, at a minimum, the withdrawal of blessings. Thus, it was designed with the objective of *hesed* in mind.

Some examples of *hesed*:

- To be protective of a friend’s assets as one’s own.
- To extend lodging and food to those in need.
- Visit the sick.
- Comfort those who are in mourning.
- Provide funds for orphaned girls to marry.
- Provide for the return of lost property to its rightful owner.
- Protect another’s money and property from loss or damage.
- If someone’s life is in danger, you are obligated to respond however possible.
- Likewise, if you become aware of a conspiracy against someone else, you should take action to expose the threat.
- Charity for the poor—providing food and clothing for both Gentiles and Israel.
- The poor of one’s household take priority over those outside.
- There is a significant value placed on *hesed*, about a tenth of what is earned in a year.
- If there’s nothing to give to the poor, then comfort him with kind words.

- **Deuteronomy 15:10** You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.
- It is forbidden to raise your voice at a poor person, for his heart is already broken and his spirit crushed.

There are eight degrees of *hesed* in giving.

1. The greatest form of charity is helping someone stay out of poverty.
2. The second highest is when someone gives without knowing who the recipient is, and the recipient is unaware of who the gift comes from.
3. The third highest occurs when both the giver and the recipient are aware of each other.
4. When the recipient knows the source, but the giver does not know who is receiving the gift.
5. When one gives alms directly to the poor without being asked.
6. When one gives directly to the poor after being asked.
7. When one gives less than he should but does so cheerfully.
8. When one goes charity grudgingly.

Hesed also includes:

- The idea of paying debts on time.
- It is prohibited to demand repayment of a loan when the borrower cannot pay.
- Procrastinating on repayment is not allowed when the borrower has the funds.
- Gossip is forbidden.
- It is also forbidden to entertain gossip from another.
- Idlers, insincere flatterers, liars, and those with wicked tongues are unworthy of the Divine Presence.
- Revenge and carrying a grudge are forbidden.
- It is forbidden to harm others with words or to call someone a derogatory nickname, even if the person is no longer offended by it.
- One should not speak one way and think differently.
- Your “yes” should be a “yes” and your “no” should be a “no.”
- Pay laborers their wages at the agreed time.
- Treat all animals with kindness and avoid actions that cause them pain or distress.
- “Love your neighbor as yourself...” (Leviticus 19:34)

- It is forbidden to strike someone unless he is engaged in attacking another.
- A person should learn to follow the middle ground in all things to develop balanced qualities in all personal traits. Such a person is called wise.
- Do only things that are healthy. Thus, avoid excessive drinking, smoking, drugs, or foods that may be harmful to health.
- Hate evil as much as loving justice, and hate cruelty as much as loving mercy. It is not enough to avoid evil or cruelty; one must also actively seek justice and mercy (Psalm 34:15; 37:27).

This list is simply a “sketch” of what is called for under the banner of *hesed*, but it offers a picture of what is expected of the Jew under *Halakah*. If these rules—and many others not listed—are practiced as required, the world would be a much better place to live. And that is what God was showing the Jew (and us), that we have moral and social obligations that were established by God, the practice of which would improve life for us.

The Sabbath

Exodus 20:8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

“Sabbath” is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *Shabbat*. The root word means to cause to cease or put an end. In the context of the Exodus passage above, it refers to the obligation of Jews to observe a day of rest every seven days. That day is the seventh day of the week, which in the Jewish calendar is Saturday. Since their observance of a day begins at sundown and ends at the next nightfall, translating that to our Roman calendar, which counts days from midnight to midnight, the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at nightfall on Saturday.

Note that I used the terms “sundown” and “nightfall.” Sundown is when the last sliver of the sun dips below the horizon. Nightfall is later when the

sky is so darkened that you can see the stars. There is a period of time between the two, and note that that period of time, on both the start and end of the Sabbath, is captured as part of it.

Many see the Sabbath simply as a day of rest, originating from the creation story where God “rested” on the seventh day after six days of “labor” creating the world. Of course, God does not need to rest, but man and animals do. It is meant to be a sacred day that stands apart from all others. Although it falls at the end of the week, it actually serves as the point around which the week revolves and is set aside from the rest. It is not just a day to withdraw from work or take a vacation. Instead, it is a day filled with deep spiritual meaning, during which the observant Jew is to completely disengage from the demands of everyday life. Its purpose is not only to refresh the body but also to rejuvenate the soul.

Rabbi Donin believes the Sabbath is so crucial that when it is neglected, the Torah and its teachings quickly fade away, diminishing the day's significance and purpose. He states that “within a generation or two the discarding of the Sabbath causes a knowledge of Judaism to deteriorate, which leads to the discarding of still other religious observances, and eventually the dissipation even of the moral values of Judaism.”

