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Today's Messianic People and Shabbat: Moving Beyond "Saturday Church" ²⁰¹⁵

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Most people who have been involved in some quarter of the Messianic movement, for some degree of time, are sure to have noticed a diversity of views and applications present regarding the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12).¹ For a wide variety of people, the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is to be a time of rest, abstention from labors, and a time to do things differently than in the previous six days of work. *Shabbat* is not a time to go to the store and shop; *Shabbat* is a time to focus in on the Lord, and be both physically and spiritually refreshed. For many others, *Shabbat* is little different than what might be considered "Saturday church." For them, *Shabbat* is a time to go to one's Messianic congregation on Saturday morning, to corporately worship God, to hear a teaching, and when it is over, there are other things to do on Saturday.

Back in the 1980s, when I was in my adolescent years, my family was very involved in the Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church, and we were strongly committed, evangelical Christian Believers (in a denomination which today in the 2010s is definitely not as evangelical as it once was). My family's social life revolved around Christ United Methodist in Florence, KY. There were church activities on both Sunday and Wednesday, my parents were on the board of trustees, they were close friends with the pastor, and it did seem like there was almost something to always do at the church.

Sunday was a day committed to the Lord for certain. My father was the leader of the singles Sunday school class, although later he led a morning service at the Boone County Jail in Burlington, KY, right before our main church service. While Sunday was a day dedicated to God for worship and fellowship, by the time 1:00 PM rolled around, the Sunday worship service was over, and most people had left the church. What would we do? Normally, like many others, we would go out to lunch. We would either go out to lunch as a family, or with a group of friends. Going out to lunch, perhaps afterward to go shopping at the mall, and surely to go to the supermarket to buy groceries, is just what you did after church in 1980s American evangelical Christianity.

¹ A broad approach to how *Shabbat* has been viewed by today's Messianic people is offered by Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), pp 188-203.

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In the mid-1990s, after my father died, my mother remarried, we moved to Dallas, TX, and we entered into the Messianic movement—while the Messianic experience was not the same as our prior church experience, there were some things that were definite carry overs. It is not impossible to transfer some of the edifying expectations of a Sunday morning church service to a Saturday morning *Shabbat* service.

Messianic congregations, just like evangelical churches, will often hold some kind of classes before the main morning service. In our experience, while there will frequently be afternoon activities at a Messianic congregation, after the main morning service, often the afternoon is left fully open. For many people, just as it was when we attended church back in the mid-1980s to early-1990s, they will leave their Messianic congregations, many will go out to lunch, many will go shopping, and many are not going to take the time to rest. For many people, *Shabbat* might as well be “Saturday church.” The difference between today’s Messianics and most of their evangelical Christian brethren—is that the former is professing some kind of conscious adherence to the Fourth Commandment.

Many people in today’s Messianic community treat the seventh-day Sabbath as a kind of “Saturday church” **more than** as a time to rest from labor, focus on God and one’s brethren, and enter into something special. Something is lost by not keeping *Shabbat* and sanctifying the day. This is not to say that there are not life events which require your attention on Saturday, that there are not exceptions to the rule, or that one has to be rigid and inflexible about Sabbath observance. **What it is to say is that *Shabbat* has dimensions that extend well beyond corporate worship on Saturday morning.** To those in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, *Shabbat* is more than about corporate worship; it is also about a time to observe important Jewish customs and traditions which have bound the community together. In my own family’s immediate ancestry in the past century, many Protestant Christians made Sunday a day of both corporate worship and family gathering.

Many sincere Believers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have come together in today’s Messianic movement—albeit a faith community that is still maturing and developing—and we have experienced, together, the blessing of *Shabbat*. It begins by sharing the dinner table on *Erev Shabbat*, it continues with the corporate, unified worship on Saturday morning, and our congregational activities may further involve an *oneg* or fellowship meal time afterward, as well as various classes and times of interaction over God’s Word. Every individual and family will have their different Sabbath routines, but *Shabbat* is hardly a time to just show up to one’s congregation or assembly for a two hour service, and then quickly leave as though it is “Saturday church.” In returning to *Shabbat*, with a more conscious remembrance of the Fourth Commandment, Messianic Believers need not squander the profound sense of rest and renewal offered to us by it. As Samuel H. Dresner astutely directs us,

“The Sabbath cannot be observed haphazardly, subject to the whims of each individual, as a day to be spent at the golf club or before the television set, or time to be used washing the car or mowing the lawn. The ‘week-end,’ with its parties, liquor, noonday sleeping and unwashed, unshaven faces, its high incidence of crime and auto accidents, is more a denial than a substitute for the Sabbath.”²

² Samuel H. Dresner, *The Sabbath* (New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1970), 22.

