

5. Spiritual pursuits

The **Yerushalmi** (15:3) teaches:

Rabbi Berekhya said in the name of Rabbi Ḥiya bar Ba: Shabbatot and Festival days were given only for people to engage in Torah study.

Time for Torah
study

According to the Yerushalmi, the point of Shabbat is for us to engage in Torah study. The Torah commands us to refrain from labor so that we can have **available time** that we can invest in Torah study.

The *Midrash* (cited in *Yalkut Eliezer*, the entry entitled *Shabbat veYom Tov*, 126; a similar point is cited in the *Tur*, 290) constructs a conversation between God and the Torah with regard to Torah study in a world in which people plow, sow, and engage in commerce and other professional activities. In such a world people cannot devote all their time to Torah study, and the Torah complains to God:

The Torah said: Master of the Universe, when the Jewish people enter the land, what will be with me? Each member of the Jewish people will go to plow and sow his field, and what will be with me? [God] said to [the Torah]: I have a mate that I am giving you, and who is that mate? It is Shabbat, on which the Jewish people do not perform labor, and they enter synagogues and study halls and engage in Torah.¹⁰

An expression of
one's connection
to Torah

In light of this *midrash*, we can add another point: During the week people cannot fill the day with Torah, and they have the ability to learn for only short amounts of time. Do they desire to invest all their time and energy in Torah, but are unable to because of factors beyond their control, e.g., professional responsibilities?¹¹ **The proof is Shabbat. What do they do when they have free time?** Do they invest their time and energy in Torah study? If so, it can be said that

10. A similar passage is found in *Tanna deVei Eliyahu* (chap. 1): “This is what the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the Jewish people: My children, didn’t I write this in My Torah: ‘This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth’ (*Yehoshua* 1:8)? Although you perform labor all six days, the day of Shabbat should be entirely for Torah. On this basis the Sages said: A person should always arise early and study on Shabbat. He should go to the synagogue and the study hall, read the Torah and review the Prophets, and after that he should go to his home and eat and drink... for God rests only with those who fulfill His Torah.”

11. See *Tosafot* (*Berakhot* 11b, s.v. *shekevar niftar*), who write that this is the ideal.

they are connected to Torah all week long, and it is work responsibilities that prevent them from studying. But if they do not, they thereby indicate that Torah is not at the center of their lives. Thus, Shabbat clarifies the extent of our commitment and connection to Torah.

Shabbat is also a special time **for attending Torah lectures**. This is cited in the *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Vayakhel*, 408):

Time for Torah lectures

“Moshe assembled;” our Sages, experts in *aggada*, say: From the beginning of the Torah until its end, there is no section where [the term] “assembled” is stated at the outset except for this one. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Gather great assemblies and teach them the laws of Shabbat in public, so that future generations will learn from you to gather assemblies on each and every Shabbat, and to come together in study halls, to teach and instruct the Jewish people the words of the Torah, what is prohibited and permitted, so that My great name will be praised among My children.

In other words, at the beginning of *Parashat Vayak’hel* the Torah states that Moses assembled the people and commanded them to observe Shabbat. This implies that Shabbat is a particularly appropriate time to gather the people and give Torah lectures.

Obviously, this does not exempt a person from studying Torah or attending lectures on weekdays, but on Shabbat there is a relatively large amount of free time that is available for Torah study, and one should use it for this purpose in order to demonstrate a connection to Torah.

The *Shulhan Arukh* and *Rema* (290:2) codify the obligation to increase one’s Torah study on Shabbat, especially for people who are unable to dedicate sufficient time to Torah study during the week:

Laymen, in particular, should study a lot of Torah on Shabbat

After the morning meal, a study session is set to read the Prophets and expound matters of *aggada*, and it is prohibited to set a meal for that time.

Rema: Workers and laymen who do not engage in Torah [study] all the days of the week should engage in Torah [study]

on Shabbat even more than Torah scholars, who engage in Torah [study] all the days of the week. Torah scholars should engage a little more in the enjoyment of eating and drinking, as they derive enjoyment from their learning all the days of the week.

According to the Rema, individuals who work all week are especially required to engage in Torah study on Shabbat, whereas Torah scholars, who engage in Torah study all week, can focus a little more on eating and drinking. Practically, it is proper for both Torah scholars and others to invest time in Torah study on Shabbat. This is true for two reasons, one of which is connected to **Shabbat** and one of which pertains to **Torah**.

Establishing
an atmosphere
of sanctity on
Shabbat

Firstly, Torah study on Shabbat is important in order to ensure that Shabbat is a day characterized by sanctity and spiritual ascendancy, rather than a day focused on physical pleasures.¹² According to some *Rishonim*, this is what the Torah means when it says: “Remember the Shabbat day, **to keep it holy**.” The **Ramban** (*Shemot* 20:7), for example, writes:

The reason [for the phrase] “to keep it holy” is that it should be on our minds so that it is holy for us . . . The reason is that the rest should be, to us, because it is a holy day on which one can turn away from the involvement of his thoughts and the meaningless [distractions of] daily life, and give pleasure to our souls in the way of God, and to go to the teachers and prophets to hear the word of God.¹³

12. Physical pleasure also has a place on Shabbat, within reason. See my book *Halacha from the Sources – Birkat HaMazon and Zemirot Shabbat*, pp. 122–123, and my forthcoming book on the positive mitzvot of Shabbat.

