



## An Ecological Message in Shabbat

by Jonathan Neril<sup>1</sup>, Parashat Vayakhel

*The Parsha of Vayakhel is dedicated in memory of Dr. Samuel Nieder, may his memory be a blessing, by Bob and Barbara Nieder.*

Our Torah portion this week, *Vayakhel*, begins with Moses (*Moshe*) assembling the entire community of Israel and commanding them in the mitzvah that many say is the essence of Judaism: "These are the things that the Lord commanded to make. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the Lord..."<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Norman Lamm, former chancellor of Yeshiva University, writes:

*Perhaps the most powerful expression of the Bible's concern for man's respect for the integrity of nature as the possession of its Creator, rather than his own preserve, is the Sabbath...The six workdays were given to man in which to carry out the commission to "subdue" the world, to impose on nature his creative talents. But the seventh day is a Sabbath; man must cease his creative interference in the natural order (the Halakha's definition of melakha or work), and by this act of renunciation demonstrate his awareness that the earth is the Lord's and that man therefore bears a moral responsibility to give an accounting to its Owner for how he has disposed of it during the days he "subdued" it....A new insight into Jewish eschatology: not a progressively growing technology and rising GNP, but a peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence between man and his environment.<sup>3</sup>*

According to Jewish tradition, the very way we relate to the world is embodied by how we act on the Sabbath, *Shabbat*. The ways in which we act, and don't act, define how we understand our place in the world vis-a-vis our Creator. One example of this is found in our relationship with the earth's creatures. The Torah teaches that the *mitzvah* (Divine mandate) of Shabbat includes an instruction to allow our animals to experience rest and contentment on the seventh day: "Six days shall you do your tasks, and on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may be content."<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a noted 19th century sage and Torah commentator, comments on this verse: "The

<sup>1</sup> Some of the text and ideas in this essay were taken with permission from an article by Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen, the Jerusalem-based director of the e-mail Torah study program, "Hazon - Our Universal Vision."

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 35:1-3 (all translations by Judaica Press, available online at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm) >)

<sup>3</sup> "Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology" in *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*, third augmented edn., Ktav Publishing House: Jersey City, New Jersey, 2006, p. 163-4.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 23:12

Sabbath is a school for teaching the recognition of every other creature beside oneself as being equally a child and object of the same Creator; and this freeing of all creatures from the mastery of the human being is one of the objectives of the Sabbath.”<sup>5</sup>

But is not only living creatures that are freed from human control on Shabbat; it is the whole world. On Shabbat we stop working, stop traveling, stop creating. The Ten Commandments state about Shabbat that “You shall not perform any kind of *melacha*.”<sup>6</sup> In Biblical Hebrew, the term *melacha* refers to skilled or creative work. Rabbi Hirsch, in his commentary on this verse, explains that physical exertion is not one of the basic criteria of the word *melacha*. According to the Torah, if one lifts a heavy piece of furniture on Shabbat, he or she is not guilty of violating the prohibition against *melacha*, even though such an activity is not necessarily in keeping with the spirit of Shabbat. If, however, one plucks a leaf off a tree or plants a seed in the earth, then he or she has violated the mandate not to perform *melacha* on Shabbat. A study of *Halacha* (Torah law) reveals that the definition of work on Shabbat is an activity in which a person transforms anything in the environment for his or her own use, such as for food, clothing, or shelter.<sup>7</sup> Observance of Shabbat – taking a day each week on which we do not transform nature at all – has the potential to alter a person's feeling of holding creative and technological control over nature.

