The Nature of Sanctified Time

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Introduction:

Is sacred time an objective reality or is it the result of our subjective experience? The rationalist Maimonides and the mystical Zohar hold opposing views. We will explore these two approaches and ask how they contribute to our understanding and experience of Shabbat.

Defining the problem:

How are we to understand the *kedushah* of Shabbat? Is it an ontological quality? Is the seventh day intrinsically holy? Or is the holiness of Shabbat a subjective experience?

In the Friday night kiddush we recite verses from Genesis (2:1–3) that begin with *Vayechulu*, describing how G-d completed the act of creation and rested on the seventh day, concluding with: *And G-d blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He rested from all His work which G-d in creating had made*.

This last verse states that G-d blessed and sanctified the seventh day.

In the opening verse for kiddush on Shabbat day, however, we are called

to: *Remember the Sabbath day, to sanctify it*. (Exodus 20:7). These two verses contradict each other: one states that G-d sanctified the seventh day, suggesting it is an intrinsically holy day. The other calls on us to sanctify Shabbat, suggesting it is a day like any other, and the experience of holiness is subjective and dependent on us to sanctify it.

Two approaches:

We will explore the tension between the intrinsic and subjective holiness of Shabbat by juxtaposing two main approaches — that of Rambam (Maimonides, 1135–1204) known as a rationalist, and that of the Zohar (a foundational mystical text of the 13th century).

Shabbat's sanctity as a subjective experience:

Rambam sees two reasons for the commandment to rest on the seventh day. The first is strictly utilitarian; a person needs a day of rest from the daily grind of work. *'With regard to the Sabbath, the reason for it is too well known to have need to be explained, for it is known how great a rest it procures. Because of it the seventh part of the life of every individual consists in pleasure and repose from the fatigue and weariness from which there is no escape either for the young or for the old'* (Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* III:43).

Rambam's second reason is theological; by abstaining from work a person reinforces their belief in G-d. *'At the same time it perpetuates throughout the periods of time an opinion whose value is very great, namely, the assertion that the world has been produced in time'* (Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* III:43).

For Rambam, ritual is a powerful anchor for ideas.

> *Opinions do not last unless they are accompanied by actions that strengthen them, make them generally known and perpetuate them among the multitude. For this reason we are ordered by the law to exalt this day, in order that the principle of the creation of the world in time be established and universally known in the world through the fact that all people refrain from working on one and the same day* (Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* II:39).

It is noteworthy that in his reasoning, Rambam does not refer to the holiness of the day. Both of his reasons for resting on Shabbat are utilitarian; to give our body necessary physical rest, and to declare and strengthen a belief in G-d's creation process.

Menachem Kellner, a contemporary Maimonidean scholar and philosopher, argues that, based on the above citations, Rambam does not see any ontological quality in the *kedushah* of Shabbat (Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006, pp. 123–124).

Rather, Shabbat functions as a means of ingraining a belief in G-d's existence, unity, incorporeality, and creation of world. Shabbat provides a means of anchoring these beliefs so that they are not lost or corrupted. Rambam's approach instrumentalizes the ritual of Shabbat.

We have seen Rambam's approach as a philosopher, next we will examine his approach as a halachist: *'Why do we recite a bracha over spices on Motzei Shabbat? Because the soul is depressed that Shabbat is leaving. Therefore we cheer it up and make it feel better with the nice smell'* (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shabbat* 29:29).

In Rambam's reasoning for the ritual of inhaling spices at the conclusion of Shabbat, he speaks of the soul being depressed as Shabbat ends. The Talmud, by contrast, describes an 'additional soul' that graces a Jew on Shabbat. When Shabbat terminates, this additional soul is painfully absent:

> *As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, gives a person an additional soul on Shabbat eve, and at the conclusion of Shabbat removes it from him, as it is stated: "He ceased from work and was refreshed* [vayinafash]" *(Exodus 31:17). Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish expounds the verse as follows: Since he ceased from work, and now Shabbat has concluded and his additional soul is removed from him, woe* [vai] *for the additional soul* [nefesh] *that is lost* (B. Talmud *Beitzah* 16a).

Tosafot (B. Talmud *Beitzah* 33b) comments that the reason we recite a blessing on spices at the conclusion of Shabbat and not at the conclusion of *Yom Tov*, is that only on Shabbat do we experience an additional soul, and the spices revive us once it departs.

Maimonides, though, does not mention the loss of the extra soul as a reason for the requirement for spices when Shabbat ends. His approach is strictly utilitarian, which is the trend of medieval thinkers, before the further development of the kabbalah.

Other medieval Jewish thinkers such as Rav Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Judah Halevi, and Jacob of Anatoli all focus on the idea that Shabbat provides freedom from work and the mundane, and allows time to socialize, enjoy, even study more Torah, but they do not speak of an intrinsic cosmic holiness, or of national sanctity.

