



## Parashat Mishpatim

“Torah Study and Torah Reading on Shabbat”

by David Silverberg

Parashat Vayakhel begins with Moshe's assembly of the entire Israelite people to reiterate to them the mitzva of Shabbat observance and present the guidelines concerning the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Several Midrashic sources noted that no other section in the Torah begins with this description of "va-yakhel" – an assembly of the entire nation. The reason for this gathering, the Midrashim explain, relates to the first set of instructions Moshe presents at this gathering – instructions regarding Shabbat:

The Almighty said [to Moshe]: Go arrange large gatherings and publicly teach them the laws of Shabbat, so that future generations will learn from you, to assemble gatherings each and every Shabbat and to gather in Houses of Study to teach and instruct Israel words of Torah and matters of prohibition and permission... (Midrash Avkir, cited in Torah Sheleima)

The special "gathering" held at the opening of Parashat Vayakhel was intended to demonstrate the proper procedure for Shabbat observance. The rabbinic leader or leaders must assemble the community for the purpose of teaching and instructing them Torah law, much as Moshe here gathers the Israelite nation to command them with regard to the laws of Shabbat and the Mishkan. Rabbi Chayim Ben Atar, in his classic commentary, "Or Ha-chayim," suggests that in this vein the Midrash interprets the entire first verse of Parashat Vayakhel: "Moshe assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do." According to the Midrash, the Or Ha-chayim claims, "these are the things" refers to the assembly itself. Moshe here tells the people that Shabbat must be a day of public Torah study and instruction, following the model that he himself establishes in this setting.

Maimonides, in his *Code* (Hilkhos Shabbat 30:10), makes brief reference to the obligation of Torah study on Shabbat, forbidding one from eating and drinking during the communal study session, and then outlining the Shabbat schedule of the *tzadikim ha-rishonim* – the righteous men of yesteryear:

It is forbidden for a person to conduct a meal over wine at the time when [people assemble in] the study hall. Rather, this was the practice of the *tzadikim ha-rishonim*: One would pray on Shabbat the morning and *musaf* services in the synagogue, come to his home and eat the second meal [of Shabbat], go to the study hall and read and study until the afternoon service, recite the afternoon service, and then conduct the third meal.

Following the principle established in the Midrash, Maimonides requires communities to hold public gatherings for Torah study, and he forbids individuals from engaging in physical indulgence at the expense of participation in these sessions.

Another Midrashic source, the Midrash Ha-gadol, appears to include "keri'at ha-Torah" – the public Torah reading, in addition to study – under this obligation:

This is what the Almighty said to Moshe: Assemble My children for [the purpose of presenting to them] the commandment of Shabbat, in order that it be preserved for generations to form gatherings and enter synagogues and study halls to hear words of Torah... The Almighty said to Israel: If you assemble on each and every

Shabbat and read the Torah, I consider you as having testified to My being your King...

Thus, the opening verse of Parashat Vayakhel introduces – or at least alludes to – the requirement of Torah study and reading on Shabbat, emphasizing the public nature of this requirement. This week we will examine the underlying nature and purpose of this obligation as codified and addressed in Maimonides' writings. (Much of our discussion is based on a transcript of a lecture delivered by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century luminary Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, which appeared in the 5752 edition of Yeshiva University's annual journal, *Beit Yitzchak*.)

### **The Dual Obligation of Torah Reading on Shabbat**

In codifying the obligation to read from the Torah on Shabbat, Maimonides refers to this requirement in two consecutive paragraphs, each seemingly reflecting a different perspective on its essential nature. In *Hilkhot Tefila* (12:1), he writes, based on a passage in the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 82a), "Moshe instituted for Israel that they should publicly read from the Torah on Shabbat, Monday and Thursday, in order that they not allow three days to pass without hearing the Torah." The Talmud (*ibid.*) finds an allusion to this enactment in the Torah's narrative earlier in the Book of Shemot, where we read that shortly after Benei Yisrael cross the sea, "They walked three days in the wilderness and found no water" (*Shemot* 15:22). The Rabbis suggested that "water" often serves as a metaphoric reference to Torah study, which, like water, is a basic necessity for survival. We are thus told here that Benei Yisrael traveled for three days without taking the time to engage in Torah study. Moshe responded to this unfortunate situation by scheduling regular Torah readings every Monday, Thursday and Shabbat, so that three days would never pass without at least some direct exposure to Torah.

