





## RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

### Words That Changed the World

Shabbat introduced the idea of a day of rest to the world. Discover how the Sabbath reshapes our understanding of work, holiness, and human dignity.



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### Jonas Phillips and the Sabbath Witness

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*Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* by Rembrandt, 1659

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"Words That Changed the  
World: The Meaning of the  
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**About the author**

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## Words That Changed the World

Shabbat introduced the idea of a day of rest to the world. Discover how the Sabbath reshapes our understanding of work, holiness, and human dignity.

In explaining the Sabbath sanctity, the imperative of Sinai to remember the Sabbath, we look not to the commentaries of the Rabbinic corpus or the insights of the exegetes, but first and foremost to the greatest Jewish statesman of modern times.

In May of 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin faced a legislative explosion from the rival parties in Israel's Knesset. What controversial decision brought upon him this sudden rain of oratorical abuse? Was it perhaps the details of the peace deal with Egypt? Was it the war in Lebanon? Was it the repercussions of the strike at the nuclear reactor in Osirak? No, what inspired the ire of the opposition was that Begin had the temerity, the outrageous initiative, the stubborn Jewish pride, to issue an order that El Al, Israel's national airline, would no longer fly on the Sabbath — showing the emotional link to the observance and faith of the Jews of thousands of years past, a profound reverence for the generations gone by that would set him apart from his predecessors as prime minister.

Begin waxed eloquent to the Knesset defending himself from the opposition, describing the love and the dedication that the denizens of his own hometown in Eastern Europe had shown for the words of what we colloquially call the fourth commandment. As Yehuda Avner, who was there, describes, Begin said,

Forty years ago I returned from exile to Israel. Engraved in my memory still are the lives of millions of Jews, simple ordinary folk eking out

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a livelihood in that forlorn diaspora where the storms of anti-Semitism raged. They were not permitted to work on the Christian day of rest, Sunday, and they refused to work on their day of rest, Saturday, for they lived by the commandment *zachor et yom haShabbat lekadesho*, remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

So said Begin, each week they foreswore two whole days of hard-won earnings. This meant destitution for many, but he said, they would not desecrate the Sabbath day. So Israel's Prime Minister in the Knesset remembered his brethren from his hometown. But then Begin, as he was wont to do, connected his own experiences to Jews from a different culture and land, thereby highlighting what unites Jews across time and space.

As catcalls from across the Knesset increased, Begin spoke suddenly about Sephardim and their own dedication to the Sabbath sanctity, and he said:

In Greece there is a port city called Salonica, which had an extensive Jewish population before the war. Most of the port workers there were Jewish, and on Shabbat they did not work. Those stevedores would forgo their pay rather than desecrate the Shabbat. Non-Jews, gentiles, accepted this as a fact of life, and the port was closed on the Sabbath day. Imagine that.

At this, a socialist member of the Knesset accused Begin of taking Israel back to the dark ages with his order to shut down El Al on Shabbat. And in response, Begin sought to point out the irony of the socialist, the purported friend of the working man, assaulting the Sabbath, which is all about providing rest to the working man. And he said,

Let me tell you something, my dear socialist friend. Shabbat enshrines a social-ethical principle without peer. Shabbat is one of the loftiest values in all of humanity. It originated with us, the Jews. It is all ours. No other civilization in history knew a day of rest.

He went on, and when somebody snickered and said "put on a yarmulke" to Begin, Begin bellowed back, "*Chutzpah!* I speak of our people's most hallowed values, and you dare to stoop to mockery? Shame on you!" And then Avner describes how, raising his arms as he was wont to do, Begin waxed eloquent about how Shabbat, throughout the centuries, bestowed dignity on human beings and how the Jews gave the concept of Shabbat to the world. And so, he continued,

Are we in our own reborn Jewish state to allow our blue and white El Al planes to fly to and fro, as if to broadcast to the world that there is no Shabbat in Israel? Should we, who by faith and tradition heard the commandment at Sinai, now deliver a message to all and sundry through our El Al planes: 'No, do not remember the Sabbath day, forget the Sabbath day?'

And then, to those who spoke of the monetary loss that would be incurred, Begin had a ready rejoinder. He said, "There is no way of assessing the re-

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ligious, national, social, historical, and ethical values of the Sabbath day by the yardstick of financial loss or gain.” He added,

If it were not for the Shabbat that restored the souls and revived the spiritual lives week by week of our long-suffering nation, our trials and vicissitudes would have pulled us down to the lowest levels of materialism and moral and intellectual decay. More than Jews have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jews.

Avner reports Begin then turned and limped painfully away from the podium. But he suddenly stopped, turned, and said,

This house should know, it is not necessary to be an observant Jew to appreciate the full historic and sacred aura that enshrines this perfect gift called Shabbat. Its prohibitions are not arbitrary. They provide insulation against corrosive everydayness, they build fences against invasions by the profane, and they enrich the soul by creating a space for sacred time. In a word, one need not be pious to accept the cherished principle of Shabbat. One merely needs to be a proud Jew.

Nowhere have I seen such an eloquent and succinct summation of what the Sabbath means to us better than what Avner gives us from Menachem Begin. I will therefore use Menachem Begin’s own words in this essay to unpack the enduring importance of God’s command at Sinai, “*Zechor et yom HaShabbat*,” remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

It is particularly apt that Menachem Begin spoke of the Jews of Greece and their loyalty to the Shabbat because it was originally Greece, Hellenistic culture, that launched the first attack on the Jewish Sabbath, that sought to utilize the Sabbath against those who kept it. According to the book of Maccabees, Sabbath profanation marked one of the first decrees of the Syrian-Greek Hellenists and of King Antiochus in Judea. And then, after the breakout of the Jewish revolt against Antiochus, the enemy specifically chose the Sabbath when traditional Jews were at rest to attack. And originally, the Jewish rebels chose not to fight back, and a thousand of them died. And then the book of Maccabees reports,

They said to one another, if we all act as our brothers have and refuse to defend our lives and beliefs, we will shortly be destroyed. They decided on that day: whosoever will attack us on Shabbat, we will fight back. We will not die like our brothers in the caves (1 Maccabees 2:43-44).

