

This month's study with  
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



*“Remember the  
Sabbath day by  
keeping it holy.”*

— Leviticus 23:42



## *Shabbat: A Day of Delight*

**T**he noted Jewish philosopher Achad Ha'am once wrote: “More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.”

The Sabbath is more than another ritual in Judaism; its essence permeates the very fabric of Jewish life. It is at the core of Jewish observance and the anchor of Jewish continuity.

More than anything, the Sabbath is a sacred point of connection with God. We work for six days in the material world, but on the seventh, the Sabbath, we recalibrate our focus on God and all things meaningful.

The significance of the Sabbath and its centrality to Jewish life is expressed in how we refer to the days of the week. Instead of separate names for each day, such as “Sunday,” “Monday,” etc., in Hebrew, the days of the week are named according to their proximity to the Sabbath. So Sunday is called “the first day (toward the Sabbath),” Monday is “the second day (toward the Sabbath),” and so on.

Only the seventh day, the Sabbath, has a name — *Shabbat*, which means “to rest.” However, while many people rest on the weekend so they may work the following week, we work during the week in order to rest on *Shabbat*. The Sabbath is the endpoint, the goal, the culmination of the week.

The Sabbath teaches us that while we must work in life, life must never become about work. The Sabbath serves as a weekly reminder that life is about connecting with God, our families, friends,

communities, and ultimately, making the world a better place. The Sabbath, having one day a week for rest and contemplation, is one of the greatest gifts that Judaism has brought to the world.

However, for all that we can say about the Sabbath, it has to be experienced to be truly understood. In Isaiah 58 we read, “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight . . . then you will find your joy in the LORD, . . .” (vv.13–14). The Sabbath is a sublime delight, one that can only be experienced, not explained. Indeed, we do not “grasp” *Shabbat* as much as it grips us.

In today's day and age, with the constant barrage of information and motion due to modern technology, the *Shabbat* experience is more important than ever. Perhaps there is no generation more in need of *Shabbat* than our own.

In this month's *Limmud* we will discover the origins of *Shabbat* and the nature of this sacred day. We will study the reasons behind the institution of this holy day and learn about the customs and rituals observed on *Shabbat*.

While we cannot fully convey the environment and emotions experienced during an authentic *Shabbat*, we can uncover many of the qualities that make this day uplifting, inspirational, and meaningful. We will begin to understand God's intention when He “blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Genesis 2:3).

*Rabbi Eckstein*



## An Island in Time

*“For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” — Exodus 20:11*

**T**he Bible teaches us that one of the reasons for the Sabbath is so we will remember that God created the world. Just as God went about His work for six days and then rested on the seventh, so, too, do we go about our daily lives for six days, but rest on the seventh.

*Shabbat* literally means “to rest.” However, there is a great misconception about what it means “to rest” on the Sabbath. The kind of work that we refrain from isn’t strenuous, time-consuming activities in favour of easy and recreational options. While we aren’t allowed to flip on a light switch, we could, in theory, do 200 push-ups.

The work that we are commanded to abstain from on the Sabbath is creative work. Since the goal is to remind us that it is God, and not us, who is the ultimate Creator, we refrain from any creative activities.

For six days we are God’s partner in making the world a better place. We use our God-given talents to create new technology, lifesaving medical breakthroughs, art, and all kinds of wondrous things. However, in order to place our accomplishments in the right perspective, we stop creating, doing, and achieving for one day

out of seven. We are at rest.

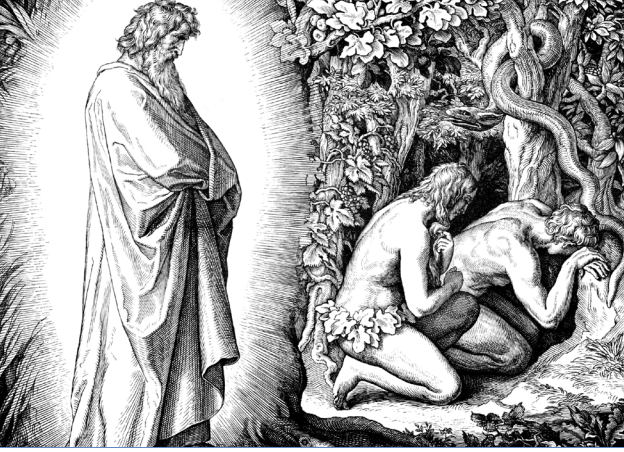
On the Sabbath, we remember that God created the world. We remember that we are not in control. By letting go of our creative work, we recognize that we do not run the world. The byproduct of this weekly break is that we are able to break free from the tyranny of our schedules without worry. We are able to press the pause button on our life and take time to focus on what really matters.

