

Meanings of Shabbat

What is the significance of Shabbat? Why is Shabbat considered so important? We will cite a number of reasons that have been suggested for the mitzva of Shabbat, and then we will attempt to understand more deeply, and perhaps in a new way, the nature of Shabbat and what makes it unique.

First, we must clarify our intentions in attempting to discover the meanings of Shabbat, and this is true with regard to studying the reasons for any mitzva.¹ It is not an attempt to provide reasons **why one should observe Shabbat**. We observe Shabbat simply **because that is what God commanded**. The reasons given for the various mitzvot are not the motivation to observe them, rather the divine command itself is the motivation. We are also not attempting to understand **why God commanded us to observe this mitzva**. Human beings cannot possibly fully understand what God had in mind. Even in the natural world, modern scientists have recognized that there is more that is hidden than revealed, that there are many aspects of the physical world that they cannot understand. How much more so is it true that we cannot fully understand the spiritual world or the thoughts of God: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways – the utterance of the Lord” (*Yeshayahu* 55:8).

When we search for **meanings of Shabbat**, we are trying to comprehend **what Shabbat means to us**. We can consider the meanings of Shabbat that we are able to comprehend via our human intellect and by examining biblical verses and the statements of

The goal of studying the reasons for mitzvot

1. There is much discussion about understanding the reasons for mitzvot, but there is general agreement to the basic principles presented here.

the Sages, thereby make our experience of Shabbat more holy and meaningful.

Shabbat – “Holy to the Lord”

The first presentation of Shabbat in relation to the Jewish people is in the **context of the manna**, in *Parashat Beshalah* (*Shemot* 16:4–5, 22–30):

Verse 4: The Lord said to Moses: Behold, I will rain food for you from the heavens and the people shall go out and gather each day’s portion on its day, so that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not.

Verse 5: It shall be on the sixth day; they will prepare that which they will have brought and it will be twice what they gather each day. . . .

Verse 22: It was on the sixth day that they gathered double the bread, two *omer* for each one and all the princes of the congregation came and told Moses.

Verse 23: He said to them: It is what the Lord said: Tomorrow is **a day of rest, a holy Shabbat to the Lord**. That which you would bake, bake, and that which you would cook, cook, and all that remains, set aside for safekeeping until morning.

Verse 24: They set it aside until the morning as Moses commanded, and it did not reek, and there were no maggots in it.

Verse 25: Moses said: Eat it today for **today is Shabbat of the Lord**; today you will not find it in the field.

Verse 26: Six days you shall gather it and on the seventh day, it is Shabbat, there will be none in it.

Verse 27: It was on the seventh day, some of the people went out to gather and they did not find.

Verse 28: The Lord said to Moses: Until when do you refuse to observe My commandments and My laws?

Verse 29: See that the Lord has given you the Shabbat; therefore, He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Remain each in his place, no man shall leave his place on the seventh day.

Verse 30: The people rested on the seventh day.

Shabbat is mentioned here in the context of the **test of the manna**. The appearance of the manna is considered a test: “So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not” (*Shemot* 16:4), and Shabbat is mentioned as part of the test.² From the time of the giving of the manna, when Shabbat was first observed by the Jewish people, until contemporary times, Shabbat observance has always been difficult and has been a test. Closing one’s business, or not coming to work, which cause many people severe financial difficulties, are not easy tests.

Shabbat as a test

The Torah’s initial presentation of Shabbat does not mention any prohibitions that apply on Shabbat, but mentions that the manna will not fall on that day. Later, the Torah mentions that there is also a prohibition that applies on Shabbat: “No man shall leave his place on the seventh day” (*Shemot* 16:29). As stated above (pp. 11–12), there is a dispute in the Gemara and *Rishonim* as to the subject of this prohibition. Some say it is referring to the prohibition of traveling beyond the Shabbat boundary, while others say it is the prohibition of Carrying an item from one domain to another. Both of these prohibitions seem less significant and less comprehensible to people than other Shabbat prohibitions, as they involve merely the transportation of people or items from one location to another rather than a creative act that effects a change to an item. Nonetheless, the Torah chose to introduce this as the first prohibition of Shabbat. Later we will attempt to understand this point.

The first prohibition – Shabbat boundaries or carrying from one domain to another

Shabbat is referred to here as “a day of rest, a holy Shabbat to the Lord” (*Shemot* 16:23), and then later, “a Shabbat of the Lord” (v. 25).

Shabbat – “Holy to the Lord”

2. See **Rashi** on this verse: “So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law – if they follow the laws pertaining to it, i.e., that they not leave it over and that they not go out on Shabbat to gather it.”

GATEWAY TO SHABBAT

Shabbat belongs to God; to an elevated, lofty realm. This expression and similar ones appear in many of the passages in the Torah pertaining to Shabbat. Later we will attempt to ascertain reasons for Shabbat, but it is clear that Shabbat relates to a special, exalted reality. Consequently, it is not enough to provide only a this-world reason for Shabbat. We must relate to reasons of this type and attempt to clarify them, but that is not sufficient. We will begin with them and then move on to more spiritual reasons, and attempt to also understand the meaning of the sanctity of Shabbat.