

# Shabbat: Why God Stopped

## Parshat Bereshit 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

We don't stop to think about it very often, but the oldest religious institution, not only in Judaism but in the world, is the Sabbath. According to the Torah, long before Sinai, long before Abraham and even before Noah, the Sabbath existed. In fact, the Sabbath was there right from the beginning; no sooner did God create the universe, but God chose to stop and bless one day above all others. It was to be a day for doing the opposite of creation - just being.

The Sabbath is often referred to as a day of rest, but the truth is, that's not how the Torah describes it. God didn't rest on the seventh day; **God ceased from creation**. There is a difference between resting and ceasing from one's labor.

If we listen carefully to the language of the Torah we might notice that the Sabbath is not about rest but about stopping. In today's Torah portion, we read: "The heaven and the earth were *finished*, along with their array. On the seventh day God *finished* the work God had been doing, and *ceased* on the seventh day from all the work that had been done. God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy because on it God *ceased* from all the work of creation that had been done." We're told four times in three verses that God finished creation and that God ceased to work on the seventh day.

So I think it's a fair question to ask: Why did God have to stop at the end of the sixth day? Why didn't God go on creating the universe? Let me take you all back to those first moments of creation. Of course, no one was there to tell us what happened, but based on the Torah's language, I'd like to imagine what was going on in the mind of God (if we can even speak of God as having 'a mind')!

Just imagine: for seven days or seven millennia or seven eons (however God tells time), God toiled over the creation. No detail was too small and God lovingly considered and reconsidered everything about this universe that God was fashioning: where the stars and the planets were to be placed, what the elements of creation should be, how trees would breath in carbon dioxide and breath out oxygen through photosynthesis, how a earth worm's digestive track would work and, most of all, the nature of the human being who was to be created 'in God's image.'

Now it was Friday, or whatever you want to call the final moment of creation. God had set six days for creation and the time was quickly coming to an end. God looked around and felt a sense of satisfaction: everything was pretty good. But God was unsure: some things weren't right. As good as the universe was, God thought it could be better. God needed was a little more time; another hour or two, or maybe a day. God thought: "Maybe I should give human beings three arms or an eye in the back of their heads. And fish - wouldn't it be neat if they could live on land or in water? And then there was the whole business of germs." As it important as they are, God knew that on occasion germs would make people sick. So maybe God could come up with microbes that would keep things going without causing havoc.

But the divine clock was ticking and it was Friday afternoon. God had set a time limit to creation and it was time to finish. The truth is, the universe would never be finished. There would always something to add, something to do differently. It was hard to let go...

God knew what had to be done. Even though the universe was incomplete, God realized that it was time to stop and let matters be. Knowing when to stop was as important as knowing how to create. If God didn't stop, then certainly the creatures of this new universe would never know when or how to stop either. And so, as the sun set on the sixth day of creation, God took a proverbial breath (since God doesn't breathe) and said *Kadosh* – “Let this day be holy; even the things that are incomplete, the things I could have done better; because a world without Shabbat is a world without a soul.”

I suspect that there is no one here today who hasn't felt the same way as God at one time or another. If only we had a few more minutes, another day or week. If only there were eight days in the week instead of seven. Our time gets filled with responsibilities and obligations and details. And the things on which we are doing, whether in the work place or at home – well, they could always be a little bit better, a little more complete or a little more efficient.

Learning that there are times to step back and leave things as they are is tough; knowing when to stop is an art. A painter has to know when to step away from a painting and every composer knows that if he doesn't stop composing, the concerto will be overworked. The Sabbath teaches us something more – if we don't know when to stop then we cease to be human as well!

One of my favorite essays about the Sabbath is by the Pulitzer Prize winning author and playwright, Herman Wouk, who was also an observant Jew. He writes what it was like, at a critical moment in the production of a Broadway play and with a deadline looming on the horizon, he would return home to observe Shabbat with his family. It wasn't an easy thing to do. Wouk writes: “I felt guilty of treason, holding to the Sabbath in such a desperate situation.”

Nonetheless, Wouk would walk away from the rehearsal, Friday afternoon each week and rejoin the frantic company on Saturday night. In between there were no phone calls and back then there certainly was no texting! Wouk writes: “The play has never yet collapsed in the meantime. When I returned I found it tottering as before and the anguished cries as despairing as ever...” But one thing was different: when Wouk returned on Saturday night he would be renewed and refreshed, ready to see the production in a new light. Once, seeing the change in Herman Wouk, his producer said: “Mr. Wouk, I don't envy you your religion but I envy you your Sabbath!”

Letting things go and letting things be – that is probably the hardest thing we must do in life. And the most important! Nothing is more essential to our existence. In an age when we have plenty of recreation and vacation time and we've turned entertainment into a fulltime pursuit, the idea of the Sabbath as a day on which we stop, we ignore our phones and e-mail and we don't text anyone is the most important gift we can give ourselves.

When we light the candles on Friday night everything stops whether or not it's done. Could things be better? Of course! Could we have done more? Definitely! But, like God, by stopping we become more than a machine or a force of nature or a cog in the wheel of life because we have the ability to sit still and enjoy just being alive.

So how does one begin to make Shabbat? Taking on the Sabbath is a major undertaking. In can't be done in one week or one month or even in one year. Certainly the Sabbath should not become

oppressive or restrictive. But there are first steps we can take in the discipline of Shabbat. This morning I want to mention only three:

First start by lighting candles on Friday night and making a Shabbat dinner. The moment that the Sabbath begins should become sacrosanct: it allows you to feel the transition from a world defined by labor and responsibility to a world in which we are part of the very make up of creation. Better yet it is a time to be with family and loved ones – or to invite others to celebrate Shabbat with you.

The second step in making Shabbat into a day of ceasing from labor is to remember that Shabbat is twenty five hours. It begins Friday night and ends Saturday night. Instead of scheduling and programming the time in between use it simply to be: read a book, take a nap, visit with a friend, or play a game of scrabble (If you want I'll tell you how to keep score without writing). Whatever has to be done will be there after sundown on Saturday night.

Finally give up one unnecessary activity on Shabbat. Don't answer the phone. Turn off your computer. Don't go to the grocery store – even if you're out of milk. And for heaven sake don't check your email! By giving up a single weekday activity, Shabbat will feel different and you'll feel different.

We learn in the Talmud that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the author of the Mishnah, was close terms with the roman emperor, Antoninus. Historians believe that Antoninus was Alexander Severus who ruled from 222- 235 and was known for his liberal attitude toward Jews and Christians. Once, Rabbi Yehudah entertained the emperor on the Sabbath. He served him cold dishes, which Antoninus thoroughly enjoyed. On another occasion, when the emperor visited, the Rabbi on a weekday, he was served hot dishes. Antoninus said, "I found the cold dishes more tasty than the hot." Rabbi Yehudah said: "The hot dishes lack one seasoning." Antoninus said: "Can there be anything lacking in the emperor's pantry – tell me what it is and I'll bring it to you!" Said Rabbi Yehudah: "These hot dishes lack Shabbat; does your pantry contain Sabbath?"

Learning to stop, to savor a day, to enjoy life without the outside stimulation is the greatest gift we can give ourselves. It has nothing to do with being Jewish – it is the joy of rediscovering our humanity. I believe that if the world could rediscover the Sabbath it would be healthier place to live!

And if God was able stop, so can we. Are we ready to meet this challenge? Are we willing to find out what life can really be?

Shabbat Shalom