

An Oasis in Time
Seven Thoughts for the Seventh Day





Rabbi Benji Levy

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Maggid Books

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*She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the law of kindness is on her tongue.*

Proverbs 31:26

In memory of

Brenda Jankelowitz z”l

and

Rose Fekete z”l

*Friends, colleagues, role models,
tour guides for life, and lovers of Shabbat*





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The Creation of Rest – a Rest from Creation

The book of Genesis, as its name suggests, describes the greatest creative act in the history of the universe. It commences with the very conception of creation itself, the foundation from which all matter was formed, launching the world into a perpetual state of development.

Newton's first law of inertia states that objects will not move unless acted upon. God's creation was this seminal creative act, the beginning of all beginnings, setting the wheels of our ever-expanding universe in motion and spinning the world around its own axis. And yet this same law of inertia states that objects will not stop moving unless acted upon by an external force, such that in a vacuum these metaphorical wheels would spin *ad infinitum* unless stopped by an external impetus. The biblical account of Creation highlights the same Creator who creates the universe on the first day as He who creates Shabbat, the day of rest, on the seventh. Ordinarily, rest is seen as the cessation of work. In the context of Creation, however, the Shabbat day of rest represents the ultimate form of creativity. God's act of rest is, in essence, as revolutionary as

His act of creation. When everything else is whole and complete, rest is the only ingredient lacking. Therefore, “when the seventh day came, rest came, and the universe was complete.”¹ On the seventh day, God created rest, and, through this rest, He completed Creation.

Since God handed the Garden of Eden to humanity “to work and to preserve it,”² we have been in a constant process of building and developing everything around us. The birth of the marketplace, the industrial revolution, and the invention of the Internet are but a few of the many breakthroughs that have shifted paradigms and given rise to new worlds that are evolving at an exponential rate. On the first day, God said: “Let there be light.”³ And indeed, the energy from this first primordial light continues to pulse daily through humanity’s innovation as a partner in the ongoing process of Creation. Yet our balance has been skewed towards one extreme. Our preoccupation with “working” through building and developing has resulted in a failure to successfully “preserve.” Shabbat helps us focus on the importance of balancing between preservation and work.

FROM REST TO RESTORATION

Today, rest is often synonymous with switching off our minds and switching on external stimuli in their stead. People flick through channels on TV, flip through pages of a magazine, or surf sites on the Internet, allowing a break from the frenetic pace of modern life. This rest can be passive. Initially

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1. Genesis Rabba 10:9.
 2. Genesis 2:15.
 3. Genesis 1:3.

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it feels good, but if prolonged, it can lead to a greater feeling of lethargy.

Shabbat is different. The rest we pursue on Shabbat has more of an active nature. It requires the channeling of a different kind of energy. If enacted correctly, this active rest leads to a feeling of rejuvenation. Passive rest is incidental; active rest is intentional. Rather than sitting back and relaxing while life passes us by, active rest is about engaging in life and savoring the moments and relationships that truly give us meaning.

Celebrating Shabbat, in its truest sense, is the ultimate tutorial in active rest; it is the journey from rest to restoration. There are a plethora of pathways that Shabbat places before us, relating to every sphere of our lives. The pages that follow provide seven thoughts for this awesome seventh day, offering seven unique entry points to the oasis in time that is Shabbat.

Throughout the years, I have shared many ideas contained in this book with my thousands of students and teachers, friends, and colleagues where I have most recently learned and taught, through Moriah College and Mosaic United, Mizrahi and Kadima, and I look forward to feedback as we further develop these concepts together. I would like to make particular mention of Abi Blackman and JJ Kimche, who were my thought partners and editorial sounding board in producing this work, and the tremendous team at Maggid Books who brought it to life: Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Sarah Levin, Rachel Kellner, and Shira Finson, under the stellar leadership of my dear friends Matthew and Yehoshua Miller.

As I share thoughts that started with and continue through my family, I cannot help but mention my gratitude to

them. Thank you to my dear parents, Debbie and Geoff, and siblings, Jon Jon, Lior, Rachel, Brad, Gabi, and Eitan, who made Shabbat so special for me as I grew up, turning this theory into practice. And of course, I am eternally grateful to my soulmate, Renana, who infuses everything we do with the uniqueness of Shabbat, and our incredible children, Shayna, Yehuda, Lital, and Amalia, who imbue my Shabbat with more meaning than I ever knew possible. Finally, it may seem strange, but I would like to thank Shabbat – my private sanctuary which cuts through the noise, anchors my soul, and recalibrates my trajectory, serving as the true “source of my blessing.”

With this lived experience in mind, in the following pages I will explore the great themes of Shabbat, whose wisdom is millennia old and yet absolutely relevant to some of contemporary society’s most pressing issues.

The first two chapters discuss the personal and individual aspects of Shabbat, exploring how Shabbat yields important perspectives on our relationship with our own selves, our minds, and our spiritual yearnings. I then discuss how Shabbat characterizes the Jewish attitude to humanity and humankind, how it informs the universalist side of our religious worldview and enjoins us to pursue an authentic, inclusive form of social justice. Finally, I explore how Shabbat is at the heart of two ideas that constitute Judaism’s most important intellectual contributions to human civilization: monotheism and messianism.

Through undertaking this journey from ideas to ideals, I hope that we will gain a deeper appreciation of Judaism’s ancient and beloved weekly reboot and the underlying

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structures of our spiritual and intellectual world, thereby illuminating a greater appreciation for our place and purpose within it.