According to this description of the obligation, the Shabbat Torah reading bears no intrinsic relevance to Shabbat itself; it is rather part of the general Torah reading system, arranged in a fashion that requires the reading of the Torah at least once within every three-day period.

In the very next paragraph, however, Maimonides appears to present the Shabbat Torah reading from a different angle. He presents in this paragraph a comprehensive list of all the days on which Halakha requires a community to conduct a public Torah reading: "These are the days on which the Torah is publicly read: Shabbat, festivals, Rosh Chodesh [the first of the month], fasts, Chanukah, Purim, and every week on Monday and Thursday." The sequence by which Maimonides arranges this list immediately catches our attention. Whereas in the previous paragraph he explicitly associated the Shabbat Torah reading with the reading held every Monday and Thursday, in this passage he seems to distinguish between the two. Shabbat is listed first, introducing the list of special occasions mandating the reading of the Torah, while the weekday readings on Monday and Thursday are reserved for the very end of the list. Rabbi Soloveitchik inferred from this arrangement that the Shabbat reading possesses an additional dimension, resembling the Torah reading on festivals, beyond that which it shares with the weekday reading. On festivals, Halakha requires Torah reading as part of the day's observance, rather than as part of a general system intended to ensure regular exposure to Torah reading. By associating the Torah reading obligation on Shabbat with that required on the festivals, Maimonides implicitly establishes that Shabbat requires Torah reading intrinsically, by virtue of the very occasion of Shabbat, beyond the requirement to read the Torah once in three days.

Maimonides' source for this dimension of the Shabbat reading is, presumably, a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud. Commenting on the verse in the Book of Vayikra (23:44), "Moshe declared to the Israelites the festivals of the Lord," the Jerusalem Talmud explains that Moshe here introduced the obligation to read the Torah on the festivals. Significantly, it includes Shabbat in this obligation: "Moshe instituted for Israel that they read in the Torah on Shabbat, festivals, Rosh Chodesh and Chol Ha-mo'ed."

If Rabbi Soloveitchik's inference is correct, then Maimonides acknowledged two simultaneous, yet distinct, bases for the obligation of Torah reading on Shabbat. The first is Moshe's enactment requiring Torah reading on Shabbat to prevent the passage of three days without hearing words of Torah. But in addition, the occasion of Shabbat itself requires Torah

reading, much as other special occasions on the calendar, such as Sukkot, Pesach and Purim, entail a Torah reading obligation.

At first glance, however, it seems difficult to explain why the day of Shabbat would itself generate such an obligation. The festivals commemorate significant historical events; naturally, then, our observance of these occasions includes a public reading of the sections in the Torah dealing with the given event. Thus, for example, on Pesach we read the narrative of the Exodus, and on Shavuot we read the story of the Revelation at Sinai. On Chanukah and Purim, which commemorate events that transpired well after the period of the Chumash, we read selections that somehow connect to the day's theme. Shabbat, however, is generally not associated with a specific event in Biblical history. And although, indeed, the Torah speaks of Shabbat observance as intended to commemorate the earth's creation (Shemot 20:11) or the Exodus (Devarim 5:15), neither of these are necessarily included in the weekly Shabbat reading. In what sense, then, does the essence of Shabbat generate an obligation to read the Torah?

### **The Underlying Purpose of Shabbat Observance**

Instinctively, we might explain that the very purpose – or perhaps among the purposes – of Shabbat observance is Torah study. One possible early source for such a theory is the Midrashic work, "Eliyahu Rabba" (1):

The Almighty said to Israel as follows: My children! Have I not written in My Torah, 'This Book of the Torah shall not leave your mouth' (Yehoshua 1:8)? Even though you perform work all six days, Shabbat shall be designated entirely for Torah. On this basis, they [the Rabbis] said: A person must arise early and study on Shabbat, and go to the synagogue and study hall, read Torah and study the prophets and [only] then go home and eat and drink.

