

The Indestructible, Universal Sabbath

In every religion men revere shrines, cities, even people. They kiss holy land: their ears clutch the syllables of holy men; they immerse themselves in holy water. Tangibles, touchables, these are holy things that we can see, feel, revere.

In Genesis, however, the first thing declared holy is not a hill, a shrine, or any place, but a block of time, the seventh day. "Then God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it" (Genesis 2:3). The word "sanctified" is translated from the Hebrew qadosh, which means "to set apart for holy use." Though creation dealt with the heavens, the earth, the birds, the sea, the "cattle", and creeping thing, and beast of the earth" - all things of space, it was time, not space, that God first pronounced blessed and holy. This action makes sense, because, besides space, time is a dimension in which God's creation - the heavens, the sea, "cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth" - exists.

Also, if God had made one specific place holy - a hill, a spring, a city, not all people would have easy access to it. They would have to travel to worship there. But with time, instead of men going to it, it comes to them. Once a week, at 1,000 miles per hour (the approximate speed at which the earth rotates on its axis), the Sabbath circles the globe. Arriving on one sundown, leaving on the next, the seventh day washes over the planet each week like a huge cleansing wave. We never have to seek it. The day always finds us.

Meanwhile, holy cities can be burned. Holy people can be killed. Holy shrines can be looted. But time is beyond the fire and knife. No man can touch, much less destroy, it. Therefore, by making a special time holy, God has made the Sabbath invincible, placing it in an element that transcends any devices of mankind. Armies can sack cities, rulers can ban pilgrimages, but no army tank, no swirl of ink, can keep away the seventh day. We can no more stop the Sabbath than we can the sunrise. God protected His memorial to the objects of space, which are vulnerable to men, by placing it in time, which is not.

Finally, men can avoid holy things. They can hide from objects, people, places. But they can't flee from time. We can ignore it, be ignorant of it, hate it, but the Sabbath always comes, and nothing, no one, can stop it.

Skipping over no man, yet beyond the destructive grasp of all, the Sabbath stands as the universal yet invincible memorial of God's work in making mankind. Framed in the most basic element of God's creation - time - the Sabbath, more than any other biblical symbol, points us to the essence of our existence: that we are the handiwork of God. Thus, as the prime symbol of our roots, the Sabbath tells us also who we are, why we are, and where we are going, all in a mere 24 hours.

Source: Shabbat Shalom, January - March 1992