



8

Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course

The Shabbat

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

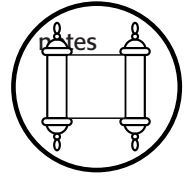
Copyright© 2003 *Shabbat Shalom*.

The Shema Israel Bible Correspondence Course is a project of *Shabbat Shalom*.

Mail: *Shabbat Shalom*
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1535
Fax: (269) 471-6202
e-mail: sshalom@andrews.edu

Bible Study – Lesson # 8*

The Shabbat



notes

Shabbat Shalom!

Upon the arrival of the *Shabbat* (Sabbath) at the end of the week in Israel, it is customary to nuance the traditional greeting of *shalom* (peace) to “*Shabbat shalom*.” This association of *Shabbat* and *shalom* is significant. The *Shabbat* is the only day which deserves to have its name embellished with *shalom*. There has never been any occurrence of “Monday” or “Tuesday *shalom*.” On the other hand, the *Shabbat* sees itself as well adorned with *shalom*. The expression “*Shabbat shalom*” has liturgical connotations to the Jewish worshiper’s ears as she or he opens the prayer book on Friday night to the words “*shalom aleikhem*.” The reason for this particular affinity between the *Shabbat* and the *shalom* can be explained by the fact that the meaning of the word *shalom* contains all the dimensions of the *Shabbat*. Yet, *shalom* means more than “peace” (*shalom*) and wholeness (*shalem*)—more than communion with others and oneself. *Shalom* also implies beauty; it thus brings into the Sabbath feelings of awe and wonder and awakens in everyone who enters into the Sabbath the slumbering nostalgia which yearns for another space and another time.

**Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader’s Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*

1. What historical event of the past should the Shabbat be a reminder of to every human being?

So the heavens and the earth and everything in them were completed. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing. So on the seventh day he rested from all of his work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. He rested on it. After he had created everything, he rested from all of the work he had done (Genesis 2:1-3).

“Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Do all of your work in six days. But the seventh day is a Sabbath in honor of the Lord your God. Do not do any work on that day. The same command applies to your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and your animals. It also applies to any outsiders who live in your cities. In six days I made the heavens and the earth. I made the oceans and everything in them. But I rested on the seventh day. So I blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

2. What other particular event has been given to Israel as a reason for observing the Shabbat?

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. The Lord your God reached out his mighty hand and powerful arm and brought you out of there. So he

has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:15).

3. Was the Shabbat also designed for the non-Jews?

“Suppose outsiders want to follow me and serve me. They want to love me and worship me. They keep the Sabbath day and do not misuse it. And they are faithful in keeping my covenant” (Isaiah 56:6).

Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath day was made for man. Man was not made for the Sabbath day” (Mark 2:27).

- *“A gentile may not observe the Shabbat as Jews observe it until he becomes a proselyte” (Devarim Rabbah 1:18).*

4. Did the Shabbat commandment precede the gift of the Torah on Sinai?

Then the Lord spoke to Moses. He said, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people must go out each day. Have them gather enough bread for that day. Here is how I will put them to the test. I will see if they will follow my directions... Moses said. ‘Today is a Sabbath day in the Lord’s honor. You won’t find any flakes on the ground today. Gather them for six days. But on the

seventh day there won't be any. It's the Sabbath'” (Exodus 16:4, 25-26). (cf. vs. 22, 23)

5. What is the place of the Shabbat in the Decalogue?

“Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Do all of your work in six days. But the seventh day is a Sabbath in honor of the Lord your God. Do not do any work on that day. The same command applies to your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and your animals (Exodus 20:8-10).

- “The Shabbat is equal to all the other commandments of the Torah” (*Exodus Rabbah* 25:12).

6. Why did Jesus like to perform his miracles on Shabbat?

“This woman is a member of Abraham’s family line. But Satan has kept her disabled for 18 long years. Shouldn’t she be set free on the Sabbath day from what was keeping her disabled?” (Luke 13:16) (cf. Matthew 12:12; Mark 2:27)

- “Have I then given you the Shabbat for your pain? No, I have given it to you for your

good” (*Devarim Rabbah*,
Ekeh).

notes

- “The Shabbat was committed unto you, not you unto the Shabbat” (*Mekhilta* on Exodus 31:13).