The Sabbath as the Weekly Appointed Time

Many Messianic people, in rightly wanting to emphasize the significance of the Sabbath, will refer to *Shabbat* as "the first of the Lord's feasts." It is not as though there is no justification for this, either. Leviticus 23:3 does communicate, "These are My fixed times. Six days shall tasks be done, and on the seventh day, an absolute sabbath, a sacred convocation" (Alter), *b'yom ha'shevi'i Shabbat Shabbaton miqra-qodesh* (שַׁבְּתוֹן מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ) (בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת). While the textual evidence from Leviticus 23 is certainly in favor of regarding the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) as one of the *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים), anyone who might express a different view, is frequently not doing so with the intent of dismissing the Sabbath. If some readers conclude that *Shabbat* is not one of the appointed times, then they instead often opt for *Shabbat* being **an institution that sits above the appointed times**, codified in the Ten Commandments, with the Sabbath being independent of commemorations rooted in Israel's history, instead to be exclusively regarded as **a Creation institution**. And the logic would be, that if one keeps the seventh-day Sabbath, then observance of the annual appointed times should follow. Far from disregarding the importance of *Shabbat*, such a view would highlight and intensify its significance.

Far more important regarding the weekly Sabbath, involves the theological discussions and debates between the verb *shavat* (שָׁבַת) and the noun *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת), which are obviously related, but are also different. Genesis 2:3 informs us, "God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all His work which God created to make" (ATS). The Hebrew clause of importance states *ki bo shavat m'kol-melakh'to asher-bara Elohim l'asot* (כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מְכֹל־מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת), "because on-him he-rested from-all-of work-of-him that he-created God to-do" (Kohlenberger).³

Everyone agrees that God gave a special blessing⁴ to the seventh day of the week; the real issue is how the verb *shavat* is used, which mainly has the neutral context of ceasing or desisting from an action, but which can also mean "keep sabbath" (BDB).⁵ If there is any component of the latter intended in Genesis 2:3, then it would not only mean that God blessed the seventh day and rested, but that God Himself effectively established the Sabbath as a Creation ordinance, resting Himself and taking a Sabbath—something in which His human creations were to likewise participate. This is a position that many people have held, believing in either the continuance of the seventh-day Sabbath, or a Sabbath-principle transferred to Sunday.

How are Bible readers to approach the noun *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת), and its relationship to the verb *shavat* (שָׁבַת)? (Various resources will use the scientific transliterations *šabbāṭ* [שַׁבְּתָ] for the noun, and *šābat/šābat* [שָׁבַת] for the verb.) Frequently, it is argued that the noun *Shabbat* is derived from the verb *shavat*, but that this is not totally independent of the verb:

- ISBE: "[It]...is most likely...that *šabbāṭ* is derived from the verb *šābat*, 'cease,' since the most ancient characteristic of seventh-day observance is

³ Kohlenberger, 1:4.

⁴ Heb. *barak* (בָּרַךְ).

⁵ BDB, 360.

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that all work ceased. Thus sabbath would mean something like 'cessation day,' the day on which all work stops. If in fact the noun was derived from the verb, it appears that the noun then influenced the verb as well. In a few instances *šāḥat* has become a denominative, losing its basic sense of 'cease' and acquiring the sense of 'keep sabbath' (Lev. 23:32; 2 Ch. 36:21)."⁶

- *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*: "The precise relationship with the noun *šabbāt* and the verb *šābat* is disputed. Whether the noun derives from the verb or vice versa is unclear. The Qal verb means 'to cease, stop.' Quite possibly, therefore, the noun simply means 'the day that stops,' implying the cessation of work or regular activity. Other possible meanings include 'to rest,' 'to celebrate' or even 'to be complete.' However, the basic meaning seems to be cessation...That there is a relationship between the two words is suggested by the absence of the noun *šabbāt* in Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 23:12; 34:21, where the seventh day is discussed and the verb *šābat* occurs...There is also conjecture that the noun *šabbāt* is related to the number seven, but that possibility has little scholarly consensus."⁷

The seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* which is codified in the Ten Commandments, is based on the hallowing the seventh day or *yom ha'shevi'i* (יום השביעי) by God, at the conclusion of His creation of the universe and humankind. While direct codification of the Sabbath would come later at Mount Sinai, surely the Biblical traditions of Creation, of God's Divine rest, and of God's sanctifying of the seventh day—preserved by the Patriarchs—were known prior to the composition of the Torah or Pentateuch by Moses. While the pre-Israelite Patriarchs probably did not observe the Sabbath as did the post-Sinai Israelites, it is possible for them to have kept some kind of rest day on what would formally develop into *Shabbat*.⁸

When the code of the Torah was instituted for Ancient Israel, there is little doubting how the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* would play an important role for the community. Ronald L. Eisenberg describes in *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, how the "admonition to keep the Sabbath immediately precede[d] the divine instructions concerning the building of the Tabernacle and Moses' transmission of them to the people. Thus resting on the seventh day took priority even over the duty of constructing the Sanctuary, the place where God was to dwell among the people."⁹ Of course, whether it was Ancient Israel in the desert, the Jewish exiles having returned to rebuild the Temple, or Jewish people in the Mediterranean Diaspora, keeping the Sabbath was an important part of the weekly activities. What people did during the first six days of the week, would lead to the final or seventh day of rest.

⁶ J.C. McCann, Jr. "Sabbath," in *ISBE*, 4:247.

⁷ P.A. Barker, "Sabbath," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 695.

⁸ This is explored in conjunction with an analysis of Genesis 26:5, "Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (NRSV), "Imitation of God," in Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), pp 64-78.

⁹ Eisenberg, 126.

