

Parshat Yitro
Sabbath, Rest, and Freedom
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How do we value the time of others?

This week's *parsha* contains instructions, embedded within the Ten Commandments, to keep the Sabbath, a weekly day of rest:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work. And the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God. Do not do any work – you, and your son, and your daughter, your servant and your maidservant and your cattle, and the stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh, therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (Exodus 20:7-10).

This passage is often read as a beautiful egalitarian vision in which everyone – including servants, cattle, and strangers – is commanded to rest. But this command is not addressed to everyone. It is in fact only addressed to a single type of person – a head of household. It commands such a person to both keep the Sabbath himself, and also to ensure that everyone within his household, whose time and labor he controls, is also able to rest on the Sabbath. Part of what it means to keep the Sabbath, in other words, is to facilitate the rest of others who do not have the power to decide when they can rest.

Revelation at Sinai is not the first time that God commands the Israelites to keep the Sabbath. The command to keep the Sabbath already appears in the Torah in last week's *parsha*, in the discussion of the manna. In Exodus 16, God explains to the Israelites that they ought to collect a double portion of manna on Fridays, as they cannot collect or bake the following day, for “tomorrow is a solemn rest, a holy Sabbath for the Lord” (Ex. 16:23) The story of the manna is the first instance in the Torah in which the people of Israel receive the command to observe the Sabbath.

The Sabbath itself is mentioned in Genesis, at the conclusion of the account of God's creation of the world. But if we read that story carefully, we realize that that narrative contains no instructions to keep the Sabbath. It merely describes God's rest: “And on the seventh day God finished His work that he had made, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that he had made. And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it he rested from all of His work, which God in creating had made...” (Gen. 2:2).

In Genesis's account of creation, we learn that God rested on the seventh day; only in Exodus does God command the Israelites to rest on the seventh day. If God rested on the seventh day of the first week of creation, why did God wait until after the Israelites left Egypt to command that they, too, rest on the seventh day?

The manna scene provides a clue, for Moses and Aaron offer a rationale to the people for why they ought to observe the Sabbath: “In the evening, you shall know that the Lord has brought you out from the land of Egypt...” (Ex. 16:6). The Israelites ought to observe the Sabbath in order to “know” that God redeemed them from Egypt. In the story of the manna, we sense the people of Israel’s anxiety about resting on the Sabbath – this is a new practice, and they are nervous about how they’ll have enough food on the Sabbath. In this first story about Israel’s observance of the Sabbath, resting and anxiety about resting go hand in hand. God, Moses, and Aaron need to assure them that they will not go hungry, and that the doubled portion they collect on Fridays will last; the people need to experience this process themselves in order to cultivate the faith in God required to rest on the seventh day. (In a sense, also, God here serves as the householder, who creates the conditions for those in His care to rest). The Israelites aren’t yet used to having such control over their time and resources, having been enslaved in Egypt and then relying so heavily on God. Freedom is a process.

The Sabbath instructions in this week’s *parsha*, embedded within the Ten Commandments, also emphasize Israel’s new status as a free people. Exodus 19 begins as follows: “In the third month after the exodus of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt, on that day they arrived at the Sinai desert” (Ex. 19:1) When God addresses the people at revelation a few verses later, God again reminds them of their free status: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...” (Ex. 20:2).

In Deuteronomy 5, in the second biblical scene that recounts the Ten Commandments, the connection between the Sabbath and freedom is made even more explicit. God ties Sabbath observance directly to the memory of slavery in Egypt and redemption by God: “And you shall remember that you were enslaved in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). It is with this memory in mind that the heads of household are commanded to facilitate a day of rest for all those under their care – “so that those you enslave [your slave and maidservant] can rest like you do” (Deuteronomy 5:14).

Other biblical passages about the Sabbath emphasize this idea as well. Exodus 23, for example, commands: “Six days shall you do your tasks, and on the seventh day you shall rest – so that your ox and donkey may have rest, and the son of your maidservant, and the stranger, may be refreshed” (Ex. 23:12).

In order to observe the Sabbath, a person must have control over their time – they must have the freedom to decide whether to work or rest. And therefore, the Israelites needed to be free from slavery before being commanded to observe the Sabbath. The command to observe the Sabbath in this week’s *parsha* is thus not addressed to everyone, but rather only to those who control their time. God demands that such people not only rest on the seventh day but also allow those whose time they control to rest as well. For them, observing the Sabbath entails both ceasing from work and ensuring that others can do so, too.



On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration begins with an assertion that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,” and, in its 30 articles it outlines the freedom and equality of all people and the rights that every person has based on that foundation of freedom and equality, including that no one should be held in slavery or servitude, tortured, or denied protection under the law.¹ The declaration also asserts everyone’s right to freedom of movement, thought, conscience, religion, opinion, expression, education; to seek asylum; to marry; to own property; to assemble peacefully; to employment; and so on. Nestled within these grand proposals is a surprising inclusion. Article 24 states: “Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays without pay.” The connection between rest and freedom finds expression in this document dedicated to human rights. Rest, the declaration insists, is an integral part of what it means to have basic human rights. It is also this principle that underpins, for example, Fair Labor Standards Laws, which limit the number of hours employees can be required to work and the overtime wages they can collect. The introduction of such laws ultimately led, in the middle of last century, to the institution of a two-day weekend, which included not only Sunday but also Saturday.

Julie Rose, in her book *Free Time* (Princeton University Press, 2016), put a new spin on this old question. She writes that requiring rest can itself be limiting, and that what true freedom entails is free time – that is, the freedom to decide how to use one’s time, whether for rest or other activities:

As a matter of liberal egalitarian justice, all citizens are entitled to a fair share of free time – time not consumed by meeting the necessities of life, time that one can devote to one’s chosen ends. Free time is a resource that citizens generally require to pursue their conceptions of the good, whatever those may be. Without the resource of free time, citizens lack the means to exercise their formal liberties and opportunities. In order to ensure that citizens can exercise their freedoms, a central commitment of liberal egalitarian theories of justice, citizens must guarantee their fair share of free time. (1)

Rose argues that free time – rather than rest – ought to be an integral part of freedom. Her contention is predicated on the idea that only those who have at least some control over their time are truly free. Her argument highlights the relationship between time and freedom, and helps explain why, in our biblical sources, the Israelites could not receive the commandment to rest, and let those in their households rest, until they themselves were free.

But if we take Rose’s argument seriously, then we must acknowledge that resting each seventh day is not a pure expression of absolute freedom (which would entail, as Rose advocates, control to do whatever one wants with one’s free time). It is rather an expression of devotion - and, indeed, even servitude - to God, who commands that rest.

¹ See <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

God thus decided to rest on the very first seventh day. But God waited to demand that the People of Israel rest each seventh day until they were free - and then, God commanded them to observe the Sabbath weekly as a remembrance of both God's creation of the world as well as God's freeing them from slavery. Embedded within the Sabbath is a contraction between freedom and service, and it is given expression in the command to cease from work and to rest.



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