7. Did Jesus intend to abrogate the Shabbat?

“Do not think I have come to get rid of what is written in the Law or in the Prophets. I have not come to do that. Instead, I have come to give full meaning to what is written” (Matthew 5:17). (cf. Matthew 24:20)

8. Did the early Christians keep the Shabbat?

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as he usually did. And he stood up to read (Luke 4:16).

Paul and Silas passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia. They came to Thessalonica. A Jewish synagogue was there. Paul went into the synagogue as he usually did. For three Sabbath days in a row he talked about the Scriptures with the Jews (Acts 17:1, 2).

9. Why did Christians choose later to replace the Shabbat with Sunday?

- Constantine's decree: "The Emperor Constantine to A. Helpidius. All judges, townspeople and all occupations should rest on the most honorable day of the sun" (*Code of Justinian* III.12, *de feriis*, 3).
- Canon 29 of the Council of Laodicea: "Christians may not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, honoring rather the Lord's Day [Sunday] by resting."
- Marcion ordered: "*to fast on Saturday...* Because it is the rest of the God of the Jews... we fast on that day in order not to accomplish on that day what was ordained by the God of the Jews" (Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses* 42, 3, 4)

10. How did this charge affect relations between Israel and the Church?

- "Over the centuries the Jewish community has interpreted the Church's decision to worship on Sunday as a rejection of the very heart of

Jewish experience—rejection of the Law. This move to Sunday worship made it exceedingly difficult, if not virtually impossible, for the Jew to give any serious consideration to the Christian message, or even enter into Christian-Jewish dialogue without suspicion. The Jew saw the Church’s move to Sunday worship as a call to abandon the Law and embrace a “new” covenant that now replaced the “old” covenant, which was thus declared ineffective and passé. In short, to become a Christian was the equivalent of leaving behind the Jewishness of one’s past, hardly a viable option for any faithful Jew to consider.” (M. R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 80).

11. Is the commandment of the Shabbat still relevant today?

Then the Lord spoke to Moses. He said, “Tell the people of Israel, ‘You must always keep my Sabbath days. That will be the sign of the covenant I have made between me and you for all time to come. Then you will know that I am the Lord. I make you holy (Exodus 31:13).

12. What other divine institution has been associated with the Shabbat in the Bible? Why?

The man said, “Her bones have come from my bones. Her body has come from my body. She will be named ‘woman,’ because she was taken out of a man” (Genesis 2:23-24).

“All of you must have respect for your mother and father. You must always keep my Sabbath days. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:3).

13. How should we experience the Shabbat?

“Do not work on the Sabbath day. Do not do just anything you want to on my holy day. Make the Sabbath a day you can enjoy. Honor my holy day. Do not work on it. Do not do just anything you want to. Do not talk about things that are worthless (Isaiah 58:13).

- *“He who takes delight in the Shabbat, receives his heart’s desires” (Shabbat 118).*

14. Who is responsible to “make” the Sabbath “holy”?

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:3). Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy (Exodus 20:8).

15. Why is the Shabbat a sign of hope?

notes

“I will create new heavens and a new earth. The things that have happened before will not be remembered. They will not even enter your minds. So be glad and full of joy forever because of what I will create. I will cause others to take delight in Jerusalem. They will be filled with joy when they see its people” (Isaiah 65:17-18).
(cf. Revelation 21:1)

- “What is the foretaste of the world to come? The Shabbat” (*Bereshit Rabbah*, 17:7).
- “The Shabbat is one sixtieth of the world to come” (*Bereshit* 57b).

¹ Jacques Doukhan, “Like a Tree in the Wilderness,” *Shabbat Shalom*, August 1996, 19-23.

² Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951/1995), p. 111.

Like a Tree in the Wilderness¹

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath?

“**T**he seventh day is a palace in time,”² wrote Abraham Heschel dusting off the ancient definition of the Hebrew prophets for whom the Sabbath was a “sign.” Instead of being a sign in space, like a monument eroded by time which becomes a sign of death, the Sabbath is a sign in time that stands out with actuality and freshness—a palace erect in the midst of hovels, a sublime beauty which inspires our song and welcomes us.

