

# 1. Testifying to the creation of the world

The most straightforward reason for Shabbat is expressed in the verses in *Parashat Ki Tisa* (*Shemot* 31:14–17):

You shall observe the Sabbath, as it is sacred for you . . . Six days labor shall be performed, and on the seventh day a sabbatical rest, sacred to the Lord . . . The children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to render the Sabbath for their generations an eternal covenant. Between Me and the children of Israel, **it is a sign forever. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day, He rested and was invigorated.**

A commemoration  
of creation

Shabbat reinforces our belief in the creation of the world. We perform labor for six days, then rest on the seventh, in commemoration of the idea that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. We act as God did in creating the world in order to declare our belief in creation, in contrast to those who believe the world has always existed.

This is the plain reading of the verses in *Parashat Yitro* (*Shemot* 20:8–11):

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall work and perform all your labor. And the seventh day is Sabbath for the Lord your God; you shall not perform any labor . . . because in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea

and everything that is in them and He rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Shabbat day and He sanctified it.

This is also the explanation provided by the *Sefer HaHinukh* (mitzva 32):

Among the roots of this mitzva is that we should be unoccupied with our work in honor of the day, in order to entrench in ourselves the belief in the creation of the world, as this belief is the rope that pulls all the foundations of the religion. We should remember on one day each week that the world was created in six separate days, and on the seventh nothing was created . . . For when all people rest on one day of the week, and someone asks what the reason is for this rest, the answer will be: “For in six days the Lord made, etc.” Each person will be thereby strengthened in the true belief.

It is natural that individuals occasionally take a break from work, but when an entire nation refrains from work on the same day it is clear that this is purposeful. This points to the foundation that all of Judaism is built upon: the belief that God created the world.

Almost the entire world currently recognizes the need for a day of rest, and the concept of a weekly day of rest indirectly connects the entire world to the creation of the universe. A year is a natural unit of time, as it is based on the earth’s revolution around the sun. A month is also a natural unit of time, as it is based on the lunar cycle. Day and night are also based on natural phenomena. By contrast, there is no natural or astronomical significance to the unit of a week.

There is only one source for the unit of a week, and that is the story of the creation of the world. There are nations that do not rest on Shabbat but rather on other days (Sunday or Friday), but the very fact that the entire world operates based on the unit of the week expresses a recognition by the entire world of the concept of creation. The entire world followed the model of the Jewish people, but in order to distinguish themselves from us they moved the day of rest to Sunday or Friday. This is in addition to the difference in the

The entire world indirectly recognizes creation

nature of the Jewish day of rest as opposed to those of other nations, as will be explained later.

We will soon examine more deeply the significance of resting on Shabbat and the connection between that and God's resting on the seventh day. But first, we will clarify some additional meanings of Shabbat.

## 2. Rest as an expression of freedom

Another explanation for the meaning of Shabbat emerges from the verses in *Parashat Va'ethanan* (*Devarim* 5:12–15):

Six days you shall work, and perform all your labor. And the seventh day is Sabbath to the Lord your God, you shall not perform any labor, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your slave, and your maidservant, and your ox, and your donkey, and all your animals, and your stranger who is within your gates, **so that** your slave and your maidservant **will rest** like you. You shall remember that **you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there** with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

In commemoration  
of the exodus from  
Egypt

These verses indicate that the goal of Shabbat is **rest**.<sup>3</sup> Why are we commanded to rest? The Torah explains: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God took you out from there.” When the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt, they were unable to rest. Upon the exodus from Egypt we became free, and therefore we rest on Shabbat in order to express our freedom, and in that way, we remember the kindness that God performed by taking us out of Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

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3. In addition to rest, this passage also emphasizes social equality, in that not only is one supposed to rest himself, but his slaves and even animals must rest as well. We will address this point later.

