



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
YISRO/יתרו
WHAT SHABBOS IS REALLY ALL ABOUT

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In loving memory of
רי מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman who loved and supported Torah learning.



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There were periods of history in Eastern Europe when priests passionately tried to convert Jews to Christianity. They were even prepared to bribe them with money, all to demonstrate the “religious achievement” of having successfully brought a Jew under the wings of Christianity.

The story is told of a Jew with no livelihood... who decided turn conversion into a business. Every Sunday he'd go to a different church and tell the priest he'd like to convert—for a price. And so the priest would baptize him, the Jew would collect his money and go home, and the next Sunday, he'd repeat the whole charade in a different city.

One Sunday, he came before a priest who'd already been warned that some Jews were playing games. So the priest told him: “I'm prepared to baptize you and even pay you—but beware: I'll be observing you to see if you have truly become one of us. There'll be no games with me.” And so he baptized him, paid him, and sent him home with a warning that he'd be on his heels to check if he stood by his word.



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The following Friday, which was in a particular era when Christians did not eat meat on Fridays, the Shabbos dinner arrived—and how can a Jew not have chicken soup on Friday night? There's simply no such thing. Our Jewish trickster found himself sitting at the head of his table like a king, when suddenly, in burst the priest.

The priest stared at the bowl of chicken soup in front of the Jew and cried out: "Aha! I've caught you red-handed!"

The Jew was confused and said, "What do you want? I don't know what you're talking about!"

So the priest asked him: "Tell me—what is that in your bowl of soup?", pointing to the piece of chicken. The Jew responded, "It's a fish!" The priest asked: "A fish?! Since when do fish have legs?"

So the Jew said, "Don't worry—I'll explain the whole thing. You remember how I came to you on Sunday and you sprinkled 'holy water' on me and told that 'From this moment on, you are no longer a Jew but a good Christian?' Well, today, when I sat down to eat, I took a little 'holy water,' sprinkled it on the chicken and said, 'From now on, you are no longer a chicken but rather, a fish.' "

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Where indeed does the Jewish custom to have chicken soup on Shabbos, along with all the other delicious Shabbos foods, come from?

In this week's Torah portion, we read the Ten Commandments, which include the mitzvah of Shabbos.

The Torah states: "Remember the Shabbos to sanctify it...do not do any labor." From this we learn that it's forbidden to do work on Shabbos, since Shabbos is a day of rest.

However, we also must remember that it's Shabbos.

One might think: "Fine! So I'll just remember that it's Shabbos." Therefore, along came the Sages and established: "Remember it over wine," meaning that Shabbos must be mentioned over a cup of wine, from which comes the entire concept of Kiddush on Shabbos.

But still, where did all these delicious foods suddenly come from? How did they turn the Day of Rest into such a big party where every family gets together and eats a scrumptious meal? Where did this come from?

The mitzvah of Shabbos appears a second time in the Torah, in the repetition of the Ten Commandments in the Torah portion of Vaeschanan. There it states, "Guard



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the Shabbos to sanctify it," meaning that it's forbidden to do work on Shabbos. But even there, there's no command to make a celebration out of it.

On Yom Kippur, just before the Yizkor prayer, we read an interesting Haftarah (not the story of Yonah that everyone knows—that's read during Minchah) from the Book of Yeshayahu (58:13-14), which ends with the subject of Shabbos—and which gives us another perspective on Shabbos.

The prophet says: "If you rest your legs on Shabbos from doing your desires on My holy day..." The prophet first states that Shabbos is a day on which weekday things are forbidden—meaning that this is a day of rest, as we know already from the Ten Commandments.

But immediately after that, the prophet adds something completely new: "And you shall call Shabbos 'delight' to sanctify the honorable Hashem." This contributes two very important things: "delight" and "honor", meaning that one must honor the Shabbos and enjoy the Shabbos.

The prophet tells us that it's not enough to just not work on Shabbos—you need to turn Shabbos into the most dignified day of the week, and you need to enjoy Shabbos more than any other day of the week.



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Along come the Sages to set parameters of honoring the Shabbos. Maimonides states in the Laws of Shabbos, Chapter 30, that to begin with, “it’s a mitzvah to wash one’s face, hands and feet with hot water on Friday afternoon in honor of Shabbos.”

Secondly, in honor of Shabbos, one must change into Shabbos clothes—and Shabbos clothes must be different and better and dignified. On Shabbos, one simply needs to dress well.