This passage describes Shabbat as the means by which a Jew can fulfill – on some level – the mandate, "This Book of the Torah shall not leave your mouth." If the pressures of the workweek allow little time for engagement in Torah study, Shabbat affords one this very opportunity. A similar Midrashic passage is cited in the Tur (the halakhic compendium that later formed the basis for the Shulchan Arukh):

Torah said before the Almighty: Master of the world! When Israel enter the land [of Israel], this one will run to his vineyard, the other will run to his field but what will be with me? He said to it: I have a match that I will make for you, and its name is Shabbat, when they [Israel] refrain from their work and can involve themselves in you.

Indeed, Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon, in his "Book of Beliefs and Opinions" (3:2), establishes two underlying purposes of Shabbat. First, of course, is the more obvious function, of providing the opportunity for physical rest and relaxation. But in addition, Rav Sa'adya writes, Shabbat enables one "to achieve...some wisdom and add some prayer, and people will be free to meet each other when they assemble and remind one another of matters related to religion, and make announcements with regard to them." Perhaps based on the aforementioned passages in the Midrash, Rav Sa'adya views Shabbat as intended to facilitate Torah study and prayer, as well as public gatherings devoted to spiritual reinforcement. According to this approach, we understand full well why the occasion of Shabbat requires a public reading of the Torah, given that the very purpose of Shabbat is to allow people the opportunity to listen to and study words of Torah.

Maimonides, however, in his *Guide* (2:31), appears to view the underlying purpose of Shabbat observance in philosophical, rather than purely pragmatic, terms. Noting that the commandment of Shabbat is included in the Ten Commandments, and appears there in relatively close proximity to the commands to believe in God and the prohibition against idolatry, Maimonides concludes that Shabbat observance relates to the fundamental precepts of Jewish faith. He writes:

You know already from what I have said, that no opinions retain their vitality except those which are confirmed, published, and by certain actions constantly revived among the people. Therefore we are told in the Law to honor this day; in order to confirm thereby the principle of Creation which will spread in the world, when all peoples keep Sabbath on the same day. For when the question is asked, why this is done, the answer is given: "For in six days the Lord hath made, etc. (Shemot 20:11).

The nationwide observance of Shabbat serves to publicize the fundamental belief in God's having created the world, as opposed to the Aristotelian theory that God and the world have forever coexisted. The weekly cessation from work, which commemorates the completion of Creation after six days, effectively reinforces the awareness of Creation as a tenet of Jewish belief. Maimonides then points to a second function of Shabbat, as indicated in the second account of the Ten Commandments (Devarim 5:15), as a reminder of the Exodus. In any event, in his view, Shabbat does not serve the practical function of allowing more time for Torah study.

For Maimonides, then, we must formulate the reason for Torah reading and study on Shabbat somewhat differently. Although Torah study does not constitute the essential purpose of Shabbat observance, it is necessary to lend Shabbat its distinctive character. In order for Shabbat to serve its function, which, according to Maimonides, is to reinforce our collective awareness of the world's creation *ex nihilo*, its observance must extend beyond the mere passive cessation of creative activity. Shabbat must also be a day of proactive involvement in spiritual pursuits, and hence we require people to assemble for the public reading and study of the Torah. This serves to lend Shabbat a distinctive character and aura, which is necessary for collective reminder of the concept of Creation.

### **"A Discernible Rest"**

Indeed, Maimonides elsewhere stresses the importance of establishing Shabbat's distinctive nature, of ensuring that it differs fundamentally from the days of the workweek. In this vein, he explains the basis for the prohibitions enacted by the Rabbis against moving various objects on Shabbat:

The Sages forbade moving a number of objects on Shabbat as one does on a weekday. Why did they decide upon this prohibition? They said: If the prophets admonished and commanded that one's walking on Shabbat not be like his walking on a weekday, and that conversation on Shabbat not be like conversation on a weekday... all the more so one's handling [of objects] on Shabbat must not be like his handling on a weekday, in order that it [Shabbat] not be like a weekday in one's eyes, such that he will come to lift...utensils from one corner to another corner, or from one house to another house, or put away rocks and the like, for after all, he sits at home idle and will look for something in which to involve himself, and it will turn out that he did not rest... Furthermore, since some people are not skilled workers, but are idle all their days... if they were permitted to walk, speak and move [items] like other days, one will not have observed a discernible rest. (*Code*, Hilkhos Shabbat 24:12-13)

According to Maimonides, the Sages forbade handling certain objects in an effort to establish the day's distinctive nature. Refraining from forbidden activity does not suffice, for, as Maimonides mentions, there are enough permissible activities to occupy a person on Shabbat in a manner that would render this day indistinguishable from any other. And, furthermore, the Rabbis wanted to ensure that even those who refrain from creative activity all week long would observe a "discernible rest" on Shabbat. They therefore enacted these laws, so that Shabbat will necessarily assume a distinctive character.