4. The perspective of Shabbat as a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt

This reason also appears in the *Sefer HaHinukh* (loc. cit.):

And aside from commemorating the creation of the world, Shabbat also commemorates the miracle of Egypt, as we were slaves there and were not able to rest when we desired rest, and God

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emerges from a straightforward reading of the verses in *Parashat Va'ethanan*, and is expressed by several of the *Rishonim*, including the **Rambam** in *Guide of the Perplexed* (1:31) and the *Sefer HaHinukh* cited here. Nevertheless, it should be noted that several *Rishonim* disagree with this understanding and hold that Shabbat commemorates only the creation of the world and not the exodus from Egypt. This is based on the fact that in the Ten Commandments as recorded in *Parashat Yitro* the creation of the world is mentioned, whereas the exodus from Egypt is not mentioned. In their opinion, the exodus is not a reason for Shabbat as a whole, but rather for the detail that slaves should rest on Shabbat (**Ibn Ezra**, *Shemot* 20:1). Some write that the exodus is only tangentially related to the mitzva of Shabbat (**Ramban**, *Devarim* 5:14; see also *Tosafot*, *Pesahim* 117b s.v. *lemaan*). The **Ramban** (loc. cit.) adds that it is not reasonable for Shabbat to be in commemoration of the exodus, as “when we rest and refrain from prohibited labor on the seventh day, we do not thereby remember the exodus from Egypt, and one who sees us abstaining from labor does not know anything about this.” The **Ravya** (508) explains that according to this opinion, when we say in *kiddush*: “the first of the appointed times, in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt,” it does not mean that Shabbat is in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt, but rather that Shabbat is listed first among the list of the Festivals (“appointed times”), and the Festivals, but not Shabbat, are in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt (this is also cited in the *Tur*, *Orakh Hayim* 271).

As stated, according to the straightforward reading of the verses in *Parashat Va'ethanan* and the plain meaning of the words of *kiddush*, Shabbat is a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt, as stated by the **Rambam** and *Sefer HaHinukh* (see also the **Ravya**, in his explanation beginning: “There are those who explain”). In their view, resting from labor on one day a week expresses freedom, which is possible only because we were freed from bondage in Egypt. According to this opinion, one needs to explain why the Torah cites only the commemoration of creation when discussing Shabbat in the Ten Commandments in *Parashat Yitro*, and only the commemoration of the exodus from Egypt in the Ten Commandments in *Parashat Va'ethanan*. See the explanation of the **Rambam** (*Guide of the Perplexed*, loc. cit.). It is also possible that the two reasons were stated at once, as the Sages state with regard to *shamor* and *zakhor*.

saved us from them and commanded us to rest on the seventh day, and therefore mentioned in *Mishne Torah* (the book of *Devarim*) this second reason for our rest.

Freedom versus  
responsibility

The Torah emphasizes that in addition to remembering that we were slaves in Egypt, we must remember that “**the Lord your God** took you out from there.” Resting by the command of God expresses not only **freedom** from human domination but also **responsibility** toward God, who freed us from Egypt.<sup>5</sup> This responsibility is expressed by the very fact that we rest due to the command of God, and also by the fact that we rest specifically on the day God commanded, Shabbat, and not on any other day. In this way, we emphasize that God is our ruler and it is He who runs the world; it is He who took us out of Egypt, and gave us freedom and the idea of resting of Shabbat.

The Jewish people  
and other nations

The Sages relate that Moshe established Shabbat for the Jewish people in Egypt, before God commanded its observance, so that they would be able to rest for one day a week (*Shemot Rabba* 1:28):

“And he saw their burdens” (*Shemot* 2:11); [Moshe] saw that they had no rest. He went and said to Pharaoh: If one has a slave, if he does not rest one day a week he will die; and so with your slaves, if you do not rest them for one day a week, they will die. [Pharaoh] said to him: Go and do with them as you say. Moshe went and established the day of Shabbat for them to rest.

Moshe succeeded in convincing even Pharaoh of the importance of resting on Shabbat. The nations of the world learned from this over the course of history and adapted the idea of a weekly day of rest. But while the other nations have merely a day of physical rest, for the Jewish people the physical rest expresses the fact that we have been freed from slavery and act as free people. We rest on

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5. The prohibitions of performing labor on Shabbat, which significantly limit our activities on this day, can be seen as a form of slavery, but in truth they represent true freedom. We will expand on this point further below.

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## MEANINGS OF SHABBAT

Shabbat and internalize our responsibilities to God, Who granted us this freedom.