The Jews who decided to fight on the Sabbath day to save their own lives against the enemy thereby embodied the Talmudic principle that the salvation of life overrides the Sabbath. But the import of this principle is misunderstood at times as implying that the Sabbath is meaningless when compared to our concern for life. Of course, the fact that saving lives overrides the Sabbath reflects the Jewish belief that human life is infinitely precious. But the rabbinic texts also sought to stress that for Jews in the way they live, the Sabbath illustrates why we feel our lives are so worth living. Shabbat is one of the things that we seek, we dream, we desire to live for, one of the central experiences we seek to live for.

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And one of the explanations in the Talmud for why Jews such as these were willing to fight on the Sabbath, one of the explanations is noteworthy: “*challel alav Shabbat achat k’dei sheyishm’ru harbe Shabbatot.*” These Jews who would save their lives on the Sabbath will violate one Sabbath so that they can keep many Sabbaths. For the Jews, in other words, the promise of future Sabbaths, the promise of future sanctity, was one of the central aspirations that made their lives worth living. And this indicates that Shabbat for Jews is not merely a day of relaxation.

It is fundamentally different from the modern notion of weekend or vacation, though people often confuse these two concepts. George Will, in his important political book *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*, notes that in the 1930s, batting averages were so high that at a certain point during that decade, the whole National League was batting an average of over .300.

The answer he gives is that there were no relief pitchers then, and so the pitcher had to keep going without a break, and so he got slower and the batters were able to hit. But today, he says, “most starters have their pitching arms in ice when relief pitchers put the game on ice.” And for many, that’s what the weekend is. It’s like a break. That’s their relief pitcher before they have to start the week again.

But that’s not what Shabbat is. The Talmud speaks about acquiring on the Sabbath a *neshama yetera*, an extra or enlarged soul. And building on this, Rabbi Norman Lamm rightly distinguished between secular society’s concept of leisure, which is vacation, in Hebrew *chofesh*, and Judaism’s notion of leisure, which is active invigoration of spirit. Or as Rabbi Lamm put it, not *chofesh* but *nofesh*, which is a play on *nefesh*, the Hebrew word for soul.

*Chofesh*, vacation, versus *nofesh*, spiritual leisure. *Nofesh*, Rabbi Lamm writes, is more than self-discovery. It is the use of leisure for self-transformation: “We take our creative talents and we turn them inwards and create a new real self.” As he adds, “it is re-creation, not relaxation.”

Rabbi Lamm notes that the Talmud speaks of an extra soul, and he understands that that means that Shabbat is dedicated to discovering new spiritual capacities within ourselves. As he writes, “there is some kind of undeveloped facet of personality, a spiritual dimension of which we remain unaware in the normal course of events.” Shabbat for Rabbi Lamm is to discover this and bring it to the fore.

As he puts it, *nofesh* means transforming the self by growing into a *neshama yetera*, an expanded soul. And this, of course, is what Begin said in the Knesset. As he put it, “the rules of Shabbat are not arbitrary. They build fences against invasions by the profane, and they enrich the soul by creating a space for sacred time.”

But how does this transpire? How does this enrichment of the soul to which Begin refers, this *neshama yetera*, this extension of the soul take place? Why is it important to stop what we are doing in order to expand our souls? The answer lies in the fact that if we do not stop our everyday activities, if we are always in a rush, we will forget what is truly important and approach all that we do with the wrong priorities.

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It was in Princeton in the 1970s when two psychologists, Darley and Batson, conducted a now-famous experiment. They took a group of seminarians, of people studying for the clergy, and they divided them into two groups.

One group was asked to prepare a speech about their future careers, and the other group was asked to create a sermon about the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, in which help is given by a stranger to someone fallen on the side of the road. They then sent members of each group, from the career speech group and the Good Samaritan group, to a building to deliver the speeches they prepared.

And they told some from each group that they were late and needed to rush, and they told others that they had plenty of time. Then, as each one of the members of these different groups went to their destination to give their speech, there was an actor playing an injured individual lying moaning on the side of the road, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The question was whether the fact that some had prepared a sermon about helping someone on the side of the road made them more likely to actually help a person on the side of the road? Did it impact whether they stopped to help? The answer is no. As Malcolm Gladwell describes it, “the only thing that really mattered was whether the student was in a rush. Of the group that was in a rush, ten percent stopped to help. Of the group who knew they had a few minutes to spare, sixty-three percent stopped.”

In fact, many of those who were in a rush were actually surprised to learn that there was somebody on the side of the road who needed their help. The writer Judith Shulevitz, in her book on the Sabbath, cites this story and notes that what happened was that as they rushed, they did not see what was right in front of their face. And the point is that the goal of Shabbat is to stop and look and see what truly matters, to devote oneself to enlargement of the soul so that we can enter the rush of the next week with the right values and proper perspective. Or as Shulevitz pithily puts this point, “we have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.”

It is exactly as Begin said in the Knesset: “if it were not for the Shabbat that restored the souls and revived the spiritual lives week by week of our long-suffering nation, our trials and vicissitudes would have pulled us down to the lowest levels of materialism and moral and intellectual decay.”

But there is more here to say. As much as Begin is correct that there are universal principles embodied by the Sabbath, there is also a covenantal, particularistic, profoundly Jewish element as well. “*Beini u’vein b’nei Yisrael ot hi le’olam,*” God says. “The Sabbath is an eternal covenant between Myself and Israel,” which means that the Jewish loyalty to and observance of the Sabbath, is meant to reflect the mysterious eternity of the Jewish people.