A Sign of Remembrance

The Sabbath is essentially linked with memory. This is most explicit in the Ten Commandments, where one is called to “remember”³ the Sabbath. Memory is also involved when an event of the past is concerned, as is the case of the Sabbath. In fact, the Sabbath is the act of remembrance *par excellence*, for it recalls an absolute past: the origin of the universe and of humanity, the past of all things and of all peoples. The association in the Decalogue (The 10 Commandments) of the fourth commandment of the Sabbath with the fifth commandment, honoring father and mother, also alludes to the importance of memory. Not only are the two commandments juxtaposed; they are also the only two to be formulated in a positive way: “Remember. . . Honor . . .” All other commandments are negative (“Thou shall not . . .”). This indicates a common preoccupation. These

³ Exodus 20:8.

two commandments exhort one to remember by evoking the origin and roots of man: the fourth commandment pointing to the creative act of God and the fifth to the procreative act of the parents.

The binding together of Sabbath and memory, does not inspire a philosophical flourish nor a beautiful truth to meditate upon, for remembrance implies the concrete, historical fact that thrusts its roots into reality. Hence, the Sabbath reminds us that Creation is not the result of an autonomous process, but an intervention from above at a given moment in time, with a beginning and an end.

But the Sabbath is not only a remembrance of creation; it is also a remembrance of the Sabbath itself, as indicated by Exodus 20:8: “*Remember the Sabbath day . . .*” This remembrance, as developed by the commandment, goes beyond mere mental strain to involve the whole person in a concrete act. To remember the Sabbath is to reactualize the Sabbath in one’s existence, week after week. This involves a gesture of “setting apart” the time of the Sabbath, distinguishing it from other times. One implication of this is fidelity to the “real time” of the Sabbath. In a society where not only the meaning of the Sabbath but also the time of the Sabbath is lost, it is the elements of time and content that are entwined in the remembrance of the Sabbath.

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:15.

⁵ 2 Chronicles 36:21

⁶ Exodus. 15:8; Deuteronomy 4:32, 33; Isaiah 43:15-17; 44:24.

⁷ Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 14:1-6; John 5:1-6; 9:1-38.

⁸ Luke 13:16.

A Sign of Hope

In remembering the event of creation, the Sabbath emerges as a sign of hope, in that it evokes the miracle by which light shone out of the shadow and plenitude was drawn from the void. Furthermore, the Sabbath is used in the Bible as a sign of liberation from the Egyptian yoke,⁴ and later as a sign of liberation for the Babylonian exiles.⁵ These two events involve the powerful act of recreation, evoking the original act of creation.⁶ In the New Testament, many of Yeshua's miracles occurred during the Sabbath.⁷ Hope was revived for the woman crippled for eighteen years who found herself "loosed from this bond on the Sabbath."⁸

But the Sabbath contains an even more explicit lesson of hope, one that is linked directly to its source. The story of Genesis teaches us that the Sabbath was the first full day for man and woman, their first full day with God. The Sabbath reminds us, therefore, of the first experience of man's communion with God. This dimension of the Sabbath is noted by the prophet Isaiah, who associates the delights of the Sabbath with the delights of God: "*If you . . . call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord . . . , then you shall delight yourself in the Lord.*"⁹ The Sabbath is described here as the moment in time when one can delight in the experience of "*God with us.*" This notion is also implied in the author's association of the Sabbath to the *shekhinah*, sign of God's presence. One can also observe that the

⁹ Isaiah 58:13, 14.

¹⁰ Genesis 2:2

¹¹ Exodus 40:33-38.

¹² 2 Chronicles 5:14; 2 Chronicles 7:12.

¹³ Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14.

phrase “*wayyekal melakhah*” (He completed the work), introduces the Sabbath at the end of creation.¹⁰ It is the same phrase which introduces the *shekhinah* at the end of the construction of the sanctuary by Moses¹¹ and of the temple by Solomon.¹² These are the only three passages which use this phrase, as though to emphasize the link between the Sabbath and the *shekhinah*.

