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Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 11: Shabbat

The concept of a day of rest—the Sabbath, called *Shabbat* in Hebrew--may well be the greatest gift the Torah bestowed upon the Jewish people and the world at large. In an oft-quoted reflection on the tradition of the Sabbath, the renowned essayist Ahad Ha'am wrote: "More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." Throughout history, observance of the laws and customs of Sabbath has been a prime indicator of traditional Jewish identity.

The institution of a weekly day of rest derives from several biblical passages, including the creation narrative and the Ten Commandments:

"The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that God had been doing, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had done."
(Genesis 2:1-3)

'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord, your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and God rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.'
(Exodus 20:8-11)

These biblical verses provide the theological and practical framework of the day of rest. Jews are bidden to rest on the Sabbath because God rested on the seventh day *and* because God freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Free people may refrain from work on the Sabbath, a luxury not afforded to slaves who are subject to their master's commands and schedule. Having been redeemed from servitude, the truly free human being becomes a servant of God and thereby obeys the divine command to keep the Sabbath.

Faithful observance of the Sabbath laws assumed a unique role in Biblical Israel and among observant Jews thereafter. Specific mention is made in the Torah of labors prohibited on Shabbat—planting, harvesting, kindling a fire, gathering food or wood. The sages of the rabbinic tradition expanded this list by deriving thirty-nine *melachot*—types of labor--associated with the preparation and construction of the portable tabernacle of Israelite worship. These *melachot* may be grouped into two broad categories—acts of exploiting nature and acts of creating or improving upon matter. Any work that involves even the most minute form of creating or improving an object is prohibited on Shabbat according to traditional Jewish law. This clarifies why Shabbat-observant Jews, to this very day, adhere to Sabbath restrictions that seem to bear little relation to contemporary explanations of what constitutes work.

The approximately 25-hour Jewish Sabbath begins just before sunset on Friday evening with the lighting of the candles and continues through Saturday evening when three stars appear in the sky. The Friday evening synagogue service is often held at dusk and worshipers welcome the Sabbath with a series of Psalms, hymns, and prayers to celebrate this special day of rest. The Saturday morning service in the synagogue features the public reading of a weekly Scriptural portion from the Torah and a passage from the Prophets,¹ a sermon or discussion based on the Scriptural portion, and additional prayers to enhance the celebration of Shabbat. Traditional Saturday morning services can last for two or three hours. Some worshipers return to synagogue later in the day for a brief Shabbat afternoon service and closing prayers to mark the conclusion of the Sabbath.

While synagogue rituals are a key component of Sabbath observance, Jewish tradition places special emphasis on the positive, joyful aspects of Shabbat in the home. Shabbat home rituals on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon—meals with special foods, family blessings, prayers over wine and loaves of bread of braided egg twist known as *challah*, table songs, and Grace After Meals--serve to reinforce bonds with family and friends and enhance the Sabbath experience. Sabbath rest and renewal are nourished by other time-honored Shabbat activities—reading, taking a nap, strolling through the neighborhood, playing games with friends and family, enjoying the outdoors, and appreciating moments of peace and quiet that nurture the mind, body, and spirit. On Saturday evening, Jewish people conclude the Shabbat and begin the new week with a beloved ceremony called *havdalah* (separation) with its symbols of a cup of wine, a braided candle, and fragrant spices. As Jews bid farewell to the day of rest, they hope that its sweetness will linger throughout the week.

Christians may note diverse patterns of Sabbath observance among their Jewish friends and neighbors. While many Jews celebrate the Sabbath in abbreviated fashion on Friday evening with a special dinner and selected rituals such as lighting Sabbath candles and eating *challah*, traditional Jews keep the detailed regulations of Shabbat “do’s” and “don’ts” for a full twenty-five hours. Chaplains in health care institutions and similar settings would do well to familiarize themselves with the laws and customs of Shabbat in order to better serve Jewish patients and staff members for whom Shabbat observance is an integral part of their religious identity.

We close this overview of the Jewish Sabbath with the words of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, an acclaimed 20th century theologian whose poetic writing is an enduring

¹ *Nevi'im*, Prophets, is the second of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible.

reminder of the gift of Shabbat. For Rabbi Heschel, the Sabbath is an island in time, a precious glimpse of the world to come that helps us to transcend the existential loneliness of a broken world. Here is an excerpt from Rabbi Heschel's classic work, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*:

“Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals...The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

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