There is a wonderful story—one that falls in the category of “too good to check”—which describes how the *New York Times* on January 1, 2000, not only showed its readers a copy of what the *Times* looked like on January 1, 1900, they also provided a mock-up of what the front page of the *Times* might look like a hundred years in the future: January 1, 2100.

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And so you had futuristic headlines like “Robots demand human rights” or “Cuba becomes 53rd state” or “With brooms flying, World Cup begins.” And then they had at the bottom of the page something that used to appear on every Friday’s copy of the *New York Times*.

On the bottom right of the January 1, 2100 issue, it said: “Jewish women light Shabbat candles today at, whatever time, “4:01 PM.”

So according to the story, at least, they called up one of the editors, and they asked him, “Why did you choose to put that there? I know the Times used to print that, but why did you put it there, the time for lighting Shabbat candles?”

And he replied, according to the story at least, “The truth is that we have no idea what’s going to be happening a hundred years from now, but one thing we do know: that a century from this point, Jewish women will still be lighting Shabbat candles.”

So the story goes, and at the heart of this story is certainly a profound truth. When we look at the Pentateuch, we see that two versions of the Ten Commandments are provided, and different reasons for Shabbat are given in each respectively. In Exodus, we are informed that the Shabbat is a commemoration of creation, for in six days the Almighty made heaven and earth and on the seventh He rested.

But in the repetition of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, an entirely different explanation for the Sabbath is given, one which, according to rabbinic tradition, was proclaimed from Sinai by God at the same time, with both reasons being communicated to the people of Israel. Why observe the Shabbat? “*V’zacharta ki eved hayita b’Mitzrayim*”: “and you will recall that you were slaves in Egypt, and God took you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

This at least initially seems strange, because Shabbat is a memory of the seven days in which the world was created. How is that remembering our freedom from slavery? Yes, we rest on Shabbat, but during the week we are not slaves.

So how does Shabbat remind us of the miracles of the Exodus? The point, perhaps, and Nachmanides hints to this in some part, is that the faith sustained by the Sabbath is revealed in the wonders of Jewish history, because at its core, Shabbat proclaims the Jewish declaration that there is a Creator and Sustainer of the world.

And when one believes in the God who created the world, and one feels in the sanctity of the Sabbath the providential presence of this Creator, then one not only sees that very same providence in the miracles of the Jewish past, but will also come to believe that God will fulfill His providential promises to Israel in the future as well.

Therefore, the Jews who observed the Sabbath through so many centuries of persecution were emphasizing week after week their faith in the providential presence of a Creator, and thereby renewed, strengthened and affirmed their faith, not only in all that had been, but in the possibility of many more redemptive miracles yet to come.

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In his memoir, Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, recounts the Friday in 1948 when the exhausted defenders of the Old City of Jerusalem surrendered to the Jordanian Legion, and how all those not taken captive by the Jordanians were forced to leave the Jewish Quarter and say goodbye to their beloved home, leaving through the Zion Gate.

At that moment, the sacred Old City, the locus of Jewish longing, suddenly seemed lost to the Jewish state forever. Rabbi Goren writes, at that point he saw, “the most distinguished elders of Jerusalem who had experienced all the hardships of the siege of the Old City and the war sitting on the ground dressed in worn, tattered clothes. Some of them also had injuries that had been bandaged.” He writes, “I cried with them like a small child.”

Rabbi Goren spent the day helping the exiles. But that day was Friday, and as he noticed the sun setting, he found his way to a Chassidic synagogue. There, hours after this terrible tragedy, he saw a reaffirmation of how Shabbat renews the faith of Jews. He recounts how immediately after the service, “everyone Friday night, all of the Chassidim stood up and began to sing and dance, may the Temple be rebuilt, the city of Zion replenished.”

Rabbi Goren describes how he was taken aback and he writes, “when I saw this, after everything I had seen and experienced over the course of the day, I could not hold back my bitter tears.”

Even though on Shabbat one is not supposed to be sad, we cannot blame Rabbi Goren for feeling as he did. And yet, less than twenty years after this point, while the Temple would not be rebuilt, it would be Rabbi Goren more than any other religious figure who would be associated with that magical moment when the Jews returned to the Old City of Jerusalem in six days, a week of miracles that more than any moment in recent history has vindicated all that the Jews have claimed that Shabbat teaches us, that the God who created the world, the God who directs the world, makes Himself known to the world through the miracles of Jewish history.

Rabbi Goren concludes by writing:

The prayers that Friday evening with the singing and dancing, on the background of everything I had seen and experienced that day, the fall of the Old City and the sight of the elderly rabbis sitting on the ground humiliated, greatly affected me.

Ever since then, I have adopted the custom of singing ‘may the Temple be rebuilt’ every Friday evening in my own synagogue in the tune I heard that evening. I will never forget that particular Shabbat.

Thus did the Sabbath, the belief in God as Creator and providential guide of the world, sustain the Jewish faith in the Jewish future. It is as Begin said in the Knesset, in his own paraphrase of Ahad Ha’am, “more than the Jews kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people.”

This then is what we will call colloquially the fourth commandment: “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Remember to stop, as Shulevitz puts it: remember to stop so that we can stop to remember. Remember how

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the Sabbath has sustained the Jewish people. Remember all this and show loyalty thereby to the Jews of generations past who sacrificed for this day. Show pride in Judaism to the non-Jewish world in order to illustrate that the people of Israel revere the Sabbath still.

It took thirty years for a prime minister to remind the Israeli Knesset what the Sabbath should truly mean to the Jewish state and thereby to the Jewish people. Soon after this moment, Begin retired, bereaved and alone.

