

Ki Tissa / Shabbat Parah 5786

כי תשא / שבת פרה תשפ"ו

## Kept by Shabbat

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Ahad Ha'am famously said: "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." Pretty remarkable coming from the founder of cultural Zionism!

Parashat Ki Tissa either supports or challenges Ha'am's words. This week's parashah relates one of the lowest moments in Israel's story—the sin of the golden calf—in which Israel dances before a god of their own making. Coming down Mount Sinai with the stone tablets inscribed by God's finger (Exod. 31:18), Moses sees Israel's frenzy and smashes the tablets. Moses spends the rest of the parashah picking up the pieces and working to restore Israel's relationship with God. The parashah ends with God giving a new set of tablets to Moses. The holy covenant between God and Israel is restored.

The great sin (חטאה גדולה, Exod. 32:21) of the golden calf is packaged tightly within the magisterial details related to the building of the Mishkan, Israel's portable temple. In Exodus 25–31, God outlines the plans for the Mishkan, replete with precious metals and incense recipes. Exodus 35–40 chronicles the building of the Mishkan. Notably, at the core of this sumptuous description are laws related to the observance of Shabbat, Exodus 31:12–17 and 35:2–3. In this literary way, holy time appears to lie at the center of holy space. The Rabbis suggest that the Torah's structure prohibits labor on Shabbat by revealing that even God's house cannot be built on Shabbat (Mekhilta Derabi Yishma'el 35:1).

The sin of the golden calf and its aftermath rests between the laws of rest. Why? Why is this shameful story framed by the laws of Shabbat? Its placement could challenge Ahad Ha'am's message by showing that Shabbat, in fact, cannot keep the Jews. In this reading, Israel's shocking apostasy is a disruption that shatters sacred time and proves it to be too abstract a concept for young Israel to embrace. Israel needs hard shiny objects like the golden calf to worship.

I suggest that the framework of Shabbat encompassing the great sin supports Ha'am's words. I don't see the sin as a disruption of sacred time. Rather, I see sacred time, Shabbat observance, as a means to contain the sin. The Torah frames Israel's sin in this way to convey how Shabbat can protect us from our basest selves and comfort us when we are our basest selves. Even when we behave terribly, as Israel did with the golden calf, Shabbat reminds us of God's holiness and our holiness. It is a sign of who we can be, as the Torah says: "It is a sign between Me and you for all generations that you know that I, God sanctified you" (Exod. 31:13).

Of course, Shabbat does more than prevent us from being base. It also elevates us, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel beautifully wrote: "It is one of life's highest rewards, a source of strength and inspiration to endure tribulation, to live nobly . . . The Sabbath is the inspirer, the other days the inspired" (A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 22).

I offer this reading because it reflects my experience of Shabbat. I did not grow up observing Shabbat. It was a

struggle when my husband and I decided not to cook or travel on Shabbat, and it still is. Let me say loudly and clearly, Shabbat is not entirely restful. Beating the Shabbat clock, hosting family and friends, is work. But it's work with great personal rewards:

**Shabbat sensitizes me to the rhythms of the natural world.** I live in New York City where I cannot see the night sky, and yet I know precisely when the sun sets and feel the seasons change as Shabbat grows shorter and longer.

**Shabbat connects my family and friends.** I host a party once a week, complete with bread, wine, and chocolate. Family and friends enjoy hours of meaningful and frivolous conversations, laughter, and some song and heated debate. My children have grown closer through Shabbat. They talk to each other, enjoy one another and, amazingly, have learned to talk to people of all kinds and opinions. Oh, and did I mention the chocolate?

**Shabbat provides me with precious time for self-reflection and self-indulgence.** I go for walks and, now that my kids are older, even take naps. Shabbat is also the only day that I spend hours reading for pleasure.

**Shabbat sustains my spiritual life.** As Rabbi Heschel writes: "The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man" (*The Sabbath*, 60). On Shabbat, I think about and pray to God, and am more aware of God's presence in the world, in my life, and in myself.

As the world around us digitalizes and anxieties and rage increase, I am more and more grateful for what Shabbat gives me. I need Shabbat. I think the Jews need Shabbat. In fact, the world may need Shabbat.

Dying from cancer, neurologist and author Oliver Sacks remembered observing Shabbat as a child and

wrote in the *New York Times*: "The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything, and I found myself drenched with a wistfulness . . . I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest" ("Sabbath," Aug. 14, 2015).

As it did for Israel in the Torah, even at its darkest moment, Shabbat frames my life. Shabbat provides me with fellowship, family memories, and intimacy. It centers me, rests me in good conscience, and restores me. It opens me to the holy and reminds me of my holiness. It inspires me to live a noble life. I am grateful that I keep Shabbat because I know the ways that Shabbat keeps me.

*This commentary was originally published in 2018.*