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The importance of the Sabbath is not just that it is a covenant sign between God and His people (Exodus 31:12-17), nor is it only a time for just physical rest. In the pre-resurrection era, for certain, Sabbath violation could merit the death penalty, and Sabbath keeping seemingly did involve some kind of religious convocation, laying the groundwork for the later establishment of synagogues for communal gatherings and worship. P.A. Barker details the following in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*:

"An assumption often made is that the sabbath law is for the benefit of humanity. People need rest and refreshment. Exodus 23:12 does indicate the need for rest and relief for animals and *aliens. The clearest expression of humanitarian concern as a reason for the sabbath is in Deuteronomy 5:14...However, this humanitarian concern is not dominant in the pentateuchal texts...More is at stake in the observance of the sabbath than just a social concern for rest and refreshment. The death penalty indicates that....

"It is unclear...what cultic activity occurred on the sabbath day apart from special sabbaths associated with other feasts and festivals. The priests offered special sabbath sacrifices, an additional burnt offering of two male lambs and a cereal offering (Num 28-29), but no mention is made of ordinary Israelites in this connection.

"Nonetheless, the day was not just a rest day. It was a religious day that belonged to Yahweh. Though more is made of the religious and cultic nature of the sabbath in texts outside the Pentateuch that the day was a religious occasion. It was set apart or made holy to Yahweh. It was his day (Ex 16:23, 25; 20:10; 31:15). Yet it was also a day holy for Israel (Ex 31:13). The command for Israel to participate in this day is linked to Israel's being holy to the Lord, set apart to be his people. Thus in Exodus 31:12-17 the sabbath is a sign that Yahweh sanctifies Israel itself. Theologically, the day reminds Israel that Yahweh is Creator and Redeemer and Lord of all. Observance of the day at least implies an acknowledgment of the lordship of Yahweh..."¹⁰

Leviticus 23:3 ascribes *Shabbat* the status of *miqra* (מִקְרָא), "summons," "assembly," or "reading, recitation" (*HALOT*).¹¹ LITV actually calls it "a holy gathering." The Sabbath is hardly supposed to be a time where all God's people do is sleep all day long. It is to be a time of assembly, especially for worshipping our Creator, and reading His Word for our edification. *Shabbat* is the weekly appointed time, which should be remembered by the people of God.

Recapturing the Significance of the Sabbath

Looking at the highly stressed, heart attack and stroke laden, overly micro-managed and technology dominated, market driven, Western culture which we have all been affected by since the end of World War II, and even more so since the end of the Cold War—it is hardly a surprise why many religious people, who affirm a belief in the God of Israel, welcome the Sabbath with open arms. I remember back in the Spring of 1996, with what happened when I told some of my freshman colleagues at high school, that my family was attending a Messianic Jewish congregation, and now keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. One friend looked disturbed, saying, "I think that might be

¹⁰ Barker, "Sabbath," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 697-698.

¹¹ *HALOT*, 1:629.

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sacrilege.” He was later invited to a *chavurah* gathering at our congregation on Saturday evening, and actually enjoyed it a great deal! Of course, looking back on this two decades ago, I just smirk and think to myself facetiously, “Ninth graders think they know everything.” **Many people who are overworked**, even if they are nicely paid, **want a day of rest.**

The significance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* as a time of rest, is something that has hardly gone unnoticed by Jewish writers. They do not have to deal with an errant Christian theology or ideology which claims that the Sabbath has been abolished, and that some of kind vague or ethereal “spiritual rest” is all that matters; Jewish teachers and theologians have to instead deal with those who think that *their work, their jobs, and their businesses are more important than God*. This even extends to admonishing various Orthodox Jews, who would be among the most strict about keeping *Shabbat*. Referencing Exodus 20:9, “Six days shall you work and accomplish all your work” (ATS), Shimon Finkelman directs in his book *Shabbos: The Sabbath—Its Essence and Significance*,

“You may have left the office or the store with enough work on your desk to keep you busy for a year, but on the Sabbath it neither worries you nor concerns you. For all practical purposes it is accomplished. Do not think about it. To spend your Sabbath analyzing the results of the last week and planning for the next violates the spirit of the day, and is forbidden.”¹²

Keeping the Sabbath properly, though, does require a great deal of preparation in the previous six days, and specific routines that will make it a holy and separated time.

The term *menuchah* (מְנוּחָה) or “rest,” takes on some significant theological overtones and undertones, among Jewish teachers probing its significance for those observing *Shabbat*. A Christian resource like *TWOT* considers the verb *nuach* (נָוַח) to involve, “not only absence of movement but being settled in a particular place (whether concrete or abstract) with overtones of finality, or (when speaking abstractly) of victory, salvation, etc.”¹³ In his famed work, *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, even with some philosophical speculation, rightly directs people to the importance of the *menuchah* or rest that involves a condition which is to extend beyond just individuals ceasing from their labor and work for a day:

“The words: ‘On the *seventh* day God *finished* His work’ (Genesis 2:2), seem to be a puzzle. Is it not said: ‘He *rested* on the *seventh* day’? ‘In *six* days the Lord made heaven and earth’ (Exodus 20:11)? We would surely expect the Bible to tell us that on the sixth day God finished His work. Obviously, the ancient rabbis concluded, there was an act of creation on the seventh day. Just as heaven and earth were created in six days, *menuha* was created on the Sabbath.