Then, long after Menachem Begin died, there was a moment, a Shabbat that more than any other since then, up to that point perhaps, vindicated from his speech, vindicated the vision that he had put forward. In November of 2018, there was a Thursday night New York El Al flight that took off late because of snow. And it became clear that it would not arrive in Israel in time for Shabbat. Any other airline would have merely kept going to Tel Aviv, but El Al was El Al, and so it was obligated to land in Athens so that those passengers who kept Shabbat could rush to an airport hotel, having missed the many celebrations that they were supposed to attend in Israel.

At the drop of a hat, the local Chabad in Athens, Greece, arranged Shabbat for a diverse group of 150 Jews. One of them, Dr. Jonathan Paley, described the experience,

After rushing to organize our few carry-on belongings and hastily prepare for candle lighting, we gathered downstairs for *Kabbalat Shabbat*, accepting the Sabbath, in our elegant *Bigdei Shabbat*, Sabbath clothes, or rather, whatever we were wearing on the plane. Many were in t-shirts and jeans, some in sweatpants, others who had some foresight to bring a spare shirt in their carry-on were able to change into fresh clothing, but most of us, men and women, had to manage in the same outfit for three days. Of course, the Chasidim among us wore their usual black and white garb, which made it that much more diverse.

“It was,” he writes, “a sight to behold, all of us together singing and dancing to welcome the Sabbath queen as one, no judgment, no labels, no barriers. We were all simply Jews. It was something.”

Paley further recounts the diversity of Jewish traditions and liturgies that were made manifest at the meals, the tunes of Eastern Europe mixing with the tunes of the Jews of the Middle East, embodying, just as Begin had said at the Knesset, how the Sabbath binds Jews together.

Writes Paley: “We all understood one thing: what unites us is so much more powerful than what divides us.”

As I read this account, all I could think about—as I studied this Shabbat in Athens from the El Al landing in Greece—was how the Syrio-Greeks had chosen Shabbat specifically in order to attack, to use the Jewish rest to their advantage, and they had sought in their decrees to wipe out the Jewish observance of Sabbath. And here, suddenly in Greece, Shabbat is honored. El Al was obligated to facilitate the keeping of Shabbat, going back to Begin’s

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own decision, and Begin himself, in speaking about honoring the Shabbat, had lauded the Jews of Greece in doing so.

And now in Greece, Jews on their way to Israel stop and make manifest what the Shabbat means to them and thereby illustrating what Begin understood about how the Shabbat is the pride of the Jewish people and joins us all together. Begin is right. One need not be fully observant to wonder at this moment. One need only be a proud Jew.

Imagine telling Antiochus and the other proud Hellenists throughout history that one day Jews from around the world would gather in Athens to mark the Shabbat, even as the Greek Empire had long ago disappeared. That one day, Jews would celebrate Shabbat in Athens and then return together following the Shabbat to a Jewish Jerusalem, a Jewish Jerusalem where today candles are kindled to mark the victory over Antiochus, where the Shabbat is welcomed in the Cardo, the street that the Hellenistic devotee and Roman emperor Hadrian had once built.

Dr. Paley reports that as these Jews took a taxi back to the Athens airport after Shabbat, with Chanukah two weeks away, they all broke out in the traditional song "*Yevanim nikbetzu alai u-minotar kankanim na'asa nes la-shoshanim.*" The Greeks had gathered to destroy us and from one final flask the enduring flame of Judaism was born.

As those Jews bid Shabbat farewell in Athens and boarded a flight to Israel, as the eternity of the Jewish people was made there miraculously manifest, at that moment, the Shabbat spirit of Menachem Begin lived again.

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*Jonas Phillips* attr. Charles Wilson Peale

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## Jonas Phillips and the Sabbath Witness

What the most important Jew of the founding era teaches us about Shabbat observance.

**T**hrough the act of *Kiddush*, we as Jews believe that we are called to witness to what our Shabbat stands for: the creation of the world, the Torah that obligated our sanctification, and ultimately the existence, omnipotence, and omniscience of the God Who created the world and sanctified this day.

Jonas Phillips was an early American Jew from Philadelphia whose daughter's wedding was attended by a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

When the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, Phillips wrote to its president, George Washington, complaining that under state law all public office holders in Philadelphia were required to affirm that the New Testament was given by divine inspiration. This, Phillips wrote, "is absolutely against the religious principle of a Jew and it is against his conscience to take any such oath." Phillips then asked that the convention create a country in which "all religious societies are on an equal footing," which meant a country where all faiths were able to serve in the legislature while remaining true to their respective beliefs.

Most fascinating about this letter is that at the top, Phillips put not only the secular date, but also the Hebrew one, even though he was writing to the Constitutional Convention which contained not one single Jew. Phillips was saying that he was simultaneously part of his society, but at the same time firmly bound to his Jewish identity.

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Phillips would soon find himself connected with another matter related to religious freedom, a series of events that took place on the Sabbath, reflecting the prophetic message of how this sacred day is bound up with Jewish identity.

In chapter 20, Ezekiel brings a message from the Almighty describing Israel's rebelliousness at the time of the exodus. But in the process, the obligations of Judaism are also summarized, with special mention being made of the Sabbath:

Thus saith the Lord God: In the day when I chose Israel and lifted up mine hand unto the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up mine hand unto them saying, I am the Lord your God;

In the day that I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had chosen for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands:

Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

But they rebelled against me and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.

But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt.

Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness.

And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall live by them.

Moreover also I gave them my Sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them (Ezekiel 20:5-13).

Thus, in his discussion of the Torah, Ezekiel's prophecy singles out the Sabbath as well as at least one of its central roles and goals: "to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them."

Ezekiel reemphasizes this aspect of the Sabbath: "I am the Lord your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and hallow my Sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am the Lord your God" (Ezekiel 20:19).