13. It is possible that this is a central aspect of the character of Shabbat even according to the straightforward reading of the biblical verses, and many commentaries in fact found support in the verses for the requirement of engaging in spiritual activities on Shabbat. The **Ibn Ezra** (*Shemot* 20:7), for example, writes that there is a parallelism between *Shemita* and Shabbat: Just as during *Shemita* there is a mitzva to gather the entire nation “so that they will hear, and so that they will learn” (*Devarim* 31:12), so too, “Shabbat

A similar idea is mentioned in *Tanna deVei Eliyahu* (chap. 26):

“Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy;” in what way do you keep it holy? **With Scripture, Mishna, food, drink, rest...**

Secondly, Shabbat is an ideal time for Torah study not only because of the free time it affords but also because its sanctity contributes a unique element to the study of Torah. **The Torah was given to the Jewish people on Shabbat** (*Shabbat* 86b), which implies that there is an intrinsic connection between Shabbat and Torah. This connection affords one the opportunity **to connect to Torah in a manner** that is not possible on weekdays. The *Zohar* (*Shelah*, 173b–174a) also states that Torah study on Shabbat is on a higher level than Torah study on weekdays:

Torah study of a different quality

Praiseworthy is the portion of those who study Torah on the day of Shabbat, more so than on other days.

was given in order to understand the deeds of God and to contemplate His Torah.” Another text is cited by the *Sforno* (*Devarim* 5:12): The Torah states in *Parashat Va’ethanan* (loc. cit.) that one must observe Shabbat “as the Lord your God commanded you.” The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 87b) explains that this refers to the command issued at Mara to observe Shabbat. Consequently, claims the *Sforno*, one must observe Shabbat “in the same manner that He commanded you in Mara, for when He commanded you there about Shabbat, He informed [you] that it is not sufficient for Him if you sanctify it by abstaining from prohibited labor; rather, you must engage in Torah and mitzvot, as it is stated: And you will perform that which is right in His eyes and listen to His commandments (*Shemot* 15:26).” See also *Rabbeinu Bahya* (*Shemot* 20:8): “And it stated: To keep it holy, [indicating that] we should mention its sanctity, that it should be holy in our eyes, and on [Shabbat] we should turn our thoughts from mundane matters and engage in the ways of God, which are matters of the soul, for we have been commanded to go on [Shabbat] to the prophets and teachers of each generation to seek Torah from them and to hear the word of God. And so said David: How I love your Torah! It is my speech **the entire day** (*Tehillim* 119:97), [the entire day] alludes to the special day of Shabbat, on which he would derive enjoyment from his engagement in Torah the entire day.” On Shabbat, Torah is the topic of conversation (see also *Tanya, Igeret HaKodesh*, at the end of the *Kuntres Aḥaron*).

According to the *Zohar* (loc. cit.) **it is especially meritorious to think of new Torah insights on Shabbat.** After the conclusion of Shabbat, when the additional soul one has on Shabbat returns to its place, if it has new Torah insights that it thought of on Shabbat, God calls the entire Heavenly entourage to listen to the new insight, and it causes great satisfaction in the upper spheres.

The *Shaarei Teshuva* (290:1) writes in the name of the *Arizal* that one who devises new Torah insights on Shabbat brings great merit to his father, and in the World to Come his father is given a crown. This is why the mitzva of Shabbat is juxtaposed in the Torah to the mitzva of honoring one's parents.

Thus, it is especially important to study Torah on Shabbat: because one thereby demonstrates a commitment to Torah even the rest of the week, because it gives Shabbat itself an atmosphere of sanctity, and because the sanctity of Shabbat elevates one's Torah study and allows one to connect to Torah in a unique fashion. It is therefore worthwhile for everyone, including professionals who are busy at work the rest of the week and Torah scholars who engage in Torah study all week long, to invest special time in Torah study on Shabbat.¹⁴

Learning Torah
with one's children

Additionally, on Shabbat there is generally a much greater opportunity than on other days **to study Torah with one's children.** Studying Torah with one's children is not just about making sure they have information. It creates a deep, spiritual connection between parents, children, and the Divine Presence. Shabbat facilitates this additional connection between parents and children, a deep connection that is characterized by the sanctity of Shabbat and the sanctity of the Torah.

Accordingly, two of the reasons we have mentioned for Shabbat, the connection to family and the ability to engage in spiritual pursuits,

14. See also the *Hida* (*Nitzotzei Orot* on the *Zohar, Shelah*, 174a): "Torah study on Shabbat is crucial for a Torah scholar as well, when a righteous person can reach great achievements, and the study is more elevated than on a weekday."

MEANINGS OF SHABBAT

are connected. Torah study on Shabbat is important not only because of the learning itself, and not only because it sanctifies the Shabbat and Shabbat sanctifies it, but also because it creates and strengthens family relationships. God and the special character of Shabbat become a strong part of the connection between family members.

Torah study on Shabbat is particularly important for several reasons: (1) One has time available for Torah study on Shabbat. (2) How we use our free time shows what our priorities are. (3) Torah study sanctifies the Shabbat and fulfills the directive to “keep it holy.” (4) Shabbat sanctifies one’s Torah study and allows them to reach greater heights in their study. (5) Torah study with one’s family members creates a unique family bond. Shabbat itself facilitates a unique bond within the family, and Torah study brings God into this family bond.

Summary: The importance of Torah study on Shabbat