

PREPARING FOR SHABBAT

By Craig Hill

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I would like to give some brief thoughts and simple “how tos,” particularly directed to those who have not been used to regularly observing Yahweh’s Shabbat, but would like to begin. (Shabbat is the Hebrew word, while Sabbath is the English equivalent.) Let’s first talk about attitudes and preparation.

In Leviticus 23 Yahweh talks about seven feasts about which He says in verse two, “these are My feasts.” The word feast is the Hebrew word *mow’ed*. This word would be better translated in English as “appointed time” or “appointed meeting.” So these “feasts” are really appointments with Yahweh. He then goes on to say in verse 3 that the first of His appointed times even before the seven “feasts” is the weekly Shabbat. So, the first thing to understand about Shabbat is that this is a day in which you have an appointment with God. I believe that He has established an appointment with us every week on Shabbat, but many times we have not shown up to the appointment, even though He was there waiting.

So Shabbat is a special time each week that Yahweh has appointed to spend with us. However, this is not meant to be burdensome or just another time of religious ritual. Yeshua told us in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” In other words, God appointed this time of rest to bless us, not to burden us further or add to us meaningless religious ritual. Let’s look at the type of attitudes and preparation that will make Shabbat a true blessing to us.

We know that Shabbat was designed to be a day of rest. So let’s first look at what rest might entail. Most of us really don’t know how to rest. I have gained much insight recently from chapter five on Shabbat in a book entitled, “To Be a Jew” by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin.¹ I would like to quote below several pertinent parts of Rabbi Donin’s chapter on Shabbat. Let’s first look at “rest.”

“‘Resting’ on the Sabbath has a totally different meaning to the Sabbath observer than that which is conveyed by the word ‘relaxing.’”

The Torah gives two motifs for the Sabbath, which we will examine. The first is as “a memorial to the creation of the world.”

In six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them... and rested on the seventh day... therefore God blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:11)

“It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested.” (Exodus 31:17)

The second motif is as “a memorial to the exodus from Egypt.

“...remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deuteronomy 5:15)

Speaking of understanding Shabbat as a memorial to the seventh day rest of God in creation Rabbi Donin states the following.

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“What lesson is derived from such a memorial? What does it testify? Besides, what does the Torah mean to teach us when it says that “God rested”? Is He human that He tires and needs physical rest? It is to teach us that just as God stopped creating physical things on the seventh day, so is man to stop manipulating nature. He is to let all things run by themselves. By desisting from all such labors, we not only acknowledge the existence of a Creator, but also emulate the Divine example.”

Speaking of understanding Shabbat as a memorial to the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, Rabbi Donin states the following.

“This motif beckons us to remember our slavery, the better to cherish freedom. If the Sabbath on the one hand emphasizes our servitude to God, it also stresses our freedom from servitude to human masters.”

“Sabbath is thus a weekly-recurring divine protest against slavery and oppression. Lifting up his Kiddush cup on Friday night, the Jew links the creation of the world with man’s freedom, so declaring slavery and oppression deadly sins against the very foundations of the universe. Can one be surprised that tyrants of all times did not permit Israel to celebrate the Sabbath?”

The honoring of Shabbat is one of the first things the Roman Emperor Constantine did away with in the fourth century when he became a “Christian.” He actually made it a capital offense to honor Shabbat or celebrate the Biblical feasts of the Lord. Rabbi Donin continues:

“But slavery doesn’t only consist of doing forced labor for which one doesn’t get paid or gets paid very little. Slavery is not only a situation in which cruel task masters stand over you and tell you that you can’t stop, that you must finish the assigned task before you go home and rest. Have you ever stopped to think that you yourself can be your own cruelest task master, that you are capable of driving yourself in a manner that no slavemaster ever drove his slaves?

You’ve got to finish the job. You can’t stop. There are deadlines to meet, there are obligations to fulfill, there are things which must be taken care of. There are conferences, there are business commitments. There is house cleaning, laundry, shopping, the need to get ready for an evening out. We drive ourselves day in and day out, and we think we are free!”

“How many, in the midst of all their pressing obligations and commitments, their worries and concerns, business and personal, can just stop everything and say: “Yes, I have so many things to do. But for the next twenty-four hours, I am a free man. I will cut myself off from the world, and all its concerns, and do nothing or limit myself to spiritual pursuits”? How many can deliberately and consciously say – not “I have

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really finished, therefore I can rest” – but **“though I have not finished, it is as though I have. I now stop for there is no such thing as must do.**

The Sabbath observer can and does! He has no taskmasters. For twenty-four hours, he is free.