“After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha*. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete.

“*Menuha* which we usually render with ‘rest’ means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of

¹² Shimon Finkelman, *Shabbos: The Sabbath—Its Essence and Significance* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1990), 11.

¹³ Leonard J. Coppes, “נָוַח,” in *TWOT*, 2:562.

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any kind. *Menuha* is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive. This must have been the view of the ancient rabbis if they believed that it took a special act of creation to bring it into being, that the universe would be incomplete without it.

"What was created on the seventh day? *Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose.*'

"To the biblical mind *menuha* is the same as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony. The word with which Job described as 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*. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters' (the waters of *menuhot*). In later times *menuha* became a synonym for the life in the world to come, for eternal life."¹⁴

While the Sabbath may be considered a Creation ordinance by many readers of Scripture, the fact is, as Heschel rightly concludes, "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living."¹⁵ When *Shabbat* becomes an important part of who you are as a man or woman of God, living in this world, then it can be understood how ***we do not rest to keep the six working days, we work so that we might rest on Shabbat***. Heschel explains,

"He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal of embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. 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."¹⁶

At the same time, the Jewish philosopher Philo—who would have interacted with a wide number of First Century Greeks and Romans—directly countered the idea that the Sabbath was a cause of laziness or idleness:

"Not that the law is the adviser of idleness, for it is always accustoming its followers to submit to hardships, and training them to labor, and it hates those who desire to be indolent and idle; at all events, it expressly commands us to labor diligently for six days [Exodus 20:9], but in order to give some remission from uninterrupted and incessant toil, it refreshes the body with seasons of moderate relaxation exactly measured out, so as to renew it again for fresh works. For those who take breath in this way, I am speaking not merely about private individuals but even about athletes, collect fresh strength, and with more vigorous power, without any shrinking and with great endurance, encounter everything that must be done" (*Special Laws* 2.60).¹⁷

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), pp 22-23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 574.

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Far from people resting on the Sabbath so that they can be *consumed by work* during the six normal days of the week, the Sabbath is instead to be a means by which people are to be enabled to *perform the best work possible*.

That the weekly Sabbath invites people not just to physically rest, but to consider a state of existence of total *shalom* and tranquility between God and His human creations—is something that has too frequently been lost. Even among some of the best Messianic people I have encountered, who firmly believe in observance of the Sabbath and in stopping their labors—*Shabbat* is not often about being a time other than “un-work.” In our collective quest to want to recapture the significance of the Sabbath, the dimensions of rest which communicate key lessons and concepts, to multiple parts of our bodies, hearts, and minds, have too often been overlooked. Dresner’s observations about how human creatures are drawn to the majesty and supremacy of their Creator, need to be seriously considered:

“On the Sabbath we are at peace with nature. Six days a week we compete with the natural world—building, subduing, struggling to overcome lest we be overcome. Technology is our bible; the machine, our god; and gadgets, the holy vessels we revere. On the Seventh-Day we withdraw, moving from creation to Creator, from machine and gadget to the quiet of our souls, from nature to the Lord of all nature, from conflict to *Shabbat Menuhah*—innermost rest and harmony. Nothing is created on the Sabbath; there is no sewing, no cooking, no building, no writing—nothing which can interfere with the sense of the rest. One day a week we are at peace with nature.

“Is man creature or creator? In his victory over the forces of nature, whose deepest secrets he unravels—turning great forests into farms and cities, drawing forth from the earth gold, silver and precious stones, harnessing powerful rivers to provide untold energy, learning to fly through the air like a bird and swim through the water like a fish, conquering dreaded diseases that were the scourge of society for centuries, building towers that pierce the clouds and trains to carry thousands underground, splitting the atom into incomprehensible power and discovering how to ascend even to the moon—it is to be expected that man would be tempted to consider himself the lord of all, the mastermind of the universe. It is so easy for him to think of himself not as creature but as creator, the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-dominating lord of nature. Infatuated with his marvelous talents, he may forget the real Creator, without whom all man’s achievements are as nothing, all his gadgets dusts, all his inventions instruments that can be turned into terrible weapons which can destroy, rather than improve the world. For the real purpose of life is not to conquer nature but to conquer the self; not to fashion a city out of a forest but to fashion a soul out of a human being; not to build bridges but to build human kindness; not to learn to fly like a bird or swim like a fish but to walk on the earth like a man, not to erect skyscrapers but to establish mercy and justice, not to manufacture an ingenious technical civilization but to be holy in the midst of unholiness. The real tasks are to learn how to remain civilized in the midst of insanity, how to retain a share in man’s dignity in the midst of the Dachaus and Buchenwalds, how to keep the mark of Cain from obscuring the image of the divine, how to fashion a home of love and peace, how to create children obedient and reverent, how to find the strength to perform the *mitzvot*, how to bend our will to God’s will.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Dresner, pp 37-39.