Of all the commandments of the Torah, Ezekiel emphasizes the Sabbath as central to the Jewish mission, and he will include it in his spiritual and

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moral messages in the next chapters as well. Dr. Tova Ganzel notes that Sabbath rituals will also be central to Ezekiel's visions of the final temple yet to come. And she further points out that Ezekiel's language here emphasizes something new about Sabbath observance that is not necessarily stressed in the same way elsewhere in scripture:

What makes Ezekiel's attitude towards Shabbat special is not that he mentions it more often than do other prophets, but that he views Shabbat as a sign and symbol, not of the creation of the world but of the special sanctity of Israel: 'That you may know that I the Lord am your God.' (20:20). He gives two different meanings for this 'sign':

'Moreover I gave them my Sabbaths to serve as a sign between me and them, that they might know that it is I the Lord who sanctify them' (20:12); and 'hallow my Sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you that you may know that I the Lord am your God' (20:20).

The first meaning of the sign is familiar to us from the book of Exodus: 'You must keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I the Lord have consecrated you' (Exodus 31:13).

But the second meaning, Shabbat's testimony that 'I the Lord am your God,' is a concept unique to Ezekiel. There is no parallel to it elsewhere in the Torah. This accentuates the importance of Shabbat. Through its observance, the nation not only expresses its sanctity, but also testifies to and calls to consciousness the fact that the Lord is their God.

What this means is that the Sabbath bears both a universal and particularistic message. On the one hand, the day commemorates the creation of the world, the making of mankind in God's image, which is the foundation of the biblical doctrine of the equality of all human beings.

But built into the Jewish calling is the unique obligation through the observance of the Sabbath to testify to the world, to witness to the world, all that the Sabbath proclaims. That is the role of the Jews.

It is all the more striking then that in the early 1790s, Jonas Phillips, not long after lobbying for religious liberty to the Constitutional Convention, was called to testify in Philadelphia court on a Saturday, as courts were then in session six days a week. Phillips refused, because Saturday was his Sabbath, and presumably because he believed that true equality demanded that he be allowed to obey the dictates of his faith.

The larger details of this case are unknown. All we have is the following recorded:

In this cause which was tried on Saturday the 5th of April, the defendant offered Jonas Phillips, a Jew, as a witness, but he refused to be sworn because it was his Sabbath. The court therefore fined him 10 pounds, but the defendant afterwards waiving the benefit of his testimony, he was discharged from the fine.

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Thus, Jonas Phillips was subpoenaed, refused to attend on the Sabbath, was fined for his observance, and eventually had the fine lifted.

From a Jewish perspective, what is remarkable is this. Showing up in court on the Sabbath does not involve a biblical violation of this sacred day. It is true that *Beit Din*, the Jewish courts, never meet on the Sabbath, but that is because of a rabbinic enactment.

Yet Phillips clearly felt that if Gentile Americans honored their Sabbath by not having court on Sunday, then he was obligated to equally uphold the honor of his Sabbath by refusing to testify. For us, as Ezekiel emphasizes, honoring the Sabbath is a form of testimony. Indeed, to this day, the tradition of many, if not most Jews, is to stand for at least part of the Kiddush, the sanctification of the Sabbath every week over a cup of wine. And that posture stems from the fact that witnesses stood in Jewish court while testifying.

Through the act of *Kiddush*, we as Jews believe that we are called to witness to what our Shabbat stands for: the creation of the world, the Torah that obligated our sanctification, and ultimately the existence, omnipotence, and omniscience of the God who created the world and sanctified the Sabbath.

In other words, what is extraordinary is that Phillips, in refusing to give testimony, was actually testifying for, witnessing to, honoring the Shabbat. By refusing to act as a witness in a Philadelphia court, he was engaging in testimony on behalf of his faith.

The Sabbath's commemoration of creation is the foundation of human equality, and it is this equality that the American promise heralded.

But witnessing this message through the Sabbath is a Jewish mission, and Jonas Phillips embraced it, testifying about the Shabbat to the world.

He was not the last. Perhaps the most eloquent expositor of what this form of witnessing might involve and why it is so important was Menachem Begin. It is Begin who gives us the most powerful example of Ezekiel's description of Jews witnessing to the Sabbath. In the early 1980s, Begin was attacked in the Knesset by the opposition because he had issued an order that El Al, Israel's national airline, would no longer fly on the Sabbath.

In response, Begin waxed eloquent describing the love and the dedication that the denizens of his hometown had shown for the words of the fourth commandment. Yehuda Avner, who was there, describes what Begin said:

Forty years ago I returned from exile to Israel. Engraved in my memory still are the lives of millions of Jews, simple ordinary folk eking out a livelihood in that forlorn diaspora where the storms of antisemitism raged. They were not permitted to work on the Christian day of rest, Sunday, and they refused to work on their day of rest, Saturday, for they lived by the commandment: remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. So each week they forswore two whole days of hard-won earnings. This meant destitution for many, but they would not desecrate the Sabbath day.

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So Israel's Prime Minister remembered his brethren from Eastern Europe. But then Begin connected his own experiences to Jews from a different culture and land, thereby highlighting what unites Jews across time and space. As the catcalls from across the Knesset hall increased, Begin spoke suddenly of Sephardic Jews and their own dedication to the Sabbath sanctity.

Avner writes, "In Greece," he said, "there is a port city called Salonica, which had an extensive Jewish population before the war. Most of the port workers there were Jewish and on Shabbat they did not work. Those stevedores would forego their pay rather than desecrate the Shabbat. Non-Jews, gentiles, accepted this as a fact of life, and the port was closed on the Sabbath day. Imagine that."

At this Begin was again attacked by a socialist member of the Knesset, and in response, the Prime Minister sought to point out the irony of the purported friend of the working man attacking Sabbath observance. He said,

Let me tell you something, my dear socialist friend. Shabbat enshrines a social ethical principle without peer. Shabbat is one of the loftiest values in all of humanity. It originated with us, the Jews. It is all ours. No other civilization in history knew a day of rest.