The Sabbath Remembers the Creation

What does it mean when it says God rested? By stopping all labor, we recognize the existence of the Creator and follow His divine example. However, “resting” on the Sabbath is not the same as “relaxing.” By not “working,” we show that the world does not belong to us. Any work, even the smallest, that involves physical creative acts and demonstrates mastery over the world, counts as work. The world is not ours. The smallest act by a person on the Sabbath is a denial that God is the Creator and Master.

The Sabbath Remembers the Exodus

Slaves in Egypt didn’t get a day of rest. The Sabbath symbolizes the freedom the Jews gained after God freed them. Therefore, the Sabbath is a weekly divine protest against slavery. It’s important to recognize that even “free” men can be slaves to their own desires and needs. There are deadlines to meet and meetings to prepare for, but we can be slaves to more than just our jobs. We can be slaves to life itself—places to go,

people to see, things to fix around the house, and football games to watch. We can simply become enslaved to life.

But during the Sabbath, for 24 hours, a Jew is free to be himself, without taskmasters. Observing the Sabbath is a refreshing pause, a new and different spirit that Jews call *neshama y tairah*. It represents a new attitude, a new state of mind.

A Jewish scholar, Shlomo Joseph Zevin, suggests there are two types of rest. One is rest from exhaustion caused by fatigue. This type of rest only allows a person to keep working and does not bring joy to the soul.

The second type of rest involves completing a project or reaching a goal. This rest occurs after finishing work, not during it. Here, a person relaxes and enjoys a sense of accomplishment that brings joy to the soul. The Sabbath rest is meant to embody this second kind of rest.

Exodus 20:9 Six days you shall labor, and do **all** your work,

Imagine the sense of rest one feels after completing **all their work**. The Sabbath observer is invited to experience this feeling. The Sabbath lifts the Jew out of the drudgery and toil of the other six days.

Observing the Sabbath is essential for preserving Jewish culture, especially for those in the Diaspora. Failing to do so could weaken their identity and faith.

Preparing for the Sabbath

To properly honor the Sabbath and appreciate its beauty and significance, it is essential to prepare for it properly.

- The males of the house should plan to arrive home from work early enough to shave, take a bath, and get dressed before sunset.
- The mother should ensure the children are washed and dressed in clean, fresh clothes.
- The dining table should be Set in advance with the household's finest dishes and tableware.
- Dinner is prepared in advance, but the menu may be a bit more elaborate than that served at a daily meal. In a poor home, meat and

fish would be reserved for Sabbath meals. Even in homes where meat and fish are common, they might be prepared in special ways for a more festive presentation than normal. There might also be more courses.

- The house would have been thoroughly cleaned or at least tidied up.
- Every family member will have taken care of any pressing chores before the Sabbath.

The Sabbath Eve

Sabbath candles.

- Lighting the Sabbath candles formerly ushers in the Sabbath for members of the household.
- It is the wife's obligation to fulfill this religious duty.
- If two or more married women are in the household, it is customary for each to light Sabbath candles separately.
- If a man lives alone, it is customary for him to light the candles.
- The sabbath candles are lit approximately 20 minutes before sundown. Once sundown passes, the candles can no longer be lit.
- It is permissible for the candles to be lit somewhat earlier. This is common in the summer months when the days are longer.
- The minimum number of candles lit is two. This is in remembrance of the two forms of the fourth commandment. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you" (Deuteronomy 5:12).
- One is free to light more than two candles, and it is often the custom to do so, such as for each child.
- White candles are preferred, but if unavailable, other colors may be used. One requirement is that they be large enough to burn through the Sabbath meal and into the night.
- Proper ritual calls for the candles to be lit first and the benediction recited after. The procedure is to close one's eyes or cover them with the hands while the benediction is recited.
- The Sabbath candles are blessed. "Blessed are thou, Lord God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights."
- After the candles are lit, it is customary to greet everyone with "Shabbat Shalom."

- The candles are lit on the table where the meal will be served. If that is impractical, then at least in the same room. This requirement can be waived if it is not practical to do so.

The Sabbath Table

The table prepared for the Sabbath should include, besides the candles, the following special items arranged at the head of the table:

1. Two unsliced Sabbath loaves, known as *hallal*, are covered by a napkin or cloth. Specially decorated *hallal* covers are often used.
2. A Kiddush Cup for wine

The Evening Services

- The Friday evening service is known as “Welcoming the Sabbath” (*Kabbalat Shabbat*). It generally begins in the synagogues shortly after the Sabbath candles are lit at home.
- Women are not obliged to attend these services, but are excused because of their preparations for the Sabbath. Many do attend.
- Male members are encouraged to attend services. The services usually last 40-50 minutes and provide an inspiring atmosphere to usher in the Sabbath.
- For women, it is the lighting of the candles which marks the ushering in of the Sabbath. For men, it is the reciting of a special Psalm.
- Illness, extremely foul weather, or great distance from a synagogue are legitimate excuses for not attending services. In such instances, Sabbath prayers are said at home.
- Prayers said at home are said after the lighting of the candles.
- A tradition of late Friday services has become common in the US, generally scheduled at 8:30. These services must not serve as a substitute for the traditional sundown service.

