



Yeshiva University

THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS–HERENSTEIN  
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

## **The Nails that Won't Run Away**

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### The Challenge of Shabbat

We are not OK.

The past few weeks have not been easy for Israel as a State and as a People. We are unfortunately not strangers to unprecedented tragedy and barbarism. And just as we've survived those attempts at destruction, we believe with perfect faith that we will ultimately emerge from this horror as well, growing stronger than ever before. Yet at this point, the wounds still seem too fresh to be soothed. I think that NYC Mayor Adam's words at the rallies he participated in accurately and succinctly sum up how we are all feeling:

“We are not OK.”

I feel inadequate to teach Torah that can illuminate the proper path through this heavy darkness, so instead I want to just share my thoughts about Shabbat, a day of rest when we do not feel rested... How are we supposed to approach this holy day? For me, there are two significant challenges:

The first is a question of emotion. What exactly are we supposed to feel on Shabbat? Isaiah the prophet instructs us to “call Shabbat a delight” – there is a commandment to enjoy Shabbat.<sup>1</sup> While we may certainly cry during our entreaties to God to protect and save our nation, tears of sadness and other practices of mourning are forbidden on Shabbat.

But even assuming that we could possibly close our mind's eye to the gruesome images of slaughtered babies, which we probably should not have looked at anyway, what about the living? Hundreds of our brothers and sisters are being held captive in Gaza. Thousands of loved ones have been called up to battle, courting death for nation and homeland. And millions of Jews cower in bomb shelters waiting out the all-to-familiar sirens portending imminent, ominous booms. How can we possibly enjoy Shabbat? How can we call it a delight?

The second challenge for me is not a question of emotion, *per say*, but of mindset. What are we supposed to be thinking about on Shabbat? Many of us cannot think about anything but Israel; it consumes every waking moment of the day. And that can be very exhausting and certainly out of sync with the ethos of a “day of rest.”

Yet, at least speaking for myself, there is also a small part of me that for just a moment desperately wants to think about anything *other than* the tragic situation in Israel.

Last Friday night, I ate a Shabbat meal at the home of a friend and the conversation meandered its way through a variety of topics, some of which had nothing to do with the war. There were words of Torah, some reminiscing, and even a few jokes. And for those moments, I felt like a stone had been lifted off my chest. I was suddenly free! And then, just as suddenly, thoughts of Israel and the terrors there returned. I was overcome with a tremendous sense of guilt that I momentarily forgot the plight of my people and homeland.

Like a black hole, we either cannot help but think of Israel or feel guilty for wanting to try to escape briefly from its gravitational pull. Has Shabbat with all the serenity it demands and promises inexorably crossed the event horizon, doomed to be sucked into this all-consuming vortex of entropy?!

## II – An Unfinished Week

But the challenge of mindset actually runs far deeper than merely *what* we think or do not think about. It also targets *how* we think.

Throughout these last few days, we have been bombarded by a relentless onslaught of information. Television, newspapers, the internet, and social media.. With near-instant communication possible around the world, we often hear about something directly from its source (or from a best friend’s best friend with all the unintentional, inevitable adulterations such as games of international telephone entail) before it’s reported by the formal news outlets. It is like drinking from a doomed firehose that never shuts off.

The same is true regarding our reaction to that information intake. We are constantly, and often instantaneously, reacting to what we see or hear about Israel. Thank God, the Jewish People have galvanized both as a united community and as an aggregate of grassroots individuals. We pray and learn. We post and we tweet. We attend rallies and contact political officials. We raise money and collect gear sometimes held up in customs at Ben Gurion Airport. Our responses, spiritual and temporal, are rapid and robust.

But much of that stops on Shabbat. We cannot read or post online. We cannot separate challah or call congresspeople. We cannot raise money for soldiers or for study. Both our ability to intake and react to information is severely curtailed on Shabbat.

That sharp contrast with our weekday routine (if you can call the trauma of existential warfare “routine”) is not accidental; the principle of *daber davar* abjures reading or discussing “work” both in the formal sense of forbidden activities (*melakhot*), as well as in the colloquial sense of business and projects we have yet to complete.<sup>ii</sup> Even thinking about such subjects is in diametric opposition to the mitzva of “*Oneg Shabbat*” [enjoying Shabbat], because we are

supposed to think of our work as complete, just like God was able to finish all of creation 5784 years ago.<sup>iii</sup>

Abie Rotenberg sweetly articulated this vision in his famous song “It’s Time to Say Good Shabbos:”

*You can spend time with your family. You’ll study and you’ll pray.  
Why not wait ‘till after Shabbos, oh those nails won’t run away.  
So put away your hammer, there’s nothing left to do. Go on home  
and find the gift, it’s waiting there for you. It’s time to say Good  
Shabbos, ‘cause all your work is done. Gonna spend the day  
together with the Holy One...*

The wording and sequence of the lyrics are quite intentional. We put down our hammer and refrain from work because there’s nothing left to do. But there’s only nothing left to do at the moment because we are waiting until after Shabbat to start rethinking about all those nails that won’t run away. In other words, we can only find the gift of Shabbat waiting at our home (family, study, and prayer), spending the day with the Holy One at rest, when we embrace the ostensible illusion that we’ve completed all our work just like God has.