Thirdly, one needs to get his house ready for Shabbos: to set the table as if for an important guest, to make the beds, and to light candles in the house.

This is what is meant by honoring Shabbos.

In addition to this, one needs to enjoy Shabbos. Maimonides asks, “What’s ‘delight’?” and immediately answers: “One needs to prepare a fatted cooked dish and a flavored drink for Shabbos.” In plain English, one needs to eat good food and lots of it, from which comes the entire concept of the Friday night meal—because a person has an obligation to enjoy Shabbos.

This is also why there is the custom of getting up a little later on Shabbos morning than during the week—because “sleeping on Shabbos is a pleasure”, and since it is a mitzvah to enjoy Shabbos, we extend our sleep.



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That's also why we light Shabbos candles on Friday eve: because with candles we accomplish both honoring Shabbos and delighting in Shabbos.

When one wants to lend a dignified atmosphere, one lights candles. When an important guest comes to town, they put up lights along the streets to emphasize that an important guest has come. Or when one wants to honor a certain holiday, lights are kindled throughout the city. It's the same thing with Shabbos: the candles of Shabbos add honor to Shabbos.

But it's more than that. In our day and age, at every formal dinner, candles are lit on every table because it adds to the enjoyment of the meal. That's also why we light candles on Shabbos—because it adds to the enjoyment of Shabbos.

Here, however, the question comes up: why indeed do we need to do all this? If G-d's entire goal is that Shabbos be a day of rest, then seemingly it would have been enough to simply refrain from work and let everyone rest as they see fit. Why does one need to wash and dress and prepare a good meal and stop everything before candle-lighting on the short Friday afternoons of winter? That's not restful at all!

So we are forced to come to the conclusion that Shabbos is more than a conventional "off day". On Shabbos, G-d wants the Jewish nation to become a more spiritual nation.



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During the entire week, we're busy with our material concerns. But on Shabbos, we are required to forget it all and deal with our spiritual needs: to strengthen our bonds with G-d, to learn more Torah and to surround ourselves with more spiritual things.

And as the prophet Yirmiyahu continued, by doing all the above we "then will delight in G-d". On Shabbos, one must enjoy spirituality—he or she must enjoy prayer, a Torah thought, a Shabbos meal with the family just as he or she would ordinarily enjoy a movie or a morning jog during the week.

And for a person to surround him or herself with spiritual things, he or she must first enter a spiritual state that he or she is capable of attaining in the first place. That's why, when it comes to Shabbos, the first order of business is to stop working. But that's not enough—one then must wash up and dress in special clothes, the table must be set and the foods must be tasty.

Only when a person's body and soul are resting is he or she conducive to enjoying spiritual things.

In other words, when a person is hungry or tired, it's impossible to discuss spiritual matters with him or her—the human body is stronger than all the intellectual theories and philosophies. And when a person is hungry, he's not exactly disposed to being surrounded by anything except food; there's little chance



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he'll suddenly feel a burst of love for G-d. Only after all the preparations for Shabbos is there a chance for "delighting in G-d."

Throughout Jewish history, in the course of all the years of exile, everyone kept Shabbos. But the troubles that the Jewish People had didn't let them have "oneg Shabbos," Shabbos pleasure. For example, when a Jew would find himself fleeing a war zone and would hole up in some place to stay there for the duration of Shabbos, it's hard to say that he would have true and spiritual Shabbos rest. Yes, technically speaking, he was keeping Shabbos—but his mind and heart would be far from at ease and he would be completely consumed with worry about what would happen after Shabbos. As a matter of fact, in many such cases our hero would look at the clock with eyes desperate for Shabbos to end so that he could continue fleeing.

Another example would be the historical Jew who had great difficulty supporting his family—yes, he kept Shabbos, but not necessarily with rest and spirituality.

It is precisely in our generation that the Jewish Nation finds itself in a material state that probably never occurred before in Jewish history: relative freedom from material worries. Thank G-d, almost everyone has enough for Shabbos today. It is specifically our generation that is able to observe the Shabbos in virtual perfection—and it is specifically the person who is not hungry or thirsty for bread or water who is able to hunger and thirst for G-d's Word.



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My dear friends: the Jewish nation has kept Shabbos for over 3,000 years—but Shabbos as we have it today never existed in Jewish history.

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