

Rabbi Benjamin Blech

Shabbat Minchah and the Messianic Vision

It is to Judaism that the world owes two revolutionary ideas about mankind's relationship to time. The first is with regard to the past; the second, the future.

Every moment of our lives is spent in the present. It is the only tense that is real. What happened before is gone; what will be is unknown. It is not difficult to dismiss them both as meaningless and irrelevant. That is why recognition of their importance is one of the greatest breakthroughs of intellectual thought.

As Thomas Cahill perceptively pointed out in his best-selling book *The Gift of the Jews*, the very *idea* of history is a Jewish invention. Before the Hebrew Bible the need to remember the past was unknown. More, it would've been considered a pointless and foolish extravagance. It was the Torah that turned memory into a *mitzvah*.

To this day the prayer book includes, and some people daily recite, "The Six Remembrances" commanded by the Torah: remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt (*Devarim* 16:3); remembrance of receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai (*Devarim* 4:9–10); remembrance of the attack of the Amalekites (*Devarim* 25:17–19); remembrance of the Golden Calf (*Devarim* 9:7); remembrance of Miriam (*Devarim* 24:9); and finally remembrance of the Sabbath (*Shemot* 20:8).

These are but six specific biblical commandments that make constant demands upon us for reflection. But they do not exhaust the full significance of memory as the key link to our relationship with God. We are a religion rooted in history. Our identity stems from the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Our commitment comes from the covenant agreed to by our ancestors. Our beliefs are shaped by truths transmitted through many generations.

It is no accident that when God chose to identify Himself in the first of the Ten Commandments, He did not do so by way of His role as Creator of the heavens and the earth. Instead He declared, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2). As Yehuda Ha-Levi beautifully put it, our God is a God of history – and only by way of our reverence for the past can we come to properly recognize Him.

This appreciation of history goes far beyond what the philo-sopher Santayana meant by his famous aphorism that "Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it." History isn't intended merely to prevent us from continuing to make mistakes. It is to grant life meaning and purpose. It is to permit us to personally grow by standing on the shoulders of previous giants. It is to allow us to hear the messages of sanctity from the past which can transform us in the present.

And it is this almost obsessive relationship with the past that allowed for the second revolutionary idea about the future. It was the idea of history that was responsible for the concept of destiny.

History that has meaning implies more than a haphazard series of happenings. History perceived as subject to rule by God must be governed by a Divine sense of order. Even as the major *mitzvah* of Passover, the festival that introduced the Jews to the Creator as a God who -continues to be involved in the story of mankind, is known as the *Seder*, so too there is *seder*, order, to the most important events of history.

In short, history viewed through a spiritual lens brings us a vision of destiny – the eventual fulfillment of a Divine plan God has in store for His creations.

With an awareness in the present of the significance of both past and future, we remarkably find ourselves able to live at one and the same time in all three tenses. That is what allows us in some small measure to be similar to God whose four-letter name, the Tetragrammaton, is a combination of the Hebrew for was, is, and will be.

The Dual Message of Sabbath: History and Destiny

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (*Shemot* 20:8).

The Sabbath commandment begins with a call to memory. It identifies its purpose as the desire to perpetuate the knowledge that "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it" (*Shemot* 20:11).

On every seventh day, we are forbidden to create so that we may confirm the identity of the true Creator. On the Sabbath we are to rest, just as we are told that God rested on the seventh day. Imitating Him is our weekly acknowledgment of His role in bringing the world into being.

The Sabbath is a perfect illustration of how a law rooted in history is meant to bring about sanctity. We need to remember the past in order to live our lives with a true sense of the holy in the present.

But in a striking change from the book of *Shemot* to the book of *Devarim*, we discover that there is a different biblical rationale given for the observance of the Sabbath. The Decalogue appears twice in the Torah. The first time records the words at the time they were given on Mount Sinai. The second time is when Moshe repeats them in his parting speech to the nation.

Biblical commentators discuss at great length how to reconcile the differences between these two versions, both of which seemingly claim to be a record of the words uttered by God as well as what was transcribed on the two tablets. Their discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to point out that the Decalogue version in *Devarim* differs from the first in *Shemot* most markedly with regard to the fourth commandment and the reason given for Sabbath observance.

