

THE SABBATH by Abraham Joshua Heschel

1

p. 3 Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.

p. 3 To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.

p. 3 Nothing is more useful than power, nothing more frightful. We have often suffered from degradation by poverty, now we are threatened with degradation through power. There is happiness in the love of labor, there is misery in the love of gain. Many hearts and pitchers are broken at the fountain of profit. Selling himself into slavery to things, man becomes a utensil that is broken at the fountain.

p. 4 Even pantheistic philosophy is a religion of space: the Supreme Being is thought to be the infinite space. *Deus sive natura* has extension, or space, as its attribute, not time; time to Spinoza is merely an accident of motion, a mode of thinking. And his desire to develop a

THE SABBATH by Abraham Joshua Heschel

2

philosophy *more geometrico*, in the manner of geometry, which is the science of space, is significant of his space-mindedness.

p. 5 To retain the holy, to perpetuate the presence of god, his image is fashioned. Yet a god who can be fashioned, a god who can be confined, is but a shadow of man.

p. 6 It is impossible for man to shirk the problem of time. The more we think the more we realize: we cannot conquer time through space. We can only master time in time.

p. 6 What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.

p. 8 Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualityless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.

p. 9 It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.

pp. 9-10 When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time. When at Sinai the word of God was about to be voiced, a call for holiness in *man* was proclaimed: "Thou shalt be unto me a holy people." It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.

p. 13 Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.

p. 14 The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.

p. 14 Not only the hands of man celebrate the day, the tongue and the soul keep the Sabbath. One does not talk on it in the same manner in which one talks on weekdays. Even thinking of business or labor should be avoided.

p. 16 The Jewish contribution to the idea of love is the conception of love of the Sabbath, the love of a day, of spirit in the form of time.

p. 16 For where shall the likeness of God be found? There is no quality that space has in common with the essence of God. There is not enough freedom on the top of the mountain; there is not enough glory in the silence of the sea. Yet the likeness of God can be found in time, which is eternity in disguise.

p. 17 Yet law and love, discipline and delight, were not always fused. In their illustrious fear of desecrating the spirit of the day, the ancient rabbis established a level of observance

which is within the reach of exalted souls but not infrequently beyond the grasp of ordinary men.

p. 17 "There is nothing more important, according to the Torah, than to preserve human life . . . Even when there is the slightest possibility that a life may be at stake one may disregard every prohibition of the law." One must sacrifice mitzvot *for the sake of man* rather than sacrifice man "*for the sake of mitzvot.*" The purpose of the Torah is "to bring life to Israel, in this world and in the world to come."

pp. 18-19 To sanctify the seventh day does not mean: Thou shalt mortify thyself, but, on the contrary: Thou shalt sanctify it with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy senses. "Sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, by beautiful garments, delight your soul with pleasure and I will reward you for this very pleasure."

p. 21 The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere.

p. 21 The primary awareness is one of our being within the Sabbath rather than of the Sabbath being within us. We may not know whether our understanding is correct, or

whether our sentiments are noble, but the air of the day surrounds us like spring which spreads over the land without our aid or notice.

p. 21 There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear.

p. 23 To the biblical mind *menuha* is the same as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony. The word with which Job described the state after life he was longing for is derived from the same root as *menuha*. It is the state wherein man lies still, wherein the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. It is the state in which there is no strife and no fighting, no fear and no distrust. The essence of good life is *menuha*.

p. 27 Technical civilization is the product of labor, of man's exertion of power for the sake of gain, for the sake of producing goods. It begins when man, dissatisfied with what is available in nature, becomes engaged in a struggle with the forces of nature in order to enhance his safety and to increase his comfort. To use the language of the Bible, the task of civilization is to subdue the earth, to have dominion over the beast.

p. 27 How proud we often are of our victories in the war with nature, proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, of the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats. In spite of our triumphs, we have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us.

p. 28 "Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work; but the seventh day is Sabbath unto the Lord thy God." Just as we are commanded to keep the Sabbath, we are commanded to labor. "Love work . . ." The duty to work for six days is just as much a part of God's covenant with man as the duty to abstain from work on the seventh day.

p. 28 The solution of mankind's most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence of it.