As a sign of God’s presence, the Sabbath nourishes our deep longing for the day when His presence shall be fully revealed. Significantly, the Sabbath is referred to as the “day of the Lord,”¹³ an expression which also designates the day of the *coming* of the Lord, which will put an end to all misery, inaugurating a new era. The Sabbath “day of the Lord” points to the other “day of the Lord” as the sign *par excellence* of hope.

A Sign of the Absolute

The Sabbath evokes the absolute, as it refers to a reality which transcends us, a law which comes from beyond, a gift and sign from God.

The Sabbath is a sign of the absolute primarily because it is divine law. The way the Sabbath is introduced in the Decalogue is significant: “*Remember . . .*” This is not an ordinary imperative. We are dealing here with an absolute infinitive, which denotes an imperative of emphasis. The Sabbath is therefore perceived as an imperious law which imposes itself absolutely from

¹⁴ Leviticus 23:2-4.

¹⁵ Exodus 16.

above. Certain elements even suggest that the Sabbath predominates the other laws. For example, in the Levitical account, the Sabbath is distinguished from the other festivals and days of rest.¹⁴ In the Biblical tradition, the Sabbath has been preserved as the first commandment which men and women observed immediately after Creation; the first couple inaugurated their existence and the course of human history by observing this commandment. The Sabbath was also the first commandment given to Israel immediately after their flight from Egypt.¹⁵ Among all the Levitical laws, the Sabbath is the only commandment which is not annual, the only day independent from the natural and astronomical cycles, which has no moral or natural cause to justify its observance. The only *raison d'être* of the Sabbath is religious. It is, in fact, the only commandment which implies faith.

The Sabbath is also a sign of the absolute in that it embodies the gracious act of God's love, what the psalmist celebrates as *hesed* (loving kindness) of God.¹⁶ The Sabbath reminds us that we are nothing but the outcome of divine generosity. In fact, the gift of the Sabbath was given neither as an answer nor as a reward for human work. The Sabbath reminds us that it was God who took the initiative to give men and women the rest which they did not deserve, enabling them to enjoy a communion which they had not sought. In practice, the Sabbath is also

¹⁶ Psalm 33:5, 22; 36:6; 57:11; 63:3; 108:5, etc

¹⁷ Psalm 31:16, NIV.

a pedagogy of *hesed* in that it teaches us the value of non-action in relation to God; in abstaining from work on the Sabbath, we demonstrate our total dependence on God. What we have is not the result of *our* work or *our* effort, but a gift from God. It is *hesed* which causes the psalmist to burst out in song: “*Let your face shine on your servant, save me in your unfailing love [hesed!]*.”¹⁷ At the heart of the Sabbath, law and the grace customarily opposed in Christian tradition, find reconciliation. By observing the fourth commandment, the believer does not exclude the grace of God. Quite the opposite, it is by observing the law that the believer expresses faith that his salvation depends *entirely* on the grace of God.

Finally, the Sabbath is a sign of the absolute in that it testifies of God Himself, the One who is absolutely “Other.” From then on, the Sabbath is called the “day of the Lord.”¹⁸ It is the day which the Lord has made,¹⁹ the sign of God.²⁰ The Sabbath day is therefore a time intrinsically sacred, which stirs in us the deepest respect along with the desire to observe the day chosen by God, rather than another decreed by human tradition. The Sabbath is more than a day of rest and recreation at the end of the week; it is the concrete expression of our faith in God, the sign that our values depend on Him.

¹⁸ Exodus 20:10; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:14.

¹⁹ Genesis 2:1-3

²⁰ Exodus 31:15.

²¹ Deuteronomy 5:15.

²² Exodus 31:17; Exodus 20:20.

A Sign of Love

And yet, the Sabbath finds no existence outside of the human person, for it is not only an action of God on behalf of humans; it is also an action by humans for God.²¹ The Sabbath is sanctified inasmuch as two partners are involved. It is a sign between God and his people.²² However, the human “doing” is but an answer to the divine “doing.” An expression of God’s love toward mankind, the Sabbath is also our expression of love for God. This understanding of the Sabbath clearly suggests that humans, not God, should be the ones to adapt. The Sabbath exhorts us to abstain from doing our own will: *“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, . . . if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,”*²³ The Sabbath also becomes an act which confronts the reality of life and not a disembodied “spiritual” truth. The believer who observes the Sabbath engages in an experience which obliges him or her to meet with God. In this encounter the believer silhouettes self against an indifferent world occupied elsewhere.