In *Devarim*, the first word is no longer “*zakhor*” – “remember”; it is “*shamor*” – “observe.”⁴⁹¹ The rationale for keeping the Sabbath is no longer to serve as reminder for God having created the world in six days and rested on the seventh; it is so that “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm – therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (*Devarim* 5:15).

It would seem on the surface that in spite of the different events alluded to in the two appearances of the Decalogue, Creation and the Exodus, there is one common denominator: The Sabbath speaks to the need for collective recollection about two major moments of the past. The emphasis is still history. The *mitzvah* of Shabbat revolves solely around memory.

But it becomes very apparent from *Midrash*, *Mishnah*, and Talmud that Shabbat also has another totally different aspect. Shabbat is profoundly related not merely to what was but, perhaps at least equally important, to what will be. It carries within it the seed of a future -Sabbath, foreshadowing a World to Come that will be defined by its spirituality and holiness.

Shabbat is meant to be observed not just as history but also as destiny.

A *midrash* relates that at the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: “My children, if you accept the Torah and observe My *mitzvot*, I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in my possession.” “And what,” asked Israel, “is that precious thing which Thou wilt give us if we obey Thy Torah?” God replied: “The World to Come.” “Show us in this world an example of the World to Come,” the Jews demanded. “The Sabbath is an example of the World to Come,” was God’s answer.⁴⁹²

At the end of the mishnaic tractate *Tamid* we read: Every day of the week the Levites sang a different song in the Temple. What did they sing on the Sabbath? “A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath day (*Tehillim* 92:1) – a song for the time-to-come (*le-atid la-vo*), for the day that is all Sabbath rest in the eternal life.”

The Talmud reiterates the same concept. The Sabbath, the *Gemara* asserts (in *Berakhot* 57b), is one sixtieth of the World to Come.

In kabbalistic writings, much is made of this comparison. As the six-day workweek culminates in Shabbat, so too will the six millennia of human history prepare the world for a time of total spirituality and perfection corresponding to the day of completion of Creation. R. Moshe Recanati in his commentary on the Torah (*Bereishit* 2:3) wrote: “*And God blessed the seventh day.*’ – The Holy One, blessed be He, blessed the World to Come that begins in the seventh millenium” – that is to say, the Sabbath of Genesis alludes to the World to Come. In this he was anticipated by Nahmanides in his comment on the same verse: “The seventh day is an indication of the World to Come that is all Sabbath.”⁴⁹³

There is a wealth of rabbinic commentary that makes clear that the purpose of Shabbat is more than to serve as reminder of God’s role in the past. It is also a vision of the messianic future, a prelude to the ultimate Divine plan for the universe. It has its roots not merely in memory but equally in anticipation; it is based on hope as much as on history.

⁴⁹¹. In the Friday night service, this discrepancy is alluded to – and resolved – in the beautiful prayer of *Lekha Dodi*, composed by the great Kabbalist R. Shlomo -Ha-Levi Alkabetz, by way of the midrashic assertion that “observe” and “remember” were given “in one act of speech.” Both words were recited at one and the same -moment, an act impossible for humans but obviously presenting no difficulty for the Almighty. The purpose, as explained further in the Talmud, was to make the legal implications of both words inseparable. Whether this answer is sufficient to explain the far lengthier discrepancy between the two versions with regard to the reason given for Sabbath observance is a matter of serious conjecture.

⁴⁹². Alphabet of R. Akiva, *Otzar Midrashim*, 407; see also 430.

⁴⁹³. Ramban, *Bereishit* 2:3.

We might well ask where this insight finds expression in the Torah text itself. We have seen that the two sources which offer the rationale for Sabbath observance, the dual versions of the Decalogue, rely solely on events of the past and make no mention whatsoever of destiny. What is it that justifies our viewing Shabbat in eschatological terms as a vision for the future?

I would like to offer a suggestion based on a profound idea -propounded by R. Yitzchak ben R. Yosef (*Ba'al Ha-Chotem*) of -Corbeil, France, a major commentator of the thirteenth century known as the *Semak*, in response to a difficulty presented by a famous talmudic passage.