pp. 28-29 In regard to external gifts, to outward possessions, there is only one proper attitude—to have them and to be able to do without them. On the Sabbath we live, as it were, *independent of technical civilization*: we abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space. Man's royal privilege to conquer nature is suspended on the seventh day.

p. 30 The Sabbath is no time for personal anxiety or care, for any activity that might dampen the spirit of joy. The Sabbath is no time to remember sins, to confess, to repent or even to pray for relief or anything we might need. It is a day for praise, not a day for petitions. Fasting, mourning, demonstrations of grief are forbidden. The period of mourning is interrupted by the Sabbath. And if one visits the sick on the Sabbath, one should say: "It is the Sabbath, one must not complain; you will soon be cured." One must abstain from toil and strain on the seventh day, even from strain in the service of God.

p. 36 So they returned and dwelled there another twelve months; for, they said, the punishment of the wicked in hell lasts only twelve months.

p. 41 To this day, the idea of Torah being the source of eternity is proclaimed in our prayers. It is for the gift of perceiving the taste of eternity in dedication to the Torah that time and again we thank and say: "Blessed be thou . . . who has given us the Torah . . . and has planted within us *eternal life*." And when we go hence and rest in the world to come—what is the bliss that awaits the souls of righteous men? It is to begin to understand the deeper meaning of the Torah: "Things that are covered up from men in this world will become transparent as globes of crystal."

pp. 45-46 An older contemporary of Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai, the distinguished heretic Alisha ben Abuyah, had taken the opposite view. Charmed with the worldly culture of Hellenism, he would visit the schools and attempt to entice the students from the study of the Torah and urge them to dedicate their energies to some more practical occupation:

“Out with you, you lazy people, stop idling away your days. Begin a human work: you become a carpenter, and you a mason, you a tailor, and you a fisherman.”

p. 46 Personally, Rabbi Judah was given to severe self-denial and austerity. “I do not wish to derive any pleasure from this world,” he said. Yet his advice to others was that the ideal path lay midway. Life is likened unto two roads: one of fire and one of ice. “If you walk in the one, you will be burned, and if in the other, you will be frozen. What shall one do? Walk in the middle.”

p. 47 Rabbi Shimeon’s doctrine was: There is only heaven and nothing else; but heaven contradicted him and said: There is heaven and everything else. His martial anger was sharply broken by the Voice: *Have ye emerged to destroy my World?* What Rabbi Shimeon decried, the Voice endorsed.

It was not until Rabbi Shimeon and his son came out of the cave at the end of their second period of retreat that their minds were reconciled to the idea that the world this side of heaven is worth working in. What caused the change of mind?

p. 48 This, then, is the answer to the problem of civilization: not to flee from the realm of space; to work with things of space but to be in love with eternity. Things are our tools; eternity, the Sabbath, is our mate. Israel is engaged to eternity. Even if they dedicate six days of the week to worldly pursuits, their soul is claimed by the seventh day.

pp. 51-52 That promise was not forgotten. “When the people of Israel stood before the mountain of Sinai, the Lord said to them: ‘Remember that I said to the Sabbath: The Community of Israel is your mate.’ Hence: Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it” (Exodus 20:8). The Hebrew word *le-kadesh*, to sanctify, means, in the language of the Talmud, to consecrate a woman, to betroth. Thus the meaning of that word on Sinai was to impress upon Israel the fact that their destiny is to be the groom of the sacred day, the commandment to espouse the seventh day.

p. 52 There is a great longing in the world. The six days stand in need of space; the seventh day stands in need of man. It is not good that the spirit should be alone, so Israel was destined to be a helpmeet for the Sabbath.

p. 54 The Sabbath is meaningful to God, for without it there would be no holiness in our world of time. In discussing the meaning of the verse, "and on the *seventh* day He finished His work," the ancient rabbis suggested that an act of creation took place on the seventh day. The world would not be complete if the six days did not culminate in the Sabbath. Geniba and the rabbis discussed this. Geniba said: This may be compared to a king who made a bridal chamber, which he plastered, painted and adorned; now what did the bridal chamber lack? A bride to enter it. Similarly, what did the universe still lack? The Sabbath. The rabbis said: Imagine a king who made a ring: What did it lack? A signet. Similarly, what did the universe lack? The Sabbath.

