

To Keep and to be Kept

Ezra G.

Better Together

Zinz Essay

March 7, 2018

To Keep and to be Kept

Ahad Ha'am once said "More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." He meant that by observing all of God's commandments related to Shabbat, the Jews have been able to survive as a people. The fourth commandment tells us to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy..." (Exodus 20:8-11) and to "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy..." (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). To "Remember" Shabbat, we remember its place in the creation of the world. To observe Shabbat, we make the mitzvot part of our weekly lives. Shabbat unites Jews no matter where we live or how we observe it. My senior buddy from the Better Together program talked to me about this and helped me understand the importance of the fourth commandment by telling me his own story.

Mr. Apelberg was trapped in Poland during World War II. As his family tried to escape from the Nazis, they did everything they could to observe Shabbat as much as possible. Mr. Apelberg described his life before the war in a small village and going to the synagogue there. Even though they were poor, they were able to celebrate Shabbat together by praying, singing, and preparing the best food they had. He explained that Shabbat, for them, was a way of disconnection from the outside world and material things. He saw Shabbat as a holy and inspiring day that kept the Jewish people alive and united because they observed it together. Shabbat gave them, he said, a kind of elevation of spirit. Mr. Apelberg told me that this was why, even during his worst times in Nazi-controlled areas in Poland and Kazakhstan during the war, he and his family managed to keep Shabbat.

"Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to

observe the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15). By doing everything he could to observe Shabbat in the middle of the Holocaust, Mr. Apelberg was able to continue Jewish traditions that were meaningful to him. He and his family were able to celebrate the fact that although the Jews were once slaves in Egypt, and although they were suffering in Nazi Germany, they were really free people because only free people have a free will to observe Shabbat.

This commandment is important to Jews today because it shows that being Jewish is all about observing Jewish traditions. “Remember” Shabbat, that God created six days of work and one day of rest, since when He was creating the world, He rested on the seventh day of creation. We rest, just like He did. However, in Devarim, the Fourth Commandment says to “observe” that Jews were once slaves in Egypt who did not have free will or any hope. We rest on Shabbat because God made it possible for us.

Jews observe Shabbat because they are told to, but that’s not all. Jews observe Shabbat because sometimes observing Shabbat helps us in ways we would not think of. Some Jews observe Shabbat by not using phones, watches, radios, or televisions. Some Jews do not cook, bake, or use fire. Most Jews will rest. Even though these Jews might be doing this as part of observing Shabbat, some of the benefits can really help a person. By not having a clock, a person is deprived of knowing the time at a certain point in the day. Although this may be infuriating, not knowing the time will allow a person to not be aggravated about being late to somewhere and rushing, when to do certain chores throughout the day, when to eat, and when to go to sleep. Not knowing the time can really be a liberation for people. As the Torah tells Jews to not light a flame on Shabbat, some people take this literally, and other do not. For the Jews who do not take this literally, they may think that this means to not fight or argue with others on Shabbat, as that

makes people raging with fire. Jews who try not to fight or argue on Shabbat are free of the stress of being mad at others, since Shabbat is a time of quiet and peace.

I believe that observing Shabbat really makes a person better. Shabbat literally translated means to “cease” or “to stop.” To stop our work and hardships. Shabbat is a time for people to stop and think about the past and following weeks in their lives. It is a time for reflection and patience. Shabbat is a part of the week where we rest and try to do good. Shabbat is a day of enjoyment and relaxation. It is really taking a break from the normal responsibilities.

Shabbat is a day to slow down and spend time with our families, friends, and community. On Shabbat we go to shul to thank God and pray. We also go for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, a time of celebration for our family and friends of children becoming adults in the eyes of the Jewish people.

Mr. Apelberg taught me that Shabbat was a way of disconnection from the outside world. He told me that even though his community was poor, they still celebrated Shabbat. That they prayed, with joy and with sadness. Mr. Apelberg told me how Shabbat is a uniting tradition that allows us to express ourselves. It gives us an elevation of spirit. He feels that Shabbat gains us a personal and public level. We gain disconnection from the environment and observing Shabbat connects all Jews in the community together, just like in the Torah. The observance of Shabbat is its own reward, like virtue. It is worthwhile, not because it makes you better than everyone else, or a better worker, but because it makes us a better human being.

Works Cited Page

MJL Staff. "Why Observe Shabbat?" *My Jewish Learning*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999,

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/observing-shabbat/>. Accessed 2 March 2018.

(quote "more than the jews have kept shabbat, shabbat has kept the jews.")

Deuteronomy 5:11-15

Exodus 20:7-10