But how can we do that this Shabbat? How can we put down our hammers and our phones and turn a blind eye to all those nails that lie before us?! Unplugging from that stream of information creates a vacuum of the unknown quickly filled by the fear that a large ominous question mark broadcasts. Truncating our ability to react leaves us feeling powerless, consumed by the incompleteness of the missions we have championed. To assuage the guilt of perceived detachment from our extended family in Israel, we often sublimate this fear and impotence into perseverance. If we cannot learn or do anything new, we focus instead on reinforcing our solidarity. All. Day. Long.

The line between healthy *nosei be’ol chaveiro* [sharing the burden of one’s friend] and a paralytic miasma of *atzvut* [depression] can be difficult to calibrate on a day when creative production is definitionally constrained, but the complete inhibiting of *menuchah* [rest] and any possibility of *oneg* [enjoyment] seems like a good metric. So how can we rest from our work on a day like this?

### III – The Blessing of Shabbat

Every Friday night during the *ma’ariv* prayer and *kiddush*, we say this verse (Genesis 2: 3) about how God created Shabbat: ויברך אלקים את יום השביעי ויקדש אותו כי בו שבת מכל מלאכתו אשר ברא אלקים לעשות. *And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. For on it He rested from all the work that God had created to do.*

We say this verse so often that we’ve become inured to its textual oddities. The Torah never actually explains how God blessed the seventh day. Ibn Ezra explains that the blessing of

Shabbat is unspecific because it is actually a universal qualitative enrichment of everything already present in creation. For human beings, this means that we are blessed with – in Ibn Ezra’s words – *sechel yiteira*, additional intellect. But what does this mean? Do we get smarter on Shabbat?!

The other difficult part of the verse is the ending: לעשות - “to do” is future tense. Why would the Torah characterize God resting from work He had “created to do?” It almost sounds like the creation which God rested from was the phenomena of work to be done and not necessarily its accomplishment.

Indeed, the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hassidic leader Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira (often referred to by his most famous work *Bnei Yissaschar*) explains<sup>iv</sup> that there are many things in this world that are still unfinished. Some will be completed by God. Others by the passive laws of nature and society. And many, the most important activities, must be done by humanity as God’s partners in creation. What gave God cause for rest was that all the raw ingredients the universe needed to ultimately reach a state of completion over history were already created. With that potential in place and faith in His handiwork, the God who transcends the constraints of linear space and time, could rest. History just needed to play itself out.

The goal of creation is to set up the *la’asot* [to do] of human civilization, seeding the world with all it needs to ultimately achieve perfection and completeness. And the blessing of Shabbat is the ability to enjoy the peace of mind that faith affords amidst an as of yet incomplete world. That is the *sechel yiteira* [additional intellect] that Ibn Ezra describes. Not intelligence, but perspective. For twenty-five hours a week, we are gifted with the ability to unplug from the world and transcend to a vantage point where we can appreciate the “long game” of our world.

From our faith in the future and memory of the past, we believe and know that we and this world possess everything needed to achieve the success that will ultimately be reached. It will just take little bit more time for the program to run. And it is on days when we have this perspective that we can achieve a modicum of rest. There may be more to do, there may be more nails needed to bang into place, but all the “work” is done.

#### IV – Echoes of the Past and Future

So what does that mean for us on these Shabbatot when Israel is at war?

On an emotional level, I don’t think it means we force ourselves to be happy. The halakhic consensus is that there is no mitzva of *simha* [happiness] on Shabbat.<sup>v</sup> Unlike a Yom Tov, Shabbat does not abrogate a shiva period of mourning. *Simha* and *aveilut* [mourning] are contradictory emotional states and thus mutually exclusive. But that is not the case for mourning and resting. The two can coexist in a modified fashion.<sup>vi</sup> The same is true for *oneg* [enjoyment]. One can experience pleasure without necessarily being happy. We’ve all eaten delicious food or done something enjoyable when we’re sad. It did not make us happy, but we could still appreciate it.