The Spanish poet and philosopher Judah Halevi (1075–1141) in his *piyut* '*Al Ahavatecha*' writes about the longing the Jew experiences all week long for Shabbat, the theme is very much one of respite from work: *'Six day we are to you like slaves…on the fifth day I'll know that on the morrow I'll have freedom… on the sixth day my soul will rejoice because rest is approaching…'*

In his philosophical work, *The Kuzari*, Judah Halevi returns to the motif of Shabbat as a respite from the physical:

> *The body makes up on the Shabbat the loss it has suffered during the six days and prepares itself for labor to come, while the soul reflects on the loss it has suffered…it is as if a man cures himself from a past illness and provides himself with a remedy to ward off any future sickness* (*Kuzari* III:5).

Jacob ben Abba Mari ben Simson Anatoli (c. 1194 — 1256) was a translator of Arabic texts to Hebrew, who was influenced by Rambam's philosophy. He explains the holiness of Shabbat as having intellectual significance:

> *And since not every man is free to study all the time…G-d appointed for them a certain time and hallowed the Sabbath day, so that on that day everyone could listen to Torah and to the words of the Sages and reflect as is proper on that day in order to understand and grasp what is holy, for holiness exists only in this respect…sanctifications consist not in cessation from work…nor does sanctification consists in preparing the Sabbath meal* (*Malmad haTalmidim*, Lyck 1866. Cf. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol III, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008, p. 1219).

But while Jacob of Anatoli believes that the sanctity of Shabbat is an intellectual construct, when he explains *kiddush*, the ritual act of sanctification of Shabbat, he frames it as a rather practical function:

> *the primary intention here is not joy in itself, but to steer man away from drunkenness, for if man did not have a [specific] time for drinking wine, he would go on drinking every day and become a drunkard. But since we have a fixed day set aside for a meal with wine, our desire for wine on other days is diminished* (*Malmad haTalmidim*, Lyck 1866. Cf. Tishby, *The*

Wisdom of the Zohar, Vol III, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008, p. 1219).

In summation, Shabbat is seen by the medieval philosophers as fulfilling intellectual, social, and utilitarian needs, rather than being about nourishing a person's spiritual needs or possessing spiritual content altogether.

Shabbat's sanctity as an objective quality:

With Ramban (Moses ben Nachman, Girona 1194–1270) we find a shift from the utilitarian and subjective approach to the sanctity of Shabbat espoused by previous medieval philosophers. Ramban's approach is directly influenced by the *Sefer haBahir* (first manuscript c. 1174), a mystical work that precedes the Zohar by about a century.

In his commentary to the verse in Genesis (2:3) *'And G-d blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it'* Ramban interprets the holiness of Shabbat as an objective quality:

> *And the truth is, that the blessing of Shabbat is source of blessing, the* Yesod *(foundation) of the world.*
>
> *He sanctified, meaning he derived it from the Holy.*
>
> *And if you understand my words, you will know what they said in Midrash* Bereshit Rabbah *(11:8) that because He has no spouse, and Knesset Israel shall be Your spouse, and understand that on Shabbat there is an additional soul in truth* (Ramban, Bereshit 2:3).

Ramban explains that God's blessing of the seventh day is the source of all blessings and the foundation (*Yesod*) of the whole world. Here we find the holiness of Shabbat as an ontological quality, it is derived from something entirely different from the rest of the week and the other parts of creation. In addition, Ramban alludes to a more profound understanding of the Midrash in *Bereshit Rabbah*, that suggests that God has to bless the seventh day, because unlike the previous six days, it could not be paired with another day.

> *Why did G-d bless Shabbat? […] Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: Shabbat pleaded with the Holy One, Blessed be He, saying: "Everyone else has a partner, but I have none!" G-d answered saying: "The Community of Israel will be your partner"* (*Bereshit Rabbah*, 11:8).

Ramban, radically suggests that, it is not just Shabbat that has no pair, but that G-d is without a spouse, and that through Shabbat, the Jewish people become G-d's spouse. He also highlights that which Rambam had completely ignored, the additional soul that Shabbat bestows on the Jew.

Ramban's mystically oriented approach is novel, and we find it expanded and amplified in the Zohar. The Zohar describes Shabbat as follows:

> *It is holiness and is adorned with holiness,*
> *and adds sanctity to its sanctity.*
> *Therefore this day is the joy of the upper and lower worlds.*
> *everything rejoices in it.*
> *It fills the world with blessings.*
> *They are all nourished by it.*
> *On this day the* ***upper and lower worlds*** *rest;*
> *on this day the wicked in gehinnom rest…they all rejoice in the joy of the king and experience no sorrow on this day' (Zohar Chadash, Bereshit 17b).*

The Zohar's language is shot through with mystical imagery (upper and lower worlds, sanctity upon sanctity and holiness) that is absent in the writings of the Jewish rationalists. Where the rationalists appeal to logic, the Zohar appeals to our imagination.