For 25 hours no one checks email, answers a phone, or gets in a car to go anywhere. We are simply present — with each other and with God. This is what it means to “rest” on *Shabbat*.

*Shabbat* is the panacea for the work life that often takes over our personal lives. It is also a wake-up call for those who might think that they are responsible for their own success. *Shabbat* is our weekly reminder that God is the ultimate Creator, and we are merely His creations through which He does great things. We are both humbled and elevated on *Shabbat* as we pause and recognize our true place and our ultimate purpose.

## think about it...

1. Studies have shown the average amount of time that families spend together these days is 36 minutes a day. How might this lack of family time affect the next generation? How might observing a weekly day of rest together serve as a counterbalance to this trend?
2. Not all rest is the same. Sometimes we can do nothing all day and still feel restless and agitated, while other times we can spend an hour doing something restorative and feel refreshed and reinvigorated. What kinds of activities restore your soul?
3. Reflect on how modern technology has in any way negatively affected the way that you interact with others. What might you do in the coming week to change that?
4. A recent poll has shown that 40 percent of North Americans work well over 50 hours a week, and similar rises have been cited in other Western countries. How do you feel about how you fill your hours in any given week? For one week, keep a time diary to track how much actual time you spending working, with family or friends, watching TV, or doing leisure activities. Consider how you correct any imbalances in your life right now.
5. Do you tend to view God’s commands as a gift of blessing or a duty of personal obligation? How might you see the command to observe the Sabbath as a gift more than a mere obligation?
6. What would our lives look like without a weekend? Consider that the Bible brought the idea of having time off every week to the world through the concept of the Sabbath. Had God not given us this idea, what might our world look like?



## A Point of Connection

*“For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a day of sabbath rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it is to be put to death. Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day.”*

— Exodus 35:2–3

**W**hen Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day of Creation, Jewish tradition teaches that had they not sinned, the first Sabbath would have lasted forever. Adam, Eve, and all humanity would have lived lives of complete harmony – with God, with nature, and with each other. However, once that sin was committed, Adam and Eve were allowed to stay in Eden for just that one *Shabbat* and then were exiled into a harsher, more disparate existence.

Yet, every week, as we celebrate *Shabbat*, we remember what was and what can yet be again. In Hebrew, the word *Shabbat* shares the same root as the word *teshuva*, which means “repentance,” or more accurately, a return to God. This teaches us that in keeping *Shabbat* we return closer to God and the state of harmony that we are destined to reach once again.

The Sabbath is a kind of portal, a point of connection. Just after the Israelites in the desert sinned with the golden calf, and Moses brought down a new set of tablets to replace the ones he smashed, Moses taught the people about two things: *Shabbat* and the Tabernacle. Moses understood that the sin of the calf was an expression of the

people’s deep desire to connect with God in a tangible way.

The Tabernacle served as a place where the people could more deeply and profoundly commune with God. *Shabbat* serves as a time when people can more easily connect with God. While we no longer have a Tabernacle, we still have *Shabbat* which remains even today as a point of connectivity between the people and their Creator.

*Shabbat* also encourages connectivity between people. The only prohibition explicitly declared in the Bible is the prohibition to ignite fire. The Jewish sages explain that this directive speaks about more than just physical fire — it also refers to refraining from lighting fires between people in the figurative sense.

We need to abstain from anger toward one another or any other destructive feelings. Rather, we are to enjoy the soft glow of the *Sabbath* candles lit before *Shabbat* that allow us to see the faces of our loved ones in a good light.

Finally, as we refrain from working the land, our animals, or changing our circumstances, we are at peace with and connected to our entire world. *Shabbat* is a time of tranquility, a point of connectivity, and a taste of eternity.

## apply it...

1. Set aside one night a week, either on a Friday night or any other night, to share a leisurely meal together with family and friends, without the pressure of anyone having to go anywhere else.
2. Spend 24 hours unplugged. For one day, do not use the phone, the computer, or any other electronic devices. Instead plug into God’s Word, nature, and the people around you.
3. Take a day off to truly rest. Instead of doing errands or chores, try to prepare in advance so that you can spend a day doing something that serves your soul. Take a walk, study the Bible, pray, and reflect on life without any distractions.
4. Create clear boundaries between work and non-work time. Don’t be a slave to work! Whether it’s a job or housework, be sure to set an end time to every day and every week.
5. Praise God for the abilities and talents that He has placed within you so that you can do the amazing things that you do every day. Recognize that without God, we could not even lift a single finger.
6. Try this exercise: Clench your fists as tightly as you can for 60 seconds and then let go. That’s a taste of *Shabbat*. We work hard for six days, and then on the seventh, we let go and rest.