“The great scholar of Jerusalem, Shlomo Joseph Zevin, suggests that there are two types of rest. One is rest from weariness, as a result of tiredness. Such rest is only to enable one to continue working. Though it brings relief and rest to the body, it does not bring joy to the soul.

The second type of rest comes in the wake of completing some project, after reaching some goal. This type of rest comes at the completion of one’s work, not as a “rest” during it. Here a man sits back and contemplates his achievement or his handiwork. This kind of rest is a delight to the soul. It brings a sense of release; it provides a deep satisfaction accompanied by a sense of peace and tranquility.

The rest that the Sabbath day is intended to reflect is the second type. “Six days shall you labor and do all your work.” Imagine to yourself when the Sabbath arrives after six days of work that all your work has been completed in that time. The Sabbath observer feels just this way. And therein lies the meaning of his freedom from servitude.

Modern man, in fact often has a romantic and idyllic vision of an isolated island in the sea as a place where just such a peaceful calm may be found. It’s a romantic dream in our culture – an island to escape to with those who are dear to us. Yet the acquisition of such an island as a personal retreat is beyond the reach of most people. The Sabbath, however, serves as a precious island in time, removed from the mainland of the rest of the week, providing just that peaceful calm that contemporary man aspires to but never quite reaches. But the Sabbath is within our reach!”

I have found many of Rabbi Donin’s comments above very helpful in understanding Shabbat and how to prepare myself for it each week. Over the last few years I have had some experience in trading commodities and options. Because the markets in which these instruments trade are many times very volatile, there is frequently some measure of emotional pressure and concern regarding what the movement of a particular market may be doing to my account at any moment, either rapidly increasing or decreasing it’s monetary value. However, late Friday afternoon all of these markets stop trading until Sunday evening. Even the electronically traded markets that move 24 hours per day during the week shut down and stop trading on Friday afternoon.

The moment that the markets stop trading on Friday afternoon, I have often felt an immediate emotional release inside. The feeling is, “ My account cannot change until Sunday evening, and for the next 48 hours, I don’t have to think about it, or concern myself with these markets at all.” I believe that this is the feeling that Yahweh intended for us to embrace the moment the candles are lit on Erev Shabbat. Everything stops moving, and I release all stress and emotional pressure that I have been carrying. This

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doesn't mean that these pressures on my life don't exist. It simply means that during this dedicated, set aside (holy) time, I choose to be a free man, and not to carry those pressures. Honestly, I think that most of us will have to learn to do this, as we are used to carrying stress, worry and pressure all the time.

Just as no one really has the extra money to tithe, no one really has the extra time to honor Shabbat. At first it feels like a stretch for everyone. However, just as there is a blessing that comes to the one who tithes, there is also a blessing that comes to the one who chooses to remember, observe and honor the first of Yahweh's mow'ed appointments with us, called Shabbat.

PREPARING YOUR FAMILY FOR SHABBAT

Let me now again refer to some wise counsel given by Rabbi Donin in his book regarding how to prepare your house and your heart for Shabbat. Here are some of his suggestions.

“To properly honor the Sabbath and to capture its beauty and spiritual delight, it is necessary to prepare for its coming.

The preparations in a household should be no less elegant than the preparations the same family might make to receive a distinguished and beloved guest.

What might a family do if a very honored guest was coming for dinner?

- A man would plan on getting home from work in plenty of time to shave, bathe and get dressed.
- A mother would see to it that she and her children were washed and dressed in clean, fresh clothes.
- The dining table would be set in advance as on a special festive occasion; one's best dishes and table ware would be used.
- Dinner would not only be prepared in advance, but the menu would be a little more elaborate than that served at a daily meal.
- A house would be thoroughly cleaned, or at least straightened up.
- Every member of the family would take care of the most pressing chores before the guest arrives.
- One can also imagine that the members of a household might warn friends, neighbors, and business associates not to interrupt by telephone calls while their guest is visiting with them. It would not only be rude to the visitor, but disturbing to all if there were constant interruptions.

All this is done before the honored guest arrives. This is also what must be done to prepare properly for the Sabbath.”

SHABBAT SHALOM!

ⁱ Donin, Hayim Halevy, *To Be a Jew*, New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1972, Chapter 5