

In Parashat Yitro, the command to “remember” Shabbat (Exod. 20:8) is observed in order to recognize the eternal sanctity of the day on which God rested on the seventh day of Creation. This command is recapitulated in Deuteronomy with significant revision: the Israelites are to “observe” Shabbat (Deut. 5:12) in order to ensure that slaves (i.e., workers) are given an opportunity for rest. What are we to make of these dual aspects of Shabbat, one in which we reenact God’s primordial resting; the other in which we attempt to achieve a measure of protection for the economically vulnerable?

I found a key to unlocking this mystery in the above-cited insight of American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Dr. Geertz has recourse to the idea that rituals (what he calls “cultural patterns”) serve both as models of reality—our practices derive from how we think things really are—as well as models for reality: to model in our religious practices an idealized world. Shabbat, I think, works in exactly this way: it both shapes itself to reality, acting as a model of, and shapes reality to itself, acting as a model for.

Deuteronomy sets out an idealized economic scenario—workers and employers are leveled, and each is in charge of his or her own time, never to be exploited. Here, Shabbat takes reality as it finds it and reshapes that reality, acting as a model for a different, economically leveled world. Exodus, however, builds on the preexisting model of Creation, shaping itself to the world as it imagines it: God creates for six days and then ceases from creating, modeling for mortals the proper mode of living in the world: work for six days and rest on the seventh.

These two aspects of Shabbat reinforce each other. Reality is economically exploitative; Shabbat serves both as a material check on that exploitation (by forbidding it one day a week) and as a vision of what a non-exploitative world could look like. But the Torah is not content to let Shabbat be merely a piece of social justice legislation; it sees Shabbat as built into the structure of Creation itself, as the pinnacle of that creation. Emulating God’s rest becomes a powerful motivator for behaving ethically, and behaving ethically comes to be internalized as a manifestation of emulated God.

Parashat Yitro 5775

פרשת יתרו תשע"ה



The Bite of Desire

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“You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:14)

“You shall not covet . . . you shall not crave. . .” (Deuteronomy 5:17)

Do you covet? I do, and it makes me sad. Perhaps I’m too hard on myself. We all see things that we want, don’t have, and wish we did. There is too much in the world that is bright and shiny—offering pleasure and excitement—not to see it and feel the ache of its absence in my life. And I speak not only of the ephemeral delights that beckon. Even more difficult to contemplate are my fellow human beings whose personal and professional lives leave me despondent when measuring myself against them: the books that others have written that I haven’t, friends who seem to be better spouses, or more successful parents. The people who have paid off their mortgages; men who still have all their hair. In short, the list is endless.

But you must understand; what disturbs me most is not having the feeling, the desire, the craving itself. What disturbs me most is that I am the victim of my own coveting. For I am robbing myself of the joy and satisfaction I could feel in the life I am actually living. Our Rabbis say, “Who is wealthy? One who is happy with one’s portion (*hasameah behelko*)” (M. Avot 4:1). But how do I do that when it seems to me that at least some other people have a better deal than I do—materially, physically, relationally, professionally, or spiritually? What’s so great about my lot?

Truth be told, from the beginning of human history, a restlessness, a gnawing dissatisfaction with what we have because of what we

lack, has been at the heart of all our troubles. God places Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden, which contained “every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9). In the middle of this, God places the mysteriously named Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God invites Adam and Eve to partake of every delight in the garden, further sharing its wonders with Adam by bringing before him “all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky” (v. 19). Adam must have taken time to observe these creatures and understand something about them, for he gives each a name (v. 20). God places a single limitation on Adam and Eve’s enjoyment of the garden’s bounty: “Of every tree you are free to eat; but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it you shall die” (v. 16–17).

Adam and Eve lack for nothing; what else could they want? Ah, but the snake, that sinister slithering creature, hisses in Eve’s ear and plants in her mind the poisonous seed of desire. She is the first human being to covet and crave: the Torah (Gen. 3:6) describes Eve as seeing that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was “a delight (*ta’avah*) to see—alluding to the probation against craving (*lo titaveh*)—and “desirable (*nehmad*) as a source of wisdom,” anticipating the language later used to proscribe coveting (*lo tahmod*). What if I could uncover the mystery of the Tree of Knowledge, Eve asks herself. What if I could discover what it is that God has hidden from us? And so she bites into the forbidden fruit, as does Adam.

And something terrible and paradoxical occurs. The act of eating and enjoying the forbidden fruit reveals to them that in denying them the fruit of that one tree, God had indeed withheld from them a pleasure otherwise unattainable. Was the fruit sweeter than any other in the garden or did it just seem so because of the thrill surrounding its forbiddenness? It does not matter. They now know that prohibition is indeed a form of deprivation. As a consequence, neither they nor their descendants will ever again experience true wholeness; they will always feel as if something is missing. Adam and Eve experience this sense of privation as nakedness, and only clothing is able to restore their sense of wholeness. But for their descendants the pain of privation is not

so easily assuaged. Wealth, power, sexual intoxication—these and other cravings emerge. At best they are dulled; they are never quite extinguished.

We are descendants of Adam and Eve and inheritors of their tragic self-inflicted curse. What shall we do? Let us meditate again on the rabbinic dictum cited above. Let us read *hasameah behelko* in the active rather than the stative sense. Being happy is often no more than a passive state of indifference, resignation, or self-delusion. My challenge is to create a state of happiness for myself. And happiness is not the word we need here; the appropriate word is joy, something richer and more expansive. When I inhabit my life fully, when I learn to savor what I have and use it to full advantage, when I value the strengths that I have and make peace with my weaknesses, when I build connections with those I love rather than nurturing resentment against them—then I have built for myself a joyous life. And when I live in joy, the distractions of desire lose their power over me. And if my head is turned now and then by something tantalizing that is beyond my grasp, so be it. I need only turn back and move forward into the arms of the full and joyous life waiting to embrace me and to be embraced.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Shabbat: A Model of, and for, the World

William Friedman, Codirector and Rosh Yeshiva, Nishma:
A Summer of Torah Study in the JTS Beit Midrash

“[C]ultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning . . . to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.”

— Clifford Geertz, PhD, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 93