Home Ritual and Kiddush

- Upon returning home from synagogue or upon concluding the prayers at home, it is customary for the family to gather around the Sabbath table and sing.
- The role of the father is as the spiritual guide for the children. It is then customary for the father to bless his children. The ritual is simple. The father places both hands on the child's head, or one hand on each of two children, and recites a short blessing.
- To a son: “May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.”

- To a daughter: “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.”
- Followed by: “May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord favor you and grant you peace.”
- The Sabbath *Kiddush* (Sanctification) is then recited by the male head of the household while holding a full cup of wine.
- The wine is the traditional symbol of joy and festive occasions. If no wine is available, blessings for the bread may substitute for the wine.
- Only kosher wine made from grapes may be used. Kosher means food or drink that satisfies the requirements of Jewish law.
- While the *Kiddush* is being recited, the *hallot* (two loaves) are kept covered with the *hallah* cover.
- After the recitation of the *Kiddush*, those present respond with “amen.” The one reciting then drinks of the wine and passes it to the others.
- Everyone then ritually washes for the meal. Water is poured over each hand and dried, followed by a benediction, “Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning the washing of hands.”
- This is immediately followed by sitting down at the table. The head of the house uncovers the two *hallot*, lifting them and reciting, “Blessed art Thou, Lord God, King of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth.”
- The *hallot* on the table must be whole and represent the double portion of manna in the wilderness.
- The *hallot* is then cut into slices and distributed to those at the table.
- The Sabbath meal should be a festive one. What is served depends on the family's preferences.
- It is customary to sing between the courses of the meal.
- It is obligatory to give thanks to God after having eaten. “And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you” (Deuteronomy 8:10).
- It is religiously praiseworthy to do all these things and should be a delight to the soul, as long as the things done do not constitute a violation of the Sabbath. (Details later.)

Leisure Activities for the Sabbath

One major purpose of the Sabbath is to provide an opportunity to study the Torah. A Jewish community that gives the Sabbath only token observance becomes a community that is also Jewishly ignorant.

The Sabbath presents opportunities:

- To socialize with family, friends, and neighbors
- Attend lectures, forums, and study groups organized at the synagogue
- Enjoy home games with the family or neighbors.
- Enjoy an afternoon siesta.
- Get involved with community activities.

The Sabbath Day

Morning Services

- Morning services at the synagogue are the most elaborate and longest of the week.
- It is long because of readings from the Torah, more prayers and singing, and messages from the rabbi
- In the US, most services begin between 8:30 and 9 AM and last about 3.5 hours until noon.

Three Sabbath Meals

Three meals are eaten on the Sabbath, counting one meal consumed on Friday evening. No meal is served for breakfast on Saturday before the morning prayers, except perhaps some juice or a cup of tea or coffee.

The second main meal is eaten around noon, and the third meal, known as *seudah shelishit*, is eaten in the very late afternoon. This meal is simple, and usually includes bread or *hallah*.

Ending the Day

The day ends at nightfall when the stars come out. The time between sundown and nightfall is traditionally neither day nor night, and is called “between the suns” in Hebrew. Since its status is doubtful, it is automatically attached to the Sabbath. This same period on Friday is also considered part of the Sabbath.

Havdalah

Just as the *Kiddush* is required for Friday evening, so the recitation of *Havdalah* is required to mark the conclusion of the Sabbath.

- *Havdalah* means division or separation, and may be said any time after nightfall. In the synagogue, it follows the brief evening service. It is also said at home for the benefit of those who were unable to attend synagogue.
- *Havdalah* is said over a cup of wine, with additional blessings recited for fragrant spices and light.
- If wine is unavailable, other beverages such as beer or liqueurs may be substituted.
- The *Havdalah* candle is a special candle with two braided wicks, available in various sizes and colors. Regular candles can be used if they can be burned in such a manner that their flames come together.
- The candle is given to one member of the household to hold, usually a child, while the prayers are recited.
- After filling the cup with wine to the brim and lighting the *Havdalah* candle, the head of the household raises the cup of wine and says a blessing.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who makes a division between the sacred and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the other nations, between the seventh day and the six working days. Blessed art Thou, Lord, who makes a distinction between the sacred and the secular.

This formerly concludes the Sabbath.

A Special Day

As you can see, the Sabbath is a very special day in the life of a Jew. It is loaded with meaning for them and represents a reminder of their special relationship with the Lord. For Jews, especially for those in the Diaspora, it is a significant connection with their faith and a reminder of the Lord's call for righteousness in them. It is easy to see that without the Sabbath, the Jew could easily drift from their faith and eventually their ethnic heritage as they became more and more assimilated into the local culture. The Sabbath remains as a connection with who they are and their special relationship with the Lord.