Avner further writes how when someone snickered and said, "Put on a yarmulke," Begin bellowed, "*Chutzpah!* I speak of our people's most hallowed values and you dare stoop to mockery? Shame on you!"

And then, raising his arms as he was wont to do, Begin waxed eloquent as to how the Sabbath throughout the centuries bestowed dignity on human beings and how Jews gave this gift to the world:

Are we in our own reborn Jewish state to allow our blue and white El Al planes to fly to and fro, as if to broadcast to the world that there is no *Shabbat* in Israel? Should we who by faith and tradition heard the commandment at Sinai now deliver a message to all and sundry through our El Al planes, 'No, do not remember the Sabbath day, forget the Sabbath day?'

Then to those who spoke of the monetary loss that would be incurred, Begin had a ready rejoinder. He said, "There is no way of assessing the religious, national, social, historical, and ethical values of the Sabbath day by the yardstick of financial loss and gain."

He added,

If it were not for the Shabbat that restored the souls and revived the spiritual lives week by week of our long-suffering nation, our trials and vicissitudes would have pulled us down to the lowest levels of materialism and moral and intellectual decay. More than Jews have kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept the Jews.

Begin, Avner reports, turned and limped painfully from the podium, but suddenly stopped, turned, and said:

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This House should know: it is not necessary to be an observant Jew to appreciate the full historic and sacred aura that enshrines this perfect gift called Shabbat. Its prohibitions are not arbitrary. They provide insulation against corrosive everydayness. They build fences against invasions by the profane, and they enrich the soul by creating a space for sacred time. In a word, one need not be pious to accept the cherished principle of Shabbat. One merely needs to be a proud Jew.

This is what it means to testify in our lives to what Judaism proclaims about the world. And a proud Jew, of course, is what Jonas Phillips was. Remarkably, his act of refusing to testify earned an important place in American legal history. Stanford Professor Michael McConnell, an expert in law and religion, has called the case — *Stansbury v. Marks* — the first recorded case raising free exercise issues following the adoption of the First Amendment.

Testifying to the Sabbath is what Ezekiel asks of us. Jonas Phillips rose to the occasion in America hundreds of years ago. Menachem Begin did so in Israel, and we, studying Ezekiel, are called to be inspired by their example.

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ATAR HADARI

SEP 7 2017

#### About the author

Atar Hadari's *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik* (Syracuse University Press) was a finalist for the American Literary Translators' Association Award. His *Lives of the Dead: Poems of Hanoch Levin* earned a PEN Translates award and was released in 2019 by Arc Publications. He was ordained by Rabbi Daniel Landes and is completing a PhD on William Tyndale's translation of Deuteronomy.

## Why Some Rabbis Have Loved the Sabbath Prayer “Shalom Aleykhem”—and Some Haven’t

The promise and peril of calling angels to bless your Sabbath table.

**F**lip through any siddur and you will find a section dedicated to prayers whose place is not in the synagogue. These include the liturgy not just for weddings, funerals, and other solemn occasions but also for the domestic rituals of the Sabbath, and especially of the Shabbat table, which set the day's meals apart from those of the rest of the week.

One of these rituals is “Shalom Aleykhem,” sung Friday night on return from the synagogue. It appears in prayer books dating as far back as 1641, and was most likely composed by an anonymous mystic living in Safed. A formal invocation of a familial space of peace and tranquility, the poem is followed by a lyric tribute from the book of Proverbs to the woman of the house, who will be identified with the Sabbath, and then the kiddush, which describes the Sabbath as the very meaning of the creation of the world. But the before-dinner ritual starts with “Shalom Aleykhem,” a song that invokes angels to accompany us with peace:

Peace be upon you ministering angels, angels from above,  
From the King, who rules over the mightiest kings—the Holy One  
blessed be He.

Come you in peace, angels of peace, angels from above,  
From the King who rules over the mightiest kings—the Holy One  
blessed be He.

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Bless me with peace, angels of peace, angels from above,  
From the King who rules over the mightiest kings—the Holy One  
blessed be He.

Go you in peace, angels of peace, angels from above,  
From the King who rules over the mightiest kings—the Holy One  
blessed be He.

A very simple song, you would think, and certainly not one that could spark controversy. But not so fast. What sort of peace is it exactly we're asking for, and of whom are we asking it? One source for the lyric is in the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 119b:

Rabbi Yossi bar Abba says: two ministering angels accompany a man on the Sabbath eve from the synagogue to his home, one good and one bad. When he comes to his home and finds a candle lit and the table laid and his bed made, the good angel says, "May it be Your will that it be so on another Sabbath," and the bad angel is forced to answer "amen." But if it is not so, the bad angel says, "May it be Your will that it be so on another Sabbath," and the good angel is forced to answer "amen."

Notably, the text doesn't say that a man will receive the blessing if he has prayed with zeal, or has been careful not to violate the Sabbath on his walk home from synagogue, or thinks elevated thoughts; rather, it focuses on symbols of a home and hearth properly arranged. Read in light of this passage, "Shalom Aleykhem" is not simply an invocation of peace in a generic sense, but a plea for domestic harmony. Those grizzled rabbis in the Talmud view the peace of the Sabbath table as the highest point of the week a man can aspire to. Call me romantic but in the line, "and his bed made," I detect a subtle hint at the conjugal delights that the rabbis, unlike their Karaite competitors, deemed perfectly appropriate for the Sabbath. Here we find the rabbis of the Talmud hoping the angels will come home with them to see if their houses are shipshape and their wives in a good mood.

An Aramaic passage in the Zohar expanding on this theme was translated into Hebrew by the 17th-century sage Isaiah Halevi Horwitz in his *Shney Lufhot Habrit*, which put many kabbalistic teachings in terms accessible to the layman:

When a man comes from synagogue on Sabbath evening, angels come with him on either side and the Divine Presence hovers over them all like a mother over her sons. . . . But that is when a man comes to his home and receives these divine guests with joy, and when the Divine Presence sees candles burning and a table set and man and wife in joy and harmony. For then the Divine Presence says, "This one's one of mine—a Jew in whom I will take pride."

