

Parshiot Vayakel-Pekudei-Parah 5772, 2012:

*Shabbat: The Ultimate Gift of Love*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Miriam bat Bilhah Batsheva.

Orthodox Judaism is very difficult, if not impossible to define, since there is no unanimity of opinion as to what exactly one must believe or do to be considered one of its adherents. As a result, Orthodox Jews differ widely in their faith structure, mitzvot orientation, and mode of ethical behavior. Yet, upon reflection, belief in the existence of G-d, and dedication to, and fulfillment of the laws of Shabbat, Kashrut, and Mikvah, *because Hashem commanded us to do so*, appear to be the major constitutive elements and essential foundation of contemporary Torah Judaism.

The first of our three *parshiot* begins with verses that discuss the vital necessity of *Shemirat Shabbat* (Shabbat observance). Perhaps because of its public nature, this mitzvah has become the litmus test of Orthodox Judaism. Then, too, Shabbat, along with *Brit Milah* (Ritual Circumcision), Torah study, and Mikvah (the laws of Family Purity), is historically one of the mitzvot for which we Jews have sacrificed a great deal. Our *mesirat nefesh* (sacrifice) has endowed this holiest of all days with a unique status: It will never be nullified. No matter how dire and devastating the circumstances we have faced, Shabbat has been, and always will be, observed. Thus, the *Mechilta de Rabbi Yishmael*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot*, states the following in its analysis of *Sefer Shemot*

31:17:

“It [Shabbat] is a permanent sign,” this tells us that the Shabbat will never be nullified from the Jewish people. So, too, does one find, each and every thing [mitzvah] for which the Jewish people have sacrificed their souls [i.e., lives] remains in their hands [i.e., continues to be observed]. [Conversely,] each and every thing [mitzvah] for which the Jewish people have **not** sacrificed their lives no longer remains in their hands [i.e., no longer continues to be observed]. For example: Shabbat, *Brit Milah*, Torah study, and Mikvah, are those [mitzvot] wherein the Jewish people sacrificed their very souls to guarantee their observance, and they continue to observe them [today]. [Conversely,] the Holy Temple, the Jewish court system, the Sabbatical years, and the Jubilee years, wherein the Jewish people did not sacrifice their very lives [to guarantee their observance], no longer continue to be observed. (Translation and emphasis my own)

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, *Shemirat Shabbat* emerges as one of the hallmarks of an individual dedicated to the Torah way of life. Thus, the well-known secular Jewish writer, “Ahad Ha’Am,” (Asher Hirsch Ginzberg, 1856-1927) is famous for the statement: “More than the Jew has kept Shabbat; the Shabbat has kept the Jew.”

Given the above, Orthodox Jews naturally focus upon the many details intrinsic to Shabbat observance. These *halachot* (laws) are crucial to fulfilling both of the commandments of the *Aseret Hadibrot* (The Ten Utterances or Commandments) that refer to Shabbat: “*Zachor*” (Remember) and “*Shamor*” (Guard or Keep). Unfortunately, our intense and legitimate concentration upon properly observing Shabbat may sometimes prevent us from fully appreciating its dazzling beauty. We need, therefore, to refocus our attention on a fundamental idea: Shabbat is a magnificent gift. It is a present from our Creator that inextricably links us to Him:

Raba b. Mehasia also said in the name of R. Hama b. Goria in Rab's name: If one makes a gift to his neighbor, he must inform him [beforehand], as it is written, “in order that you may know that I the L-rd sanctify you.”[*Sefer Shemot* 31:13] It was taught likewise: “In order that you may know that I the L-rd sanctify you: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: “I have a **precious gift** in My treasure house, called the Sabbath, and desire to

give it to Israel; go and inform them.” (Soncino translation, *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 10b with my emphasis and modifications)

The great Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen of Radun, Poland, 1838-1933)

explained this passage with the following inspirational parable:

...that *matanah tovah* [precious gift], is like a ring - a ring that a husband gives a wife to symbolize their special relationship, their love, their devotion. That is the “*ot bayni uveneichem*,” [“sign between Me and you”] that is our wedding band that the *Ribono Shel Olam*, G-d, has given us. Sometimes husbands and wives have arguments and fights, and things are not perfect, but the wife never removes that ring as long as they remain married. No matter what happens, she wears that ring...Shabbat is the ring.

(Quoted by Rabbi Yissocher Frand in a public address and reproduced at: <http://www.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5758/shabbos.html>, modifications my own)

*Shemirat Shabbat* thus emerges as “the ring” that symbolizes our steadfast and unwavering commitment to Hashem. It represents our devotion to G-d and His devotion to us. In sum, it epitomizes His love for us, and our love for Him. It is a weekly reminder that Hashem is truly He who is “*habochere b’amo Yisrael b’ahava*” (“Who chooses His people Israel with love,” translation, *Artscroll Siddur*).

As we strive to observe Shabbat to the best of our knowledge and ability, may *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* help us remember that Shabbat, in and of itself, is the greatest of all His gifts to us, second only to life itself. In addition, may we always remember that Shabbat connects us to our Creator like a bride to her bridegroom. In this way, may our lives be sanctified and endowed with new and enriched meaning. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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