We are taught that one of the first questions we will be asked when we face the heavenly court after our death is "*Tzipita li-yeshu'ah*" – "Did you, during your lifetime, await salvation?"⁴⁹⁴ It seems we are expected always to optimistically await messianic redemption. We must live our lives with ever present hope or be held accountable at the time of our final judgment. The Rabbis wonder, if this is such a serious obligation we are expected to fulfill, what is its Torah source? Where are we taught that our belief in God must be wedded to a belief in His role as eventual Redeemer? The *Semak* responds that it is implicit in the very first commandment.⁴⁹⁵

This is why everyone will be asked after death whether they believed in final redemption. And where is this *mitzvah* written? We may deduce that from this – the two ideas are inter-dependent. Just as we must believe that He took us out of Egypt, as it is -written "I am the Lord who took you out the land of Egypt," and this is a commandment, it also tells us that as I desire that you believe I was your Redeemer from Egypt so too do I desire that you believe that I am the Lord your God and I am destined to gather you in and to finally redeem you. And so He will help us with His great mercy once again, even as it is written "and He will return and gather you from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you."⁴⁹⁶

The words "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt" are to be understood not simply as a statement of fact about the miracle God had just performed for the Jews He saved from the tyranny of Egypt. They are meant as the theological foundation of faith for all future generations. They are what must serve as the key to our -relationship with God, rooted not only in gratitude for previous kindness but also in expectation of the fulfillment of Divine promises yet to come.

The first commandment, with its reference to the Exodus, speaks *about* the past but also *to* the future. It contains the dual message of history and destiny.

With this in mind, we may see the two different rationales given for Sabbath observance in the variant versions of the Decalogue in a new light. The text in *Shemot*, basing Shabbat on the act of Creation in which God rested on the seventh day, begins with the Hebrew word "*zakhor*" – "remember." It is clearly oriented to the past. Its purpose is memory. However the rationale offered in *Devarim* is to codify, on a weekly basis, the event recorded in the first commandment. Shabbat is linked to redemption.

Perhaps that is why the Sabbath commandment in *Devarim* begins with the Hebrew word *shamor*. It is generally translated "observe." But in *Bereishit* we found the word to have a special meaning that resonates with the interpretation the *Semak* offered to explain the first commandment. When the brothers of Yosef despised him for his dreams of rulership, the Torah cryptically tells us, "*ve-aviv shamar et ha-davar*" – "and his father kept the saying in mind."⁴⁹⁷ In his comment on this verse, Rashi tells us that the word "*shamar*" implies "*hayah yosheiv u-metzapeh matai yavo*" – "he sat and anxiously hoped for the time when this would become fulfilled."

"*Shamar*" is connected to the future. The Sabbath commandment in *Devarim* begins with this word. It then emphasizes recognition of God as our Redeemer to be the reason for its observance. The two versions of the Decalogue now can be seen as the two sides of the coin representing our relationship to time. The *zakhor* of *Shemot* is the Shabbat of the past and of history. The *shamor* of *Devarim* is the vision of the Shabbat of final messianic redemption and of destiny.

The Three *Tefillot* of Shabbat

This duality helps us to understand a unique feature about the central prayer of Shabbat. We know that the *Amidah*, the prayer in which we stand and speak directly to God, is condensed from its normal -nineteen blessings on the

⁴⁹⁴. *Shabbat* 31a.

⁴⁹⁵. *Semak*, *mitzvah* 1.

⁴⁹⁶. *Devarim* 30:3.

⁴⁹⁷. *Bereishit* 37:11.

Sabbath as well as on holidays. The first and last sections, devoted to praise and thanksgiving, remain unchanged from their daily recitation. The middle portion however, which is devoted to specific requests, is eliminated; on holy days we feel spiritually fulfilled, unburdened by the need to ask for anything else. Instead of “*bakashah*” – “asking” – we substitute one blessing called *Kedushat -Ha-Yom* – Identifying the Sanctity of the Day.

On every day of *Yom Tov* the central portion of the *Amidah* is the same, *Ma’ariv*, *Shacharit*, and *Minchah* – evening, morning, and afternoon. There is no reason for the words to change. Their purpose is merely to clarify the special nature of the day’s holiness. Just as the reason for its sanctity remains constant, so too do the words of the -blessing meant to identify it.