## A Light of Freedom

*“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” — Deuteronomy 5:15*

**T**ime is the first thing that is sanctified in the Bible: “Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Genesis 2:3). In declaring the seventh day holy, God taught us that time is sacred. Time is also what was taken from the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. The defining characteristic of slavery is not being the master over one’s own time. It’s the slave-driver who tells his slave what to do and when.

When God redeemed the people from Egypt, they regained ownership over their time. It is not surprising then that one of the two purposes of the Sabbath is to remember the Exodus. When we take one day each week to rest instead of work, we remember that we were once slaves, but God saved us and gave us back the sacred gift of time.

But what are we doing with our time? One can be physically free and yet still be enslaved — a slave to work, a slave to other people’s opinions, and a slave to bodily desires.

When Moses came to free the children of Israel, he sought to free them body and soul. He didn’t just say “let my people go,” but rather “let my people go so that they

might serve God.” Indeed, the redemption from Egypt was not complete until the giving of the *Torah* on Mt. Sinai.

True freedom can come only from serving God. On *Shabbat*, we cease serving anything else — not work, other people, or our material aspirations. Instead, it is a holy day dedicated to serving God.

On *Shabbat* we demonstrate that we are truly free. We are not slaves to our work — we stop working no matter what we are involved in doing at the time. We are not slaves to technology — we take a break from our phones and our computers. We are not slaves to meaningless labour — we spend our time pursuing a meaningful life through Bible study and prayer.

The *Sabbath* is ushered in with the lighting of candles. The Jewish sages taught that gazing at the *Shabbat* candles can repair our vision. In other words, during the week, we can lose perspective. Our vision can be skewed regarding our values and goals. However, the light of *Shabbat* reminds us that we are free and that we must use our freedom to live meaningful lives. As our vision is corrected during *Shabbat*, we are ready to live more powerfully in the week to come.



# Customs and Rituals Observed Today



The laws and rituals regarding the Sabbath are vast and can be split into two categories: activities we abstain from doing on *Shabbat* and activities that we intentionally and specifically do on the Sabbath. Both these elements are necessary to create the ideal atmosphere for experiencing the Sabbath as it was meant to be experienced.

When it comes to activities that we refrain from doing on the Sabbath, the laws are gleaned from the actions that went into building the Tabernacle. There are 39 categories mentioned in the Bible associated with building the Tabernacle that are considered creative work.

Literally, volumes of books have been written on this topic explaining and defining what constitutes as creative work that cannot be done on the Sabbath. Some examples include cooking, building, and working the land. It's important to understand that these prohibitions were instituted not to limit us, but to allow us to rise above our everyday lives.

Aside from the things we don't do on the Sabbath, there are many rituals and customs that accompany us through the Sabbath from beginning until the end. These activities actually begin before the Sabbath. We buy food and prepare festive meals during the days leading up to Friday night. Many Jewish women make their own *challah* bread, the special bread eaten on *Shabbat*, or otherwise buy several loaves. Learn more about the significance of *challah* with our *Limmud* study here.

It is customary to invite guests or extended family to

share our meals. On Friday afternoon, the house is cleaned, the table is beautifully set, and family members wash and dress in their finest clothing. The Sabbath begins at sunset when the woman of the home lights the *Shabbat* candles and recites the traditional blessings to usher in *Shabbat*.

Once the Sabbath has begun, we go to the evening prayer service at the synagogue where we sing psalms and songs welcoming the Sabbath, referred to as "the bride." Once the service has concluded, we begin the Sabbath meal. The meal begins with traditional songs, blessing our children, reciting the *Kiddush* (blessings over wine), and eating the special Sabbath bread, *challah*. The meal is enjoyed and usually concludes with more singing and the Grace after Meals.

In some families, the husband recites Proverbs 31 to honour his wife as an *ishet chayil*, or woman of valour. To learn more about this time-honored tradition and the characteristics of an *ishet chayil*, order our free devotional resource, *A Woman of Valour*, here.

*Shabbat* day is enjoyed in a similar manner. Time is spent in synagogue, studying the Bible, at beautiful meals, and being together with friends and family. After sunset, the Sabbath concludes with a *Havdalah* ceremony, literally a "separation" ceremony.

It is the official act that separates the holy Sabbath from the new week. *Havdalah* includes blessings over wine, fire, and a special fragrance that is said to revive the soul which already misses the Sabbath and longs for the next one.