But if heaven forbid it were not so, and there is no harmony between them, heaven forbid, the Divine Presence leaves and the angels with her. And the evil inclination and his forces with him set upon them and say, "This one's one of mine and he's of my legion." Instantly the spirit of impurity rests upon him and awe and knowledge leave the man and the Lord leaves the woman. . . .

Which is to say, this song calling angels to your table is actually a song invoking matrimonial bliss, or, to put it in more prosaic terms, a song hoping that—despite whatever stresses have been setting a couple at each other’s throats during the course of a long, hard week—the peace of the Sabbath will now allow them to rekindle their affection for each other and rediscover a space in which they can see each other in the best light. And the arena where that miracle will happen is the Sabbath table.

Who could object to that?

**Rabbi Yaakov Emden** (1697-1776), the great rabbinic contrarian of his day, apparently could object. In his collection of responsa titled *Sh’elat Ya’avetz*, he lists a number of reasons not to say this prayer. First, his father—the widely esteemed and fiercely independent-minded Tsvi Ashkenazi—had said no such prayers upon returning from synagogue on Friday night. Second, the talmudic sages chose to *abbreviate* the main daily prayers on the Sabbath, removing personal supplications and focusing on praise and thanksgiving; adding such post-talmudic devotions as *Shalom Aleykhem* thus contravenes the spirit and perhaps also the letter of their wishes. Third, the Jerusalem Talmud states, “Don’t squawk to [the angels] Michael or Gabriel”—meaning that God and not His angels should be the addressee of prayers. By requesting that the angels bless our Sabbath table, we are flirting with polytheism.

So where the Talmud and Zohar see an invocation to domestic harmony, Emden sees incipient idol worship.

Interestingly, Emden did not see fit to omit the song from his own two-volume prayer book, though he found reason there to object over another point: why conclude by bidding the angels farewell in the final stanza? Why not ask them to stay for dinner, since “if all is as it should be, . . . surely [the angels’] joy will increase and they’ll bless him the more for it.” Perhaps, suggests Emden, the author was afraid that if the angels stayed too long they’d notice something amiss, and retract their blessing. Emden therefore states that his own custom is to stop after the first stanza.

The whiff of idol-worship that worried Rabbi Emden also perturbed Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), whose credentials may be summed up in his being a favorite student of the great talmudist the Gaon of Vilna and the founder of the Volozhin yeshiva, which steeped the soul of the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik in the halakhah, from which more poetry sprung. Rabbi Hayyim, too, was uneasy with even the appearance of praying to angels. After all, he writes, “they have no power to bless whatsoever. . . . If a man so merits, they must bless him; and if not, then, heaven forbid, they must curse him.”

**The last word** on this subject goes to Hayyim Shaye HaKohen Halbersberg (1844-1910), who was very learned but preferred to live by casual work rather than by accepting a rabbinic position; he finally relented in 1902, serving as a rabbi in Lublin for five years before departing to Jerusalem to live out his final days. In addition to eighteen halakhic works and translations into Yiddish, he also compiled the siddur *Y’shu’ot Yisrael*, adding sections of the

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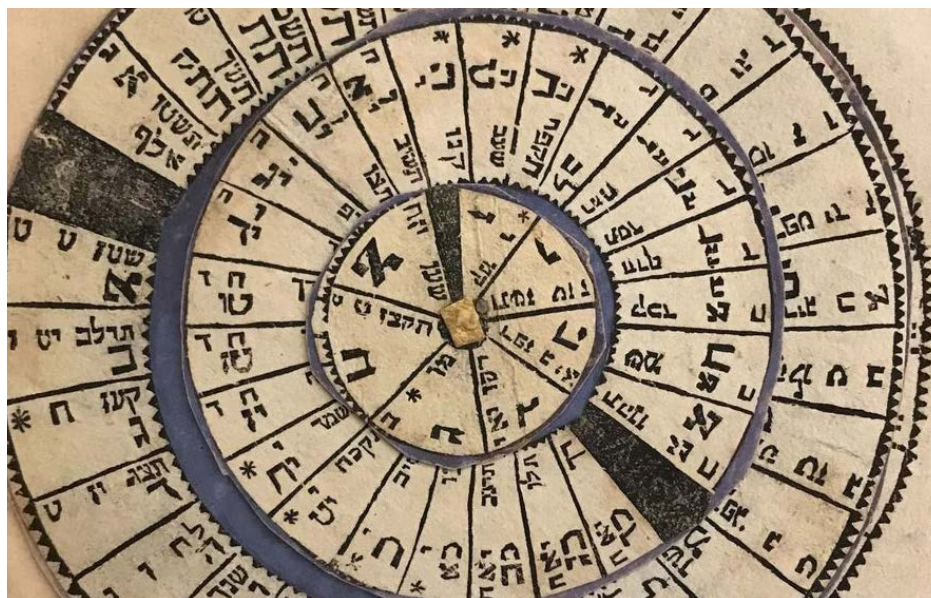
psalms, Talmud, and Mishnah to illuminate the prayers. His gloss on the poem's final stanza ("Go in peace . . .") is laconic but telling: "When there's some argument in the home he should not say this rhyme, but soothe the argument. (I received this teaching from a great rabbi, and it is tried and tested.)"

In considering Halbersberg's comments, and Emden's, a little more closely, it seems to me there's more going on here than meets the eye. Emden's rejection of the poem in his responsum is no doubt motivated by his usual concerns—respect for his father's opinions and his quest to scale back the influence of Kabbalah—but he nonetheless finds "Shalom Aleykhem" sufficiently innocuous to include it in his siddur. In the final analysis, nobody is very worried that singing this song will really lead to polytheism.