The following passage of Zohar, traditionally recited by hasidim on Friday before evening prayers is even more imaginative and evocative in its depiction of Shabbat.

> *Mystery of Sabbath: She is Sabbath — united in the mystery of one, so that mystery of One may settle upon Her. Prayer for the entrance of Sabbath: then the Holy Throne is united in mystery of One, arrayed for the supernal Holy King to rest upon Her. When Sabbath enters She unites, and separates [herself] from the Other Side, all judgments removed from Her. And She remains unified in holy radiance, adorned with many crowns for the Holy King. All powers of wrath and masters of judgment all flee (and pass away from her) and no alien power reigns in all the worlds. Her face shines with supernal radiance, and She is adorned below by the Holy People, all of whom are adorned with new [or: joyous] souls. Then, beginning of prayer, blessing Her with joy and beaming faces, saying: "Bless (et) YHVH who is blessed!"* (*Zohar II*: 135a-b, Trans. Daniel C. Matt, Pritzker edition).

This passage imagines Shabbat as a time when the Divine masculine and feminine unite (*unified in holy radiance*), and as a result all is well in the world (*powers of wrath and masters of judgment all flee)*. The Divine feminine, the *Shechinah*, is adorned by the Jewish people below, as they are adorned by her.

To be clear, the Zohar is not merely presenting a symbolic connection between a Jew's Shabbat ritual and the transformation that occurs in the upper worlds. Rather the Zohar is insisting that there is a theurgic connection. A Jew's actions below *create* the spiritual realities above.

'If a person does not celebrate shabbat joyfully, they cause a separation in upper worlds, like taking the bride away from husband' (*Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, 21, 59b).

In his systematic review of Shabbat through the lens of Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel explains how Moshe Cordovero (Safed 1522–1570), an important later Kabbalist, reinforces this theurgic connection:

> *Cordovero conceives Sabbath not just as a moment in time propitious for the revelation of the holy, but as an entity, consisting of holiness and light, which descends in a certain moment and is experienced by those who prepare themselves and their belongings so as to contain the presence of Shabbat* (Idel, "Sabbath: The Concepts of Time in Jewish Mysticism," in Gerald J. Blidstein (ed.), *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality*, Ben Gurion University Press, 2004, p. 82).

Which Shabbat do you relate to?

We have seen two very different approaches to Shabbat. The rationalists see Shabbat in practical, social, and intellectual terms. There is nothing ontologically sacred about a Saturday. It is rather what we do on this designated day that is of significance.

The mystics, on the other hand, sense in this particular day an intrinsic sanctity spanning the terrestrial and celestial domains. This contrast can best be captured in Max Weber's (German philosopher, 1864–1920) distinction between a (pre-modern) *enchanted* world and a (modern or secular) *disenchanted* world.

So what are we to make of all this? Which of the two depictions best describe our experience of Shabbat? Or, to put the question slightly differently,

which of these two radically different world views should we adopt in our conceptualising Shabbat?

At first blush, the answer seems obvious. Those with a mystical bent will gravitate towards the mystics' enchanted Shabbat, while those wedded to a rational mindset will opt for the disenchanted version. But what if the choice was not binary? What if the enchanted version did not so much force a rationalist to abandon logical thinking, as much as invite her to temporarily step outside it?

Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), an ethnographer with particular interest in transition rites, speaks of *pivoting the sacred* (Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge, 2004)**.** Gennep understood sacredness as something that is not fixed but relates to circumstances, suggesting that we create situations that enable us to enter a sacred time and space.

To make this practical, let's contrast the experience of seeing a play being rehearsed, with the actual live performance at the theatre.

When seeing a rehearsal, we see the actors for the people they are, without make up, wigs, or costumes. We see the interruptions for stage directions, for scenery changes, or just for the actors to sip water. We are fully aware that the play is not 'for real'. When we go to theatre for a performance, in order to fully experience it and enjoy it, we need to deliberately 'forget' that the actors are wearing fake beards and costumes. We choose to immerse ourselves in the scene on stage, and lose ourselves in the world that is presented to us. This is what Gennep means by pivoting the sacred. That we 'set a stage' so that we can experience the sacred, and that we willingly enter the 'sacred' mode in order to experience it. To fully experience Shabbat, we may need to set aside the rationalist lens, if not abandon it entirely, and allow our actions and rituals to open for us a sacred consciousness.

William Blake (1757–1827), known for his poetic ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, wrote about the elusive boundary between physical reality and our perception of it:

> *The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity…and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself* (excerpt from a letter to Reverend John Trusler, 1777).

The hard core rationalist, who insists on subjecting every experience to level

headed, sensible inquiry, will be unable to enter into sacred space and time, and Shabbat will remain a utilitarian framework. But for those who are able to suspend the rational and pivot the sacred, Shabbat can be transformed into an enchanted moment in time, bringing with it a deep sense of spiritual nourishment.