And such enjoyment can reflect and reinforce a state of rest, not as an analgesic to quash the feelings of sorrow, fear, and powerlessness, but as the embodiment of the broader perspective we have on Shabbat. The *Ohr Hachaim* notes<sup>vii</sup> that a literal reading of the words “כי ששת ימים ורביום השבועי שבת וינפש עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ” indicates that God created the heavens and earth for six days. In a sense, the world is only designed to last for six days, culminating in Shabbat when the work of the week is complete. Each new week is merely a ‘rerun’ of the first week of creation, with the only difference being that with each new cycle the potential seeded grows a little more. It’s the same six days, time and time again, with the gap between potential and execution shrinking each week as we continue to live out and give final form to God’s vision.

With this perspective, we have done everything we possibly could do during the last six days. All that davening, *tzedakah* [charity], and activism was everything that we could have done and everything we needed to do. And next week we will do it all again, nurturing the seeds we and God planted and giving them the care and time necessary to mature.

But to get from this week to next week, we need Shabbat. We need Shabbat to appreciate that all the groundwork for our success has already been laid out. And that can only happen when we disconnect from incessant onslaught of information and the rapid responses it demands. Unfettered from time, we can contemplate the long view of Jewish history and what truly lies at the core of who we are as a people.

#### V - A Taste of the World To Come

In *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expands upon a novel idea of Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich about Moses’ leadership.<sup>viii</sup> Upon witnessing the burning bush symbolizing God’s presence suffering along with the Jewish People in exile, Moses averts his eyes. This was not out of fear or reverence, Rabbi Rabinovitch argues, but out of his love for the Jews. Encountering God ‘face to face’ would enable Moses to see history from His timeless perspective.

With past, present, and future all held in view, Moses would have appreciated the necessity and even the blessings of slavery. He would have been able to recite *hatov vehetiv* [a blessing reserved for good tidings] instead of *dayan haemet* [a blessing reserved for death and other bad tidings] on the suffering of the Egyptian exile.<sup>ix</sup> As the faithful shepherd of the Flock of Israel, that was something he could not do. He needed to anchor himself in the presence and thus averted his gaze to the plight of his people. Embracing the virtue of theodicy would need to wait for the Messianic Era at the end of time when we can look back and connect the dots of God’s footsteps guiding and weaving between our own across the sands of history.

Unlike Moses, however, there is a time when we can have the best of both worlds: Shabbat as a “a taste of the World to Come.”<sup>x</sup> Just a taste. Not enough to summarily sever us from the present, but enough perspective to give the fortitude, foresight, and faith to focus on the potential and beauty that the present contains. The liturgy of *Kiddush* on Shabbat refers to God as

the “Ancient” Holy One (*Atika Kadisha*) because it is a day when our relationship with God transcends the myopic, rational present.<sup>xi</sup> It is day that commemorates the first Shabbat in history of creation, affirming our belief in the divinity of the past. It echoes the Shabbat of *Matan Torah* [Revelation], underscoring the precepts which guide us in the present. And it heralds the ultimate Shabbat at the end of days, declaring our faith in a perfected future.

This past week has brought out some of the best in the nation of Israel. The heartwarming stories of kindness, unity and prayer were our instinctive response to this crisis because they define us. That should be a source of pride and faith that we are going down the right path. Speak about that at the Shabbat table. Share the stories of all the instances of *Kiddish Hashem* [sanctification of God’s Name] you heard. Discuss the hopes for unity that you think can emerge from this crisis. And thank someone else for all the *mesirut nefesh* [personal sacrifice] they’ve demonstrated during these trying times.

We cannot stick our heads in the sand and ignore our present reality. It will not work, and it is morally wrong. But there is a bigger story at work, a broader perspective that Shabbat affords us. It may not fill us with joy in these hard times, but it can give us a brief pause for a little enjoyment and some much-needed respite.

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<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 58:13; Shabbat 118b

<sup>ii</sup> See Shulhan Aruch OC 307

<sup>iii</sup> See Exodus 20:9 and Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael ad loc.

<sup>iv</sup> Igra D’Kallah Genesis 2:3

<sup>v</sup> For an analysis of the debate see *Shiurim L’zeher Abba Mari* Vol. 1 pp 64-83

<sup>vi</sup> See Shulhan Aruch YD 400

<sup>vii</sup> Commentary to Exodus 20:11

<sup>viii</sup> Sacks, pp. 22-23 ; see also *Darkah Shel Torah* pp. 185-191

<sup>ix</sup> See Pesachim 50a

<sup>x</sup> Shabbat 119b

<sup>xi</sup> See Pri Tzaddik, Bereishit 6