The deeper concern, for both Emden and Halbersberg, is that a man will put his faith in angels and incantations and pay insufficient attention both to Him and to her—the person waiting for him at home. The Sabbath is about rest, and you rest at home. You can pray until you're blue in the face about Sabbath peace and domestic tranquility, and you can invite all the heavenly host home with you—you can even ask them to stay until the following nightfall—but peace will not come to the house unless the people who live there make sure to maintain it. Even if you truly believe in angels, they can't help you in that department.

And this, perhaps, is the answer to Emden's objection both to the prayer in general and to the final verse in particular. You bid the angels "go in peace" because you know they can't do more than observe. If your house is in order when they arrive, you'll get their blessing; if not, not. Saying farewell to the angels makes it clear that you're not asking for their help, but instead saying "I'll take it from here." Because if you don't make peace for yourself, you won't have peace, period.

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A volvelle, meant for calculating new months, in Hebrew, from Germany ca 1722. Library of Congress.

## PHILOLOGOS

MAY 29 2024

### About the author

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appeared twice a month in Mosaic from 2015 to 2025.

## When Did Jews Settle on the Seven-Day Week?

It was only in the early-to-mid first millennium BCE that both the ancient Babylonians and the ancient Hebrews began dividing their lunar months into seven-day periods.

Chapter 23 of Leviticus states:

Seven weeks you shall count for yourself: from the time the sickle is put to the grain, you shall begin to count seven weeks. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God with a donation of your choosing, which you shall give the Lord your God.

We are now past the midpoint of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot—the name of the latter holiday being the plural of the Hebrew *shavu'a*, week. The word, coming from *sheva*, “seven,” also gives us *shiv'ah*, the seven days or mourning after a death.

The seven-day week is today universal, and there is a tendency to think of it as entirely natural phenomenon. After all, the division of the solar year into lunar months, each beginning with the appearance of the new moon, ending with the disappearance of the old one, and averaging 29.5 days, is natural. So is this cycle's consisting visually of four parts: a first quarter in which the new moon is less than half the size of the full moon; a second quarter in which it goes on growing until the moon is full; and a third and fourth quarter in which it shrinks in reverse sequence until it vanishes. Since each of these quarters averages 7.375 days, what could be more obvious than dividing the month into four seven-day weeks with an extra day or two at the end of them?

Yet this was not obvious to the peoples of the past, though many of them did have lunar months, and some observed sub-monthly cycles as well. (The ancient Romans, for example, had an eight-day week called the *nundinum* that, based on a regular recurrence of market days, was unrelated to the waxing and waning of the moon.) As far as is known, it was only in the early-to-mid first millennium BCE that both the ancient Babylonians and the ancient Hebrews began dividing their lunar months into seven-day periods. Inasmuch as Babylonia was a Middle Eastern power that exerted great political and cultural influence at the time, and the Hebrews were a small people subject to this influence, these are unlikely to have been independent developments. In all probability, the seven-day week was a Babylonian invention that the Hebrews borrowed and developed within the framework of their own unique religious beliefs.

One of these beliefs, of course, was in a single God's creation of the world in six days, after which He rested on a seventh called *Shabbat*. In this word, too, there appears to be a Babylonian influence, since the Babylonian calendar had a day called *Shabbatum* that fell regularly on the fourteenth or fifteenth day of every month—that is, on the day of the full moon that marked the end of the month's second quarter. Called by an Akkadian cuneiform text *ûm nûkh libbi* (the Hebrew equivalent would be *yom nu'ah ha-lev*), "the day of rest of the heart," *Shabbatum* did not have an importance anything like that which *Shabbat* came to occupy in Jewish life. Rather, it was a day, considered unlucky or ominous (in all likelihood because it marked the start of the moon's waning), on which certain restrictions were imposed, some of which, such as eating food cooked over a fire or riding in a chariot, applied to the royal house alone.

*Shabbatum* occurred only once a month, but the seventh, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the Babylonian month also had a special character that marked the turning points of the lunar cycle. Although no direct evidence has been found for this, it has been conjectured that each day of these seven-day periods was associated by the Babylonians, in whose thinking astrology played a major role, with the sun, moon, or one of the five visible planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. At any rate, when the seven-day week was widely adopted in the Roman empire at the beginning of the Common Era, its days were assigned the Latin names of these same heavenly bodies.

Thus, the first day of the week was called in Latin *Dies Solis*, the Day of the Sun. The second was *Dies Lunae*, the Day of the Moon. The third was *Dies Martis*, the Day of Mars, followed by *Dies Mercurii*, *Dies Iovis* (the Day of Jove or Jupiter), *Dies Veneris* (the Day of Venus), and *Dies Saturnis*. The earliest attestation to these names is their presence in a graffito found at Pompeii that cannot date later than the site's destruction by a volcanic eruption in 79 CE, and they were ordered according to a system of reckoning that combined the 24-hour cycle of the day with each planet's sidereal period—how long it took it to complete a circuit of the heavens and return to its original position vis-à-vis the fixed stars. Ancient Greek developed similar names for the seven days of the week at about the same time (*heliou himera*, "Sun's Day," *selenis himera*, "Moon's Day," etc.), and it may be that the Greek names

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preceded the Roman and served as their model.

Meanwhile, the Hebrews had their own seven-day week, which was already well-established in First Temple times, long centuries before it became so in the Roman empire. Its days did not, of course, have the names of pagan gods attached to them. Rather, they were numbered like the days in the account of Creation in the Bible—“First Day,” “Second Day,” “Third Day,” and so forth, up to the seventh day of Shabbat, which alone had a non-numerical name.

These two different ways of referring to the week’s days, one by name and one by number, have contended around the world practically up to this day. In many places, the clash between them belongs to the battle between Christianity’s pagan and Jewish heritages, and this will be the subject of our next, Shavuot column.

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