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While I would not advocate for people to not use electronic devices to communicate with friends and loved ones on *Shabbat*, Dresner does draw out key points about how without a time to pause and rest, we might not be able to see that in spite of our achievements as a human civilization—we are all subject to our Supreme Creator, *and* how some of our achievements could mean the end of our civilization. Ceasing from our labor, to pause and consider that in spite of all our achievements—including splitting the atom and going to the Moon—we are really still quite limited and mortal, **is really quite significant.**

More practically, perhaps, Dresner comes to the conclusion that if the Ten Commandments had been formulated in the Twentieth Century, a definitive prohibition on commerce would have been included. And indeed, he asserts how many would embrace such an initiative:

"If a new Ten Commandments were to be drawn up today for twentieth century man, prominent among them would surely be a law not to touch money one day a week. How vital to our age it would be to have a day when the shopkeeper and the customer alike might be removed from all temptation to buy or sell, when no one would even think of entering a store because he could purchase nothing, and the store itself would stand closed because one could sell nothing. What a blessing it would be for modern man to have one day a week free from all commerce. But that is precisely what the Sabbath has given the Jew for centuries. The halt it brings to our economic lives is a call to sanity."¹⁹

Even more recently, now into the Twenty-First Century, secularists are embracing various forms of "Sabbath." This can often be rooted within a hybrid of Biblically- and classically-informed philosophy, which emphasizes moderation, and which directs how too much reliance on modern convenience can lead to a life consumed with pleasure and ultimately unnecessary overload. Among secularists, the notion of taking a "technology Sabbath," has become something important.²⁰ *That human beings need to take a time to recognize their humanity, has surely been lost by far too many.* Thankfully, sincere men and women of God can lead the way, with the great customs and traditions surrounding *Shabbat*, as a separated and holy time dedicated to their Creator.

Acknowledging Messianic Diversity With Shabbat

As our family has experienced in two decades of being involved in the contemporary Messianic movement—and also interacting across the spectrum of people who compose it, and reading through the many materials which address the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* on some level—there is no uniformity of approach within our faith community. Frequently, one's experience with *Shabbat* will naturally focus on the morning *Shabbat* service facilitated by a Messianic congregation. Different levels of Sabbath observance are present within Messianic congregations and fellowships. The fact that most people will drive to a Messianic congregation, is a good enough indicator that a Conservative Jewish approach to the Sabbath, is the highest traditional level most are willing to adopt,

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp 204-206.

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with few being able, much less willing, to walk to a Messianic congregation, like how many Orthodox Jews will walk to their synagogue.

The variances which exist for Messianic people and *Shabbat* are across the spectrum. Some think that the seventh-day Sabbath has been abolished for the post-resurrection era, only to be observed for evangelizing unsaved Jews, while others think that *Shabbat* should be imposed, perhaps rigidly, on all Believers. Some think that Messianic Jews should be striving for a high(er) level of Sabbath keeping, and others think that past Jewish traditions bear little relevance for the present. Some think that only Jewish people are expected by God to keep the Sabbath, and others think that *Shabbat* is a special gift given by God to all people.

Shabbat is obviously about much more than just congregational attendance, as it is something to be experienced from Friday evening to Saturday evening. Still, most of our encounters with how other Messianic brothers and sisters keep the Sabbath, is often determined by their congregational involvement. No two Messianic congregations are alike, and as such, individual people who hold to these views, are probably present with you every time you attend a *Shabbat* service:

1. The Sabbath has been abolished for the post-resurrection era, but might be necessary to observe for Jewish evangelistic purposes:²¹

It is detectable from various sectors of the Messianic movement, widely involving those organizations whose major purpose is to evangelize Jewish people with the good news of Yeshua, that they hold that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* has probably been abolished in the post-resurrection era. Passages of the Apostolic Scriptures like Acts 20:7-12; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; and Colossians 2:16-23, among others, are interpreted along traditional Christian lines. If *Shabbat* is to be really observed for anything, it would be via Jewish Believers being sensitive to various cultural concerns of Jewish non-Believers, but not out of any sense of obedience to the Torah. Jewish Believers in Yeshua may keep *Shabbat* out of a sense of loyalty to Jewish culture and the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, but do not have to if they do not want to.

²¹ This view would be witnessed, to various degrees, in: Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus Volume Four: New Testament Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), pp 269-273; Sam Nadler, *Messianic Foundations: Fulfill Your Calling In the Jewish Messiah* (Word of Messiah Ministries, 2010), pp 177-181; Michael Brown, *60 Questions Christians Ask About Jewish Beliefs and Practices* (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 2011), pp 219-224.

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2. Sabbath observance should be encouraged, and/or is an obligation to be observed, by Jewish Believers, with some (high) level of emphasis on traditional interpretations and applications of *Shabbat* comandments.²²

Much of today's Messianic Jewish movement, having built itself upon a foundation of the earlier Hebrew Christian movement—which was primarily interested in Jewish evangelism—does tend to encourage Sabbath observance for Messianic Jewish Believers, which at the very least would recognize that the Sabbath has not been abolished, was not changed to Sunday, and that Messianic Jews should gather for *Shabbat* services. Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah, kept *Shabbat*, and Jewish followers of Yeshua should certainly keep *Shabbat* also.