Rabbi Hirsch continues in his explanation of Shabbat by exclaiming “Sabbath in our time! To cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hurry-scurry of our time! To close the exchanges, the workshops and factories, to stop all railway services—great heavens! How would it be possible? The pulse of life would stop beating and the world perish! The world perish? On the contrary, it would be saved.”<sup>8</sup>

What is it about the observance of Shabbat that causes Rabbi Hirsch to see the day as a panacea for the world's problems? He explains that Shabbat was given to the Jewish people “in order that [they] should not grow overweening in [their] dominion” of G-d's creation... Jews “should refrain on this day from exercising [their] human sway over the things of [the] earth, should not place his hand upon any object for the purpose of human dominion, that is, to employ it for any human end; he must, as it were, return the borrowed world to its Divine Owner in order to realize that it is but lent to him.”<sup>9</sup> He continues, “On Shabbat you strip yourself of your glorious mastery over the matter of the world, and lay yourself and your world acknowledging at the feet of the Eternal your G-d.”<sup>10</sup>

In this vein, Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky, currently Rosh Yeshiva of Jerusalem's Yeshivat Darche Noam, comments that “During the six days of the week, G-d's presence takes on the dimension of ‘tzimtzum,’ a limited manifestation of power, as He allows and even encourages man to exert human control over the world. This creative domination of the natural world, in all its dimensions, creates barriers between man and G-d. But every week, the Jewish people ‘let go,’ replicating G-d's ‘tzimtzum’ by relinquishing their

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<sup>5</sup> Commentary to Exodus 32:12 in *The Pentateuch, Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 2, rendered into English by Isaac Levy, Judaica Press: Gateshead, England, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:10

<sup>7</sup> There are 39 categories of creative work forbidden on Shabbat. Some examples are cooking and other constructive uses of fire, sewing, and building.

<sup>8</sup> “The Jewish Sabbath,” in *Judaism Eternal* 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ben Uziel* 30

<sup>10</sup> *The Pentateuch*, op. Cit. 5, Commentary to Exodus 20:10.

human control over the world. This enables man to forge an intimate connection with the Creator...Shabbat is the time man is challenged to cease the activities that represent his control of the world, activities which can lead man to forget the world has a Creator and a purpose...A successful Shabbat allows one to have the correct perspective of man's role in G-d's world, maintaining an intimate connection with G-d even while involved in the daily activities that might otherwise build barriers."<sup>11</sup>

This message of Shabbat is sorely needed in Western society today. As a *New York Times Magazine* article commented about lifestyles in the United States, "A nation of remarkably productive, often well-paid workers... are becoming increasingly reluctant to pause from their labors and refresh their souls."<sup>12</sup> The mentality and lifestyle of doing without regard to being, of transforming the natural world without taking time to reflect on the value of that transformation, is taking an environmental toll on the planet. The society that rests and reflects the least is the same society that extracts and consumes the most. This mastery of the earth without sufficient contemplation of its consequences has produced ecological destruction on the local, regional, and global level. Air pollution. Species loss. Climate change. These are problems not of the environment, but of a society bent on doing and producing seven days a week. On Shabbat, we are to walk on the earth without asserting our mastery over the earth, in order to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Creator. In this way, we will remember that we are only the custodians of the earth with the responsibility "to work it and to guard it."<sup>13</sup>

### Suggested Action Items

- 1) Celebrate Shabbat with clothes made of more environmentally-friendly materials, like organic cotton or wool, hemp, or recycled polyester. This could help remind you on Shabbat of a balanced relationship with the natural world.
- 2) On Friday, before Shabbat, unplug electric appliances that will not be left on during Shabbat: wireless routers, microwaves, stereos, etc. During the week, get in the habit of only plugging in electrical appliances when you are using them, and unplug them when you stop using them. To read more on the electricity used even when appliances are on standby, see: <http://www.eere.energy.gov/buildings/info/documents/pdfs/26468.pdf> and [http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2001/02/09\\_energ.html](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2001/02/09_energ.html)
- 3) On Shabbat, think about how you live in the natural world—as a master and consumer, steward and guardian. What do you like about your relationship to the natural world?

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<sup>11</sup> "Stop and Grow," *Darce Noam Newsletter*, Spring 5765

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, "Vacation: All I Never Wanted," Walter Kirn, August 5, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 2:15

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