But strangely enough that is not true for the prayers of Shabbat. The central portion intended to define the day is totally different on Friday night, Shabbat morning, and Shabbat afternoon. Although the blessing’s conclusion in all cases is identical, “Blessed are You O Lord who sanctifies the Sabbath,” the text leading up to the final phrase highlights a separate idea for each of the three services.

Friday night’s prayer begins the *Kedushat Ha-Yom* section with the proclamation that “You [Lord] sanctified the seventh day for Your name’s sake as the culmination of the creation of heaven and earth; of all days You blessed it, of all seasons You sanctified it.” That is followed by a quote from the Torah of the three verses from the book of *-Bereishit* which conclude the biblical account of Creation: “Then the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their array. With the seventh day, God completed the work He had done...”⁴⁹⁸ The creation theme is then expanded upon, leading to the concluding blessing of the Lord for the sanctification of Shabbat.

On Shabbat morning, creation is no longer the prominent theme. What is stressed is Sinai. “Moses rejoiced at the gift of his portion when You called him faithful servant. A crown of glory You placed on his head when he stood before You on Mount Sinai. He brought down in his hands two tablets of stone on which was engraved the observance of the Sabbath.”

This opening is also followed by a biblical quote. It is however not from *Bereishit*. It speaks in legal rather than in descriptive language: “The Children of Israel must keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath in every generation as an everlasting covenant.”⁴⁹⁹ The blessing continues by emphasizing the unique role of the Jews in contrast to the other nations who did not receive the law as a heritage. It does fleetingly add a reference to “*zeikher le-ma’asseh bereishit*” – “a reminder of Creation,” but clearly it is the theme of the giving of the Law that was meant to be the main priority.

Shabbat *Minchah*, the afternoon service, remarkably ignores both Creation and Sinai. The central portion of the *Amidah* has no quote from the Torah to biblically validate its theme. It simply states: “You are One and Your name is One.” It is a phrase that clearly echoes the verse from the prophet Zechariah with which we conclude every service: “The Lord will be King over all the world, on that day the Lord will be One and His name will be One.”⁵⁰⁰ The descriptive portion of the day’s sanctity has moved from past to future. The first two services of Shabbat recalled history; the concluding prayer asks us to focus on our destiny.

In his legal code, the noted thirteenth/fourteenth-century -halakhic commentator the *Tur*, R. Yaakov ben Asher, takes careful note of the difference between the central portions of the Sabbath and -holiday prayers and explains it as follows:

And the reason they [the Rabbis] decreed three different texts for the Sabbath service and on holidays they only decreed one [the same] is because these three prayers were decreed to correspond to the three Sabbaths: “You sanctified” corresponds to the Sabbath of Creation as becomes clear from its content; “Moshe rejoiced” corresponds to the Sabbath of the giving of the Torah which according to all opinions was given on the Sabbath; and “You are One” corresponds to the Sabbath of the World to Come.⁵⁰¹

Here we have clear support for our thesis that Shabbat is thematically linked to both past and future. As outlined by the *Tur*, the first two prayers, *Ma’ariv* and *Shacharit*, link us to the seminal moments of both universal and Jewish history, Creation and Sinai. The concluding prayer of *Minchah* directs us forward to the glorious era that awaits us, a time whose spiritual perfection we were permitted to gain a small “one -sixtieth” glimpse of by way of the Sabbath.

⁴⁹⁸. *Bereishit* 2:1–3.

⁴⁹⁹. *Shemot* 31:16–17.

⁵⁰⁰. *Zechariah* 14:9.

⁵⁰¹. *Tur*, *O.C.*, Laws of Shabbat 292.

Schematically we might say Friday night takes us to the very beginning of human history. Shabbat morning brings us a step further with the selection of the Jewish people accepting the covenant to serve as a “light unto the nations.” Finally, Shabbat afternoon reminds us that history has a goal which includes final redemption and universal revelation.

The Three Eras of History

This tripartite theme of three Sabbaths brings to mind very clearly another famous talmudic passage.

We are taught:⁵⁰² “We learned from the house of Elijah: six thousand years is the length of time of this earth. This is divided into two thousand Years of Chaos [confusion]; two thousand Years of Torah; and two thousand Years of the Days of Messiah.”