Given how even the most liberal Reform Jews, will still demonstrate some kind of fidelity to the Sabbath, Messianic Jews have been given an opportunity to demonstrate that their faith in Yeshua is not something that subtracts, but rather enhances, their Jewish faith. Messianic Jews have a deep and rich heritage from Judaism in keeping the Sabbath, and making it a holy time. Many of the customs and traditions of Judaism, associated with the Sabbath, should be observed by today's Messianic Jews, as a part of their obedience to God, as well as for them to maintain a sense of Jewishness in an age when Jewish people are threatened with assimilation.

3. *Shabbat* has a great deal of richness to teach Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Israel's Messiah about the common origins of their faith.²³

A wide variety of Messianic or Messianic-involved people, believe that the seventh-day Sabbath is something that was lost by the emerging Christianity of the Second-Third Centuries C.E., and is something that needs to be restored to the Body of Messiah. This includes a wide spectrum of people to be sure, including Jewish Believers who are relatively welcoming to all in their assemblies, and various evangelical Christians who are trying to recapture a sense of their lost spiritual heritage in Judaism and the Old Testament. It

²² This view would be witnessed, to various degrees, in: Daniel C. Juster, *Growing to Maturity* (Denver: The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations Press, 1987), pp 181-185; Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times: A Practical Guide for Understanding and Celebrating the Biblical Holidays* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1993), pp 1-23; David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement With an Ancient Past* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2007), pp 164-166; Daniel C. Juster, *The Irrevocable Calling: Israel's Role as a Light to the Nations* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 2007), pp 17-18; Mark S. Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2011), pp 95-100; Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: Understanding Your Jewish Faith*, revised edition (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2013), pp 249-255; Daniel C. Juster and Patricia A. Juster, *Conveying a Heritage: A Messianic Jewish Guide to Home Practice* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2013), pp 11-21; D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels' Sabbath Conflicts* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2013).

²³ This view would be witnessed, to various degrees, in: Barry & Steffi Rubin, *The Sabbath: Entering God's Rest* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 1998), pp 1-10; Larry Huch, *The Torah Blessing: Revealing the Mystery, Releasing the Miracle* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2009), pp 99-140; Jill Shannon, *A Prophetic Calendar: The Feasts of Israel* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009), pp 257-275; Toby Janicki, *God-Fearers: Gentiles & the God of Israel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 73-87.

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involves Messianic Jewish congregations which are internally diverse, and can also involve Christian churches, which while continuing to hold Sunday services, have some kind of periodic Messianic service, gathering, or related events.

4. The seventh-day Sabbath was dismissed in the early centuries of emerging Christianity, and this was a serious mistake. Jewish Believers need to keep the Sabbath for sure, and Christian Believers need to recognize Sabbath dismissal as an act of anti-Semitism.²⁴ There are various people in today's Messianic world, but most especially the Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, and for sure the One Law/One Torah sub-movement,²⁵ who believe that losing the seventh-day Sabbath was a huge mistake made by many of the Christians of the Second and Third Centuries. Some of this wanting to recapture the Sabbath has been because of sincere intentions, of wanting to obey God, experience rest and refreshment, and return to a more First Century style of faith. At the same time, others can force *Shabbat* onto people as a rigid, legalistic obligation, including an inappropriate and unloving attitude toward Christian people who attend Sunday Church.

There can be some other views of the Sabbath present within the broad Messianic movement, and some of the categories present above do likely have some overlap among Messianic people. Given the fact that in Holy Scripture, the Sabbath is not exclusively about assembling for worship, and then returning to one's normal habits throughout the six working days, it is good to detect how there are many Messianics **who realize that *Shabbat* is not to be treated as some kind of "Saturday church."**

Community among brothers and sisters is certainly not built if one's *Shabbat* experience is all about how fashionably late and reasonably early, one can arrive at and then leave, your congregational *Shabbat* service. Community among brothers and sisters is scarcely built as well, though, among those who would force *Shabbat* onto others as a rigid observance. Likewise, not much is accomplished when people whom the Lord is drawing into a fuller and deeper remembrance of the Sabbath, as a time of rest and refreshment *and* to reclaim what was lost from the early Body of Messiah, are not encouraged by various others to continue such a path of holiness.

Is the Sabbath for everyone?

One of the huge elements of debate regarding the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, for today's Messianic community, does surround the place of non-Jewish Believers and the Sabbath. While it is rightfully recognized how Jewish Believers should keep the Sabbath, not only as a part of their ethnic and cultural heritage—but also their obedience

²⁴ This view would be witnessed, to various degrees, in: Tim Hegg, *Introduction to Torah Living* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), pp 61-67, 117-129; Daniel Gruber, *The Separation of Church & Faith: Copernicus and Jews* (Hanover, NH: Elijah Publishing, 2005), pp 149-154; Tim Hegg, *Why We Keep Torah: 10 Persistent Questions* (Tacoma: TorahResource, 2009), pp 37-54.

²⁵ Consult some of the discussions offered in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

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to Israel's Scriptures—what is the relationship of the Sabbath to Believers from the nations? There are Messianic Jews who do not believe that non-Jews should keep *Shabbat*; there are Messianic Jews who do believe that non-Jews should keep *Shabbat*. There are Messianic Jews who believe that *Shabbat* is exclusively for the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; there are Messianic Jews who believe that *Shabbat* is a great gift for all of God's people. **Suffice it to say, there is debate over how the Fourth Commandment should be approached, and what its original intentions actually were:**

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11).

"Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

It is fairly obvious to readers of the Fourth Commandment, how the weekly *Shabbat* or Sabbath was to be something that affected native, ethnic Israelites, as well as all other groups of people who were a part of the community of Ancient Israel. It is not difficult to deduce, though, how various interpreters can take the Fourth Commandment, and view it as being an egalitarian institution that welcomes all people (and even animals!) into a society where the Creator God requires rest of His own. Yet at the same time, not all have viewed the Sabbath or *Shabbat* as being such an institution. As is summarized by Barker in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*,

"To what extent...the original seventh day is to be a *creation ordinance for all humans to follow has been the topic of much debate, a debate that has implications for Christian sabbath observance. Many who argue that the sabbath is a creation ordinance also argue that Christians are bound to keep Saturday as their sabbath...Some ancient Jewish sources, such as Philo, argued that sabbath observance is binding on all humanity and not just Israel. However, many Jewish rabbinical texts argue the opposite, contending that the sabbath was given for Israel only."²⁶

That there was debate in Second Temple Judaism, from those who believed that the Sabbath was an ordinance God intended for all people, to others who believe that the Sabbath was an institution only to be kept by ethnic Israel and proselytes, is hardly something surprising. The same debate is present in today's Messianic movement.

²⁶ Barker, "Sabbath," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 696-697.

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The Jewish philosopher Philo did argue that the Sabbath was an institution intended for all of humanity:

“and there is an account of events recorded in the history of the creation of the world, comprising a sufficient relation of the cause of this ordinance; for the sacred historian says, that the world was created in six days, and that on the seventh day God desisted from his works, and began to contemplate what he had so beautifully created; therefore, he commanded the beings also who were destined to live in this state, to imitate God in this particular also, as well as in all others, applying themselves to their works for six days, but desisting from them and philosophizing on the seventh day, and devoting their leisure to the contemplation of the things of nature, and considering whether in the preceding six days they have done anything which has not been holy, bringing their conduct before the judgment-seat of the soul, and subjecting it to a scrutiny, and making themselves give an account of all the things which they have said or done; the laws sitting by as assessors and joint inquirers, in order to the correcting of such errors as have been committed through carelessness, and to the guarding against any similar offenses being hereafter repeated” (*On the Decalogue* 97-98).²⁷

“But after the whole world had been completed according to the perfect nature of the number six, the Father hallowed the day following, the seventh, praising it, and calling it holy. For that day is the festival, not of one city or one country, but of all the earth; a day which alone it is right to call the day of festival for all people, and the birthday of the world” (*On the Creation* 89).²⁸

Statements appearing in the Pseudepigrapha and the Mishnah reflect the view that the seventh-day Sabbath was only intended for ethnic Israel, and by extension any proselytes who would convert to Judaism:

“And he told us—all of the angels of the presence and all of the angels of sanctification, these two great kinds—that we might keep the sabbath with him in heaven and on earth. And he said to us, ‘Behold I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will also keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. Just as I have sanctified and shall sanctify the sabbath day for myself thus shall I bless them. And they will be my people and I will be their God. And I have chosen the seed of Jacob from among all that I have seen. And I have recorded him as my firstborn son, and have sanctified him for myself forever and ever. And I will make known to them the sabbath day so that they might observe therein a sabbath from all work.’ And thus he created therein a sign by which they might keep the sabbath with us on the seventh, to eat and drink and bless the one who created all things just as he blessed and sanctified for himself a people who appeared from all the nations so that they might keep the sabbath together with us....The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth” (*Jubilees* 2:19-21, 31).²⁹

²⁷ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, pp 526-527.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁹ O.S. Wintermute, trans., “Jubilees,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, pp 57, 58.

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"A gentile who came to put out a fire—they do not say to him, 'Put it out,' or 'Do not put it out,' for they are not responsible for his Sabbath rest. But a minor [Israelite child] who came to put out a fire—they do not hearken to him [and let him do so], because his Sabbath rest is their responsibility. They cover a lamp with a dish so that it will not scorch a rafter; and the excrement of a child; and a scorpion, so that it will not bite. Said R. Judah, 'A case came before Rabban Yochanan b. Zakai in Arab, and he said, 'I suspect [he is liable for] a sin offering.' A gentile who lit a candle—an Israelite may make use of its light. But [if he did so] for an Israelite, it is prohibited [to use it on the Sabbath]" (m.*Shabbat* 16:6-8).³⁰

In much of post-Second Temple Judaism, the thought that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* was only intended for ethnic Jews and proselytes, is the view that largely won out. This is the view expressed by Finkelman in his Orthodox Jewish book *Shabbos*:

"Only the Jewish people, who endured the purifying process of the Egyptian exile until departing that land as God's Chosen People, who attained a heightened level of holiness and purity as they witnessed God's miracles at the Splitting of the Sea—only such a nation can truly experience and attach itself to the day of Shabbos."³¹

It is true, however, that more progressive branches of Judaism today, are much more inclusive when it comes to the application of *Shabbat* to those outside of the Jewish community. In his essay "The Roots of Shabbat," Bernard M. Zlotowitz states, "Traditionally, Judaism teaches that the Sabbath was unique to ancient Hebrew culture and was not influenced by others. It contends that the Sabbath as a day of rest and joy is our special contribution to the world, a gift from the Jewish people to all humankind."³² In her book *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*, Judith Shulevitz asserts a firm inclusiveness for what the thrust of the Sabbath commandments communicate:

"[Y]ou could call the Sabbath a *political* institution. It makes the radically egalitarian claim that everyone—men, women, children, strangers, *and* animals—has the right not to work. The Sabbath asserts the fundamental dignity of the human being, beyond his or her productive function."³³

Even Dresner, in his book *The Sabbath*, mentions how a non-Jewish visitor to modern Israel was impressed by the Sabbath, and the power it possesses could be observed by human civilization:

"A gentile reporter, after her first visit to Israel, observed in a popular magazine that 'the official beginning of the Sabbath is at sunset the previous evening, and a notice in the Friday paper tells exactly what time it is. After you've been through a few of them you can see why. They don't just close the stores; they shut down the whole city. Now that I'm used to it, I'm all for it and think if they'd shut down the whole world one day a week, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in.'

"On the Sabbath there is peace between man and society."³⁴

³⁰ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 199.

³¹ Finkelman, 138.

³² Bernard M. Zlotowitz, "The Roots of Shabbat," in Ruth Perelson, *An Invitation to Shabbat: A Beginner's Guide to Weekly Celebration* (New York: UAH Press, 1997), 5.

³³ Shulevitz, pp 59-60.

³⁴ Dresner, 51.

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For those who are committed to recognizing Yeshua of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel, His famed words about *Shabbat* were, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Some readers approach this from the vantage point of an individual person being in view, yet other versions, as is especially indicated by renderings employing a principle of inclusive language, have taken *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος), “a person of either sex, w. focus on participation in the human race, a *human being*” (BDAG),³⁵ in a slightly different direction:

- “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (NRSV).
- “The sabbath was made for humans...not humans for the sabbath” (Kingdom New Testament).
- “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath” (Common English Bible).

Even the Complete Jewish Bible, not following an ideology of inclusive language, still has, “*Shabbat* was made for mankind, not mankind for *Shabbat*” (CJB).

The words of Yeshua the Messiah, give strong support for the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* being something in which all people can and should participate.

The Future of Messianic Shabbat

It is hard to avoid that for many of the people who compose today’s Messianic movement, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, how the weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* is something that has too often been unappreciated for the significance it has for us. Certainly for this past Messianic generation, simply seeing that Jewish Believers express some fidelity and continuance of their Jewish heritage, including Sabbath observance, has been met with difficulty. *Shabbat* is something that today’s Messianic Jews have laudably kept, at least in terms of their congregations and assemblies meeting on Saturday. **But *Shabbat* is more than just “Saturday church,”** and with a new Messianic generation emerging, it needs to take on more dynamics of being a period of rest and refreshment.

The ancient Rabbinic dictum surrounding *Shabbat* is that “If the Israelites keep two successive Sabbaths in a proper manner, they will be saved immediately” (b.*Shabbat* 118b).³⁶ This is something that does correspond to the Apostle Peter’s own admonition, in how Believers “ought . . . to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Peter 3:11-12), as it is their holy conduct which hastens the return of the Messiah. And, even with there being some variance on how to approach the prophetic symbolism of the seventh-day Sabbath,³⁷ the Millennial Kingdom of Yeshua the Messiah will be the first time in human history when the Sabbath will actually be able to be properly observed, without any worldly impediments. Far from Jewish people in the Diaspora, or even in Israel today, having to worry about their jobs or their safety—the Sabbath is going to be a worldwide observance (Isaiah 66:23), with the King of Israel

³⁵ BDAG, 81.

³⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

³⁷ Consult the FAQ, “6,000 Year Teaching.”

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leading the way. **The Messianic Age as a time of worldwide Sabbath adherence, is something which has not been too emphasized in our discussions of the end-times.**

The future of Messianic *Shabbat* is two-fold: (1) There is a future coming (how soon on our doorstep we do not know for sure) when the seventh-day Sabbath is going to be an integral part of the True New World Order of Israel's Messiah. (2) In the present, among those seeking Biblical truth and greater enrichment, there are going to be more and more people welcoming the Sabbath into their lives. In 2012, CNN posted a blog on 01 January, "15 faith-based predictions for 2012," Sabbath keeping was actually listed as being #9 on the list:

Sabbath becomes trendy! Fourth Commandment makes a comeback! Sabbath named Time's person of the year! A new movement sweeps the country. They call themselves 24/6. Worn out by being tethered to the grid 24/7, sick of being accessible all hours of the day, inundated by updates, upgrades, and breaking news, Americans finally rebel, demanding, "We need a day off." People all over the country go offline for 24 hours every week. The simple break from the frenetic pace results in lowered cholesterol rates, fewer speeding tickets, and a reduction in marital strife. Peace, tranquility and contentment spread like wildfire.³⁸

The Sabbath is something to be welcomed and embraced! Let us not take it for granted, but instead use it as a means to experience, even if for a brief moment, the glorious future that awaits the people of God!

³⁸ (2012). *15 faith-based predictions for 2012*. CNN.com. Retrieved 17 March, 2015, from <<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/>>.