p. 59 What is it that these epithets are trying to celebrate? It is time, of all phenomena the least tangible, the least material. When we celebrate the Sabbath we adore precisely something we do not see. To name it queen, to call it bride is merely to allude to the fact that its spirit is a reality we meet rather than an empty span of time which we choose to set aside for comfort or recuperation.

p. 59 Did the rabbis imagine that the Sabbath was an angel? A spiritual person? Religious thought cannot afford to associate closely with the powers of fantasy. Yet the metaphoric concept of the Sabbath held no danger of deification of the seventh day, of conceiving it to be an angel or a spiritual person. Nothing stands between God and man, not even a day.

p. 60 Yet do not some of us realize at times that a person is no superlative, that to personify the spiritually real is to belittle it? A personification may be both a distortion and a depreciation. There are many persons in the world but only one Sabbath.

p. 61 "The reason why the people extend the observance of the Sabbath to a part of Saturday night is to thank and to show that they do not like to see the departure of the holy guest, that her parting evokes a deep feeling of regret. This is why they detain her, and in their great affection accompany her with song and praise . . . as it is said in a Midrash: This may be compared to a bride and queen who is escorted with song and praise."

p. 67 Set me as a seal upon thy heart,
As a seal upon they arm;
For love is strong as death,

Jealousy is cruel as the grave:
The coals thereof are coals of fire,
A most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it;
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
He would utterly be contemned.

p. 74 What is the nature of the day that is all Sabbath? It is a time in which "there is neither eating nor drinking nor worldly transactions; but the righteous sit enthroned, their crowns on their heads, and enjoy the luster of the Shechinah."

p. 75 There is much that philosophy could learn from the Bible. To the philosopher the idea of the good is the most exalted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate; it cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base, the holy is the summit. Things created in six days He considered *good*, the seventh day He made *holy*.

p. 75 What is the Sabbath? Spirit in the form of time. With our bodies we belong to space; our spirit, our souls, soar to eternity, aspire to the holy. The Sabbath as an ascent to the

summit. It gives us the opportunity to sanctify time, to raise the good to the level of the holy, to behold the holy by abstaining from profanity.

p. 76 One must be overawed by the marvel of time to be ready to perceive the presence of eternity in a single moment. One must live and act as if the fate of all of time would depend on a single moment.

p. 76 There is a world of things and a world of spirit. Sabbath is a microcosm of spirit, as if combining in itself all the elements of the macrocosm of spirit.

p. 79 Holiness in space, in nature, was known in other religions. New in the teaching of Judaism was that the idea of holiness was gradually shifted from space to time, from the realm of nature to the realm of history, from things to events. The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity. There were no naturally sacred plants or animals any more. To be sacred, a thing had to be consecrated by a conscious act of man. The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God.

p. 89 What *we are* depends on what *the Sabbath* is to us. The law of the Sabbath day is in the life of the spirit what the law of gravitation is in nature.

p. 89 Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one's own pettiness. Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty. Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem—how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent.

p. 96 The world of space surrounds our existence. It is but a part of living, the rest is time. Things are the short, the voyage is in time.

p. 98 About the arrival of the people at Sinai we read in the Book of Exodus: "In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on *this day* they came into the wilderness of Sinai" (19:1). Here was an expression that puzzled the ancient rabbis: on *this day*? It should have been said: on *that day*. This can only mean that the day of giving the Torah can never become past; that day is this day, every day. The Torah, whenever we study it, must be to us "as if it were given us today." The same applies to the

day of the exodus from Egypt: "In every age man must see himself as if he himself went out of Egypt."

p. 99 Time is man's greatest challenge. We all take part in a procession through its realm which never comes to an end but are unable to gain a foothold in it. Its reality is apart and away from us. Space is exposed to our will; we may shape and change the things in space as we please. Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond our power. It is both near and far, intrinsic to all experience and transcending all experience. It belongs exclusively to God.

p. 99 We share time, we own space.

p. 100 Time is like an eternal burning bush. Though each instant must vanish to open the way to the next one, time itself is not consumed.

p. 100 Time is perpetual innovation, a synonym for continuous creation. Time is God's gift to the world of space.

p. 101 Creation is the language of God, Time is His song, and things of space the consonants in the song. To sanctify time is to sing the vowels in unison with Him.