## "A Sabbath for the Lord your God"

On what basis did Maimonides assume that the day of Shabbat requires a "discernible rest"? Perhaps the Torah simply forbids engaging in any of the thirty-nine categories of activity as identified by the oral law; where do we find a source for the proactive observance of Shabbat as a fundamentally different day?

From the passage cited above, Maimonides appears to base himself on the prophecy of Yeshayahu (58:13): "and if you honor it [Shabbat] and not go your ways nor look to your affairs nor strike bargains." The Talmud (Shabbat 113a-b), as Maimonides paraphrases in this passage, interprets this verse as introducing a prohibition against conducting oneself on Shabbat as he does during the week. One's manner of "walking," speech and areas of involvement must be of a different nature on Shabbat, and the Rabbis expanded this principle by forbidding handling certain objects on Shabbat.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, however, argued that Maimonides' source for this concept, of the need to lend Shabbat a distinctive character, appears in the Torah itself. Rabbi Soloveitchik demonstrates this Biblical origin by examining a discussion in the Talmud (Pesachim 68b and elsewhere) concerning the proper method of festival observance. The Talmud notes that whereas in the Book of Bamidbar (29:35) the Torah describes Yom Tov as an observance intended "lakhem" – "for you," for our benefit and enjoyment, in Devarim (16:8), it speaks of Yom Tov as a festival "for the Lord your God." A debate is recorded as to how we might reconcile these two conflicting descriptions. One position views the two verses as presenting two, equally acceptable options for Yom Tov observance: one may observe Yom Tov either through the means of festive celebration, or by devoting the day entirely to spiritual pursuits. The other position argues that one must incorporate both themes in his Yom Tov observance, by dividing the festival day between physical enjoyment and spiritual engagement.

Rabbi Soloveitchik noted that this entire discussion relates only to the festivals, and has no impact upon the observance of Shabbat. Unlike Yom Tov, Shabbat is never described by the Torah as a day intended "for you," for our personal benefit. Rather, as we read in the Ten Commandments, the Torah refers to this day as "a sabbath for the Lord your God" (Shemot 20:10). True, as the Talmud (ibid.) itself notes, the prophet Yeshayahu (ibid.) requires that we observe "oneg" – physical delight – on Shabbat, and therefore even the position that allows devoting Yom Tov entirely to spiritual pursuits requires some physical indulgence on Shabbat. However, Rabbi Soloveitchik contended, the essential nature of Shabbat is one that is devoted "to the Lord your God."

For this reason, Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, Maimonides understood that the occasion of Shabbat requires Torah reading and study. The Torah, after all, defines Shabbat only as "a sabbath to the Lord your God," rather than "a sabbath for you." This definition requires us to lend the day of Shabbat a distinctively spiritual nature, and thus the occasion of Shabbat obligates communities to read the Torah and conduct public study sessions.

## Conclusion

As opposed to Rav Sa'adya Gaon, who identifies public Torah study as the very purpose underlying Shabbat observance, Maimonides views Shabbat as intended to reinforce the philosophical concept of Creation *ex nihilo*. Nevertheless, he clearly emphasizes the importance of public Torah study on Shabbat, and implicitly attributes the obligation of Shabbat Torah reading to the intrinsic nature of the day, beyond the general concern that the Torah be read once in every three-day period. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that in Maimonides's view, Torah reading and study are necessary to lend Shabbat its distinctive nature. For the Torah not only forbids performing creative activity on Shabbat, but requires that we observe Shabbat as a day "for the Lord your God," devoted primarily to spiritual pursuits, the obligation of *oneg* (physical enjoyment) notwithstanding. Only by observing Shabbat as a uniquely spiritual occasion can we ensure its distinction from the rest of the week, such that it can fill its role in impressing upon us the fundamental belief in Creation.