The passage takes as its premise a remarkable concept alluded to in the book of *Tehillim*: “For one thousand years in Your [God’s] eyes are but a day that has passed” (90:4). The six “days” of Creation prefigure six millennia. According to the Ga’on of Vilna, “Each day of Creation alludes to a thousand years of our existence, and every little detail that occurred on these days will have its corresponding event happen at the proportionate time during its millennium.”⁵⁰³

And just as the six days of Creation described in *Bereishit* were followed by Shabbat, so too will the six thousand years of history bring to a close the world as we know it, to be followed by a time of total spirituality: “Six thousand years were decreed for the world to exist in accord with the number of days in the week [of Creation]; and the seventh day of Shabbat refers the seventh millennium in which there will be rest and cessation”⁵⁰⁴

As Nahmanides puts it, “The seventh millennium will be the Shabbat of the ‘World to Come,’ wherein the righteous will be resurrected and rejoice.”⁵⁰⁵

That is why the Talmud identifies the first two thousand years of history as the era of chaos and confusion. They are the two thousand years before Avraham discovered God. As Rashi explained it, “The ‘Two Thousand Years of Chaos’ ended when Avraham was 52 years old. Avraham was born in the Jewish year 1948.⁵⁰⁶ When he was 52 years old he brought back all the souls that he had acquired (converted) in Charan as stated in *Bereishit* 12:5.”⁵⁰⁷

The second two thousand-year period is identified as the era of Torah. On the Hebrew calendar from 2000 to 4000, corresponding to 1760 B.C.E. to 240 C.E., it was highlighted by the age of the Patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, the entry of the Jewish people to Israel, the building of the two Temples as well as the redaction of the Oral Law.

The final era, in which we presently find ourselves, is bounded by the years 4000 to 6000, 240 of the common era to 2240. It has so far included what one may certainly view as the prophetically predicted “birth pangs of the Messiah” – the dispersal of Jews throughout the world, the trials as well as persecution of the long exile, the Holocaust, and finally the ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel and signs of the beginning of the final redemption.

Perhaps the three prayers of Shabbat, identified by the *Tur* as the Sabbath of Creation, the Sabbath of Sinai, and the Sabbath of the World to Come, are meant to correspond to the three eras of history preceding the seventh millennium.

Shabbat begins in darkness. Its first prayer of *Ma’ariv* reflects the first two thousand years of chaos, a world without the missionizing presence of the first monotheist, Avraham. Its only claim to spirituality is an affirmation of God as Creator of the Universe. Its biblical reference is the opening verses of chapter 2 in the book of *Bereishit*.

Morning brings with it both the light of day and an introduction to the light of Torah, key to the second two thousand years of history. The prayer of *Shacharit* reminds us of Moshe and the joy of the receiving of the Torah. Its biblical reference recalls our obligation to observe laws of the Sabbath throughout the generations and to reaffirm our commitment to Divine law. It is the paradigm of the middle of the three ages of mankind.

As the day progresses, and Shabbat brings with it higher and higher levels of holiness, we find ourselves drawn closer to the goal of our existence. We dream the dream of universal recognition of God. We dare to hope that we are approaching the fulfillment of the Messianic Era’s promise.

⁵⁰². *Sanhedrin* 97a; *Avodah Zarah* 9a.

⁵⁰³. *Safra De-Tzni’uta*, ch. 5.

⁵⁰⁴. Rashi, *Avodah Zarah* 9a.

⁵⁰⁵. Ramban, *Sha’ar Ha-Gemul*, ch. 58.

⁵⁰⁶. I leave it to the reader to decide whether there is any significance to the year of Avraham’s birth on the Hebrew calendar and its similarity to the date on the secular calendar for the modern-day establishment of the State of Israel.

⁵⁰⁷. Rashi on *Sanhedrin* 97a.

“You are One and Your name is One.” That is the key to the central prayer of *Minchah* on Shabbat.

Indeed, the three Sabbath prayers are in accord with the talmudic principle that we are always to “ascend with regard to the holy.”⁵⁰⁸ They move us from history to destiny. They remind us that we come ever nearer to the day when Messiah will bring the entire world closer to the spiritual fervor and joy that we Jews have been blessed with by way of the Shabbat throughout the generations.

⁵⁰⁸. *Berakhot* 28a.