

## The Ten Commandments 4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy

Remember the sabbath day,  
to keep it holy.  
Six days you shall labor,  
and do all your work;  
but the seventh day is a sabbath  
to the Lord your God;  
in it you shall not do any work,  
you, or your son, or your daughter,  
your manservant, or your maidservant,  
or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates;  
for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea,  
and all that is in them,  
and rested the seventh day;  
therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day  
and hallowed it

Genesis 20:8-11 (RSV)

### Topics

(Questions and topics from chapter 4 in **Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves**. Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999, and chapter 4 in **Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments? : A Fresh Look at God's Laws of Love & Changing Perspectives**. John H. Timmerman. Augsburg Fortress. 1997.)

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### 1. The Fourth Commandment

#### Exodus Version

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your

son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it

- Exodus 20:8-11 (RSV)

## Deuteronomy Version

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God, you shall not do any work -- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NRSV)

## The Structure of the Commandment

- 1. *command*:
  - remember
  - keep holy
- 2. *details*:
  - acknowledgement of six legitimate work days
  - 7<sup>th</sup> day: complete and comprehensive work stoppage for all
- 3. *rationale*:
  - because God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day
  - because God freed you from slavery in Egypt

## 2. Remembering

### Zachor vs Shamor: Keep and Remember in a Single Utterance

Remembering here involves more than mere mental action, but active observance

- Exodus version: *Zachor*, “remember”
- Deuteronomy version: *Shamor*, “keep” or “observe”

Talmud:

- *Zachor*: reminds us to celebrate the positive
- *Shamor*: charges us against violating the “do not’s”

## 3. Sabbath as a Palace in Time

### A Time Set Apart

Descriptions of the Sabbath as a time set apart

- “palace in time”
- “island in time”
- “sanctuary in time”
- “holiness in time”

Keeping the sabbath holy involves separating it from all the other days (which are characterized by the activities of work, productivity, servitude to others), making it an "island in time," removed from the mainland of the rest of the week

## **Not all Time is Our Own**

The junction to make the Sabbath a "palace in time" also reminds us that not all time is our own. The God of all time retains the right to determine how one day should be used

## **A Celebration of of What We Share in Eternal Time Rather Than the Tyranny of the Transient Things of Space**

"Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. . . 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."

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

## **4. Sabbath as Divine Gift**

The Sabbath is a grace bestowed by God on the Creation.

The sense of the Sabbath as divine gift is seen in Jewish poetic descriptions of the Sabbath:

- "The Sabbath Bride" - radiant and beautiful, poetic symbol of charm and purity, object of love and affection
- "The Sabbath Queen" - symbol of majesty, beauty and grace

The sense of the Sabbath as a grace, a gift to us is also manifest in Jesus' statement that the Sabbath was made for human beings.

"The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath"

- Mark 2:27

## **5. Sabbath as Part of the Order of Creation**

God built the working / resting rhythm of the week into the fabric of Creation.

"God's resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working / resting rhythm."

- Terrence Fretheim

"it is ordained in the very fabric of creation that the world is not a place of endless productivity, ambition, or anxiety."

- Walter Brueggemann

## 6. Sabbath Keeping as Creation Keeping

Because the Sabbath is built into the very fabric of creation, to keep the Sabbath is to maintain the order of the universe. Violating the Sabbath is decline into chaos and may have cosmic consequences:

“Even more, *sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping*. To keep the sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation. Not keeping the sabbath is a violation of the created order; it returns one aspect of that order to chaos. What the creatures do with the sabbath has cosmic effects.”

- Terrence Fretheim

## 7. Sabbath as a Remembrance of Creation

The Exodus version of the Fourth Commandment notes “. . .for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.”