The human encounter with God does not, however, exclude encounter with others. On the contrary, human communion with God is fulfilled only through one’s communion with

²³ Isaiah 58:13, 14, NIV.

²⁴ This median position of the Sabbath in the Decalogue takes on a particular meaning in the light of the ancient Middle Eastern documents. The seal which engaged the partners of the alliance was in fact apposed at the center itself of the tablet (see Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King, The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 18, 19.

others. The social dimension of the Sabbath is already implied in the story of Creation. It is even more explicit in the Decalogue, where all family members, the slave, and the stranger are invited to enjoy in this day the same privileges of liberty and rest as the Israelites. The Sabbath is the day when we remember that “the other” is an equal and deserves our respect. It is also the day when within the family gathering, the arts of listening and dialoguing can be cultivated. The way the Sabbath is situated in the literary structure of the Decalogue confirms its emphasis on both God and mankind. The text of the Sabbath is located at the center of the Decalogue, geometrically and thematically speaking.²⁴ The fourth commandment is comprised of 55 words (in Hebrew) and is situated between 67 words (first three commandments) and 41 words (last six commandments). The commandment of the Sabbath comprises approximately half the words of the whole Decalogue (55/108) and occupies its center. Thematically, the first three commandments are concerned with the relationship between God and man, whereas the last six commandments involve the relationship between humans. The Sabbath functions, then, as a bridge between the two groups of commandments and is concerned with relations between God and humans, as well as, between humans.

Sign of God’s love for us, but also sign of our love for Him, the Sabbath suggests that the vertical relationship does not exclude the horizontal but that they are interdependent.

A Sign of Life

The Sabbath celebrates Creation and thus implies a positive appreciation of life. The senses, food, and beauty are well received and fully enjoyed. In the second century, the Gnostic Marcion, who despised the human body and creation, rejected the Old Testament and its God *YHWH*, the God of Creation. He claimed that *YHWH* had been replaced by the God of the New Testament, the God of salvation. The spiritual domain has since been placed over the physical one, the “despicable flesh.” This dualism has affected Christian anthropology. The soul, the spirit, has been separated from the body. Along the lines of Platonism, salvation has then been understood as a deliverance from the body. Since Marcion, many Christian theologians have favored salvation over Creation. One of the most interesting symptoms of this dualistic mentality is detected in the Christian shift from the Sabbath memorial of creation to the Sunday memorial of salvation. Sabbath keeping expresses, then, a religious philosophy that says yes to Creation and involves the body in the “spiritual” process of salvation, affirming the unity of the human person.

Sign of the past and the future, the Sabbath tears us from our present reality to rekindle our memories and set our hopes ablaze. Sign of the absolute and of love, the Sabbath teaches us to open ourselves to others—to man and to God.

Perhaps one reason humans have lost the meaning of the Sabbath is because they have lost their roots and perspectives. Today, the

Sabbath is no longer a sign of the glorious event of Creation, or the extraordinary hope of a recreation. People are comfortably settled in their Sabbath, which has shriveled into a mere “weekend,” or an obscure ritual.

If humans have lost the sense of the Sabbath, it is because they are unable to open up to others. It must be noticed that the three monotheisms that issued from the Bible—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all observe a different Sabbath, as though to avoid any possible encounter with each other—perhaps also to avoid stumbling upon God.

From the depths of the ages to our time, the Sabbath is a sign for Jews and Christian alike. Even more, Sabbath is the sign that comes *between* the Jew and the Christian. The Sabbath is one of the first elements which determined and even maintained the open wound of their separation.

Separated by time, Jews and Christians have lost sight of each other. What better way for them to meet than to worship at the same time as indicated by the God of Abraham, Israel, and also Paul.

The Sabbath would then become the sign of a miracle – that we remember, that God is more than a tradition – a sign of life and hope in something else, like a tree in the wilderness.

notes

שבת