Therefore, keeping the Sabbath then is also remembering Creation, acknowledging that:

- the world is not ours
- God is the Lord and Creator of the universe
- we must serve God

One way we acknowledge this is by:

- stopping our labors
- stopping our manipulation of nature
  - in the back of our minds, we may arrogantly believe that our ability to control nature means nature is ours
- letting nature "run itself" on the Sabbath

## 8. Sabbath as Remembrance of Exodus from Egypt

The Deuteronomy version of the Commandment urges us to "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

Therefore, keeping the Sabbath is also:

- remembering the Exodus,
- remembering our ultimate freedom from servitude to human masters.
  - Just as God frees the “manservants” and “maidservants” in Exodus 20:8-11 from working for their human masters on the Sabbath, God has freed us in the 21st century from working in servitude to governments, corporations or other institutions.
  - the emphasis on our freedom from servitude to human masters should perhaps include the “taskmaster” in ourselves (?)

“The very concreteness of sabbath is a sacrament witnessing to the reality of exodus and to the governance of the creator who has broken the restless penchant for productive activity. . . Sabbath is the daring recognition that with the change of sovereigns wrought in the exodus, such unrewarding expenditure of labor is no longer required.”

- Walter Brueggemann

## 9. Sabbath as Egalitarian Institution

The Sabbath rest is for all, rich and poor, master and servant, man and animal. The implicit equality of the Sabbath rest witnesses God's intention that creation should be a community of peace in which all creatures stand in shared rest

"What is the Sabbath? A reminder of every man's royalty; an abolition of the distinction of master and slave, rich and poor, success and failure. To celebrate the Sabbath is to experience one's ultimate independence of civilization and society, of achievement and anxiety. The Sabbath is an embodiment of the belief that all men are equal and that equality of men means the nobility of men. The greatest sin of man is to forget that he is prince."

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

## 10. Sabbath as Protest

Seneca, Roman philosopher wrote that spending every seventh day without "doing anything" wastes one seventh of your life.

"We must understand that doing nothing, being silent and open to the world, letting things happen inside, can be as important as -- and sometimes more important than -- what we commonly call 'useful'"

- Rabbi Gunther Plaut

Sabbath is:

- protest against worldly concept that value exists only in producing (*world is more than a place of endless productivity*)
- statement that the world is not ours (*remembrance of creation*)
- statement that we belong to no human master (*remembrance of Exodus*)

## 11. Sabbath as a Foretaste of the World to Come

The Sabbath envisions the new world order where:

- our value is more than what we produce
- all recognize Creation is God's
- all recognize we serve God alone
- all the world's creatures are be at peace with one another

Jews pray at the end of their Sabbath service for the Sabbath that never ends

## 12. Praxis: How Do We Remember, Keep the Sabbath Holy?

As a practical matter, how do we remember and observe the Sabbath and keep it holy?

Worship, whether private or communal, is not mentioned in the Fourth Commandment, but clearly is one means of making the Sabbath "holy." But worship is not the only means of observing the Sabbath.

Fundamentally keeping the Sabbath must involve:

"periodic, regular disengagement from systems of productivity whereby the world uses people up to exhaustion. That disengagement refers also to culture-produced expectations for frantic leisure, frantic consumptions, or frantic exercise."

- Walter Brueggemann

This may involve:

- termination of routines
- disengagement from some social conventions
- lowering one's standard of living

To make the Sabbath holy, we must strive to focus on:

- God as the center of our lives
- building a faith where striving for our material needs does not dominate our lives (See the Parable of the Rich Man whose land produced abundantly in Luke 12:16-29.)

## 13. The Blessing of the Sabbath

"If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs, then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob . . . "

(Isaiah 58: 13-14 NRSV)

## 14. Footnote: Sunday vs. Saturday

**Early centuries:** observing the Eucharist was not part of the observance of the Fourth Commandment

- Fourth Commandment commanded us to imitate God the creator who rested on the Sabbath
- Sunday: the day to celebrate Jesus' death, resurrection

However, in later centuries, Sunday began to take on both the "holiness" of the Sabbath (as the day of Eucharistic worship), and the required proscription against labor on the Sabbath:

- **Fourth Century:** Emperor Constantine required cessation of all work on Sunday except farming
- **538 AD Council of Orleans:** prohibited servile work on Sunday
  - main purpose was that landowners could not require their serfs to work on Sunday

## 15. References

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