



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

by Rabbi Dr. Meesh Hammer-Kossoy

The Shabbat Queen: “Feminine” Values for Men and Women

Introduction

Shabbat is characterized as female in the Jewish tradition. A thousand years before the composition of the [Kabbalat Shabbat](#) service, Jews were so enamored of Shabbat that they ran to greet her in their finest clothes, calling her both queen and bride:

Rabbi Hanina robed himself and stood at sunset of Sabbath eve [and] exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the queen Sabbath.' Rabbi Yannai donned his robes on Sabbath eve and exclaimed, 'Come, O bride, Come, O bride!' (Talmud Shabbat 119a)

The excitement of Rabbis Hanina and Yannai for their Shabbat lover was not unrequited. As portrayed by the midrash, Shabbat herself was equally anxious felt to find a match:

Why did God bless Shabbat? Rabbi Berekiah says: "Because she has no partner. The first day of the week has the second, the third has the fourth, the fifth has the sixth, but Shabbat has no partner... Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: Shabbat pleaded with the Blessed Holy One saying: "Everyone else has a partner, but I have none!" God answered saying: "The community of Israel will be your partner." God continued: "And when thy stood before Sinai, God said to the Israelites: "Remember what I said to Shabbat, that the community of Israel is your partner, "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it (lekadsho)" (Exodus 20:8) (Genesis Rabbah 11:8)



[The Sabbath Queen, by Abigail Sarah Bagraim](#)

The word “to sanctify”—*lekadsho* evokes the marriage ceremony, called [kiddushin](#) or sanctification. Traditionally, the male partner sanctifies, or sets aside, his bride as his special partner. Even though the Torah refers to Shabbat in the masculine, the midrash is essentially translating the verse: “Remember the Shabbat day and marry her!”

Both of these sources reflect the rabbinic understanding of Shabbat as the female partner in a deep and exclusive love relationship with the Jewish people (who in this context are the male partner). Why do we love Shabbat so much? And why is she characterized as female? By exploring key aspects of Shabbat,

we will try to demonstrate that while rooted in patriarchal notions of gender, the feminine aspects of Shabbat have a lot to offer our modern society. But in order to get the role of gender, we need first to understand some basics about the essence of Shabbat.

Shabbat — a Holiday of Refraining

Rest is an integral part of Creation

Many people mistakenly view the creation of human beings on the sixth day as the apex of creation. But a close reading of the Torah reveals that the crowning achievement of creation is actually Shabbat:



[Shabbat light](#)

*The heaven and the earth were **finished**, and all their array. With the seventh day God **finished** the work that God had been doing, and God **ceased** on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had done. (Gen. 2:1-3)*

[It is easy to be misled by the demarcation of the end of the first chapter after 6 days. However, the [division into chapters](#) is not of Jewish origin. More indicative is the Jewish division into Torah portions, in which the entire creation story is a single long uninterrupted reading through all of chapter and 2:1-3.]

Why does the Torah say “God finished the work” and “God ceased”? Which is it?! Was God busy putting the finishing touches on creation or resting from creating? Both! God “completed” and made the world whole by creating, blessing and sanctifying Shabbat. As Rashi says:

What was the world lacking? Rest. The Sabbath came, and so came rest. The work was completed and finished. (Gen. 2:2)

It is hard to imagine a more important theological statement. From this we understand that God’s rest on the seventh day is a creation in its own right, thereby completing the whole. The six intensive days of doing were not complete until the Divine rested on the seventh day. The midrash goes even further and suggests that Shabbat is the very purpose of all of creation:

Geniva said: This is comparable to a king who prepared a wedding chamber but was missing a bride. Similarly, the world was missing Shabbat. (Genesis Rabbah 10:9)

What good is a wedding chamber, if it has no bride? Everything created in the first six days has been prepared on behalf of Shabbat. According to this view, Shabbat is more than an integral part of creation—it is its entire purpose.



[Shabbat Intimacy](#)

Enough is Enough

It is also worth pausing over the key verb from this passage in Genesis.ch.2:l, which means both to complete and to stop.

*The heaven and the earth were **finished/completed (veyichulu)**, and all their array. With the seventh day God **finished/stopped and completed (veyichal)** the work that God had been doing...*

In today's fast-paced society, it seems like nothing is ever complete. There is always more to acquire, greater heights to achieve, another frontier to cross or invention to imagine. This is a blessing, for we are commanded "Six days you shall work" (Exodus 20:9), and our insatiable ambitions have led humankind to advances that increase quality and length of life in ways previously unimaginable.

But as Ecclesiastes 5:9 warns, "One who loves money will never be satisfied by money." By calling the world "finished" (y.ch.l) at the end of creation, the Torah gives us something even greater than material gains to strive for – that of finding satisfaction in the present. Certainly, our creative capacities are manifestations of being created in the image of the Divine, but we are also called upon to imitate God by resting on Shabbat and recognizing that sometimes enough is enough. As Resh Lakish said: "What is the meaning of the verse, 'I am *E-l Sha-dda'* (Gen. 35) I am the one who said to the world "*dai-Enough*." (Hagiga 12a)

These notions of six days of intensive work and that of being "finished" on Shabbat can feed off of one another, as well. Take, for example, what happens with my own family on Friday afternoons as we prepare for Shabbat. Children and adults alike have extensive to-do lists: everyone helps to clean the house, cook the food, fold and put away the laundry, take out the recycling and trash, empty the dishwasher, set the table, take their turn in the shower and get dressed before we light candles and head off to synagogue. The team building is solid, the smells are wonderful, but it is hard work. The tension increases as sunset approaches, and it never feels like we've managed to do all we had hoped. But once the siren in Jerusalem sounds the arrival of Shabbat, we are forced to say "enough." And it is. The intensity of the sprint to the finish line makes our transition to the relaxation of Shabbat that much more profound. We let go and enjoy.

Inaction the Core of Shabbat Observance

Generally speaking, religious observance is characterized by *doing* in various forms, such as ritual, prayers, learning or other public ceremonies. God created Shabbat by ceasing, resting, and being finished, so perhaps it is not surprising that the primary *observance* of Shabbat is *refraining* from doing.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work (*melakhtekha*), but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; you **shall not do any work**—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Keeping Shabbat is first and foremost a matter of collective *not* doing! While there are positive observances of Shabbat (to be discussed below) the most crucial aspect of Shabbat, and not insignificantly, the only one for which the Torah prescribes a punishment, is refraining.

Traditional Jewish law delineates [39 categories of creative activity](#) (*melakhot*) that must be avoided. On the surface, these forms of “creative labor” [seem illogical](#)—carrying objects from one domain to another, closing circuits (and thus in modern times, turning on and off electric lights and using the telephone, television, or computer), or igniting fire (and by modern extension using a car’s combustible engine) are not necessarily associated with physically difficult labor. In fact, avoiding them can be more effort than doing them. But these 39 categories have a symbolic power. God directed the Israelites in the desert: “Let them make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). The 39 categories of creative labor are defined precisely as whatever was considered essential to constructing God’s earthly sanctuary, [the Tabernacle](#). The very methods used to bring God into *space* form the basis for the actions that must be **refrained from** in order to bring God into *time*.



[Partners in Creation](#)

Not doing can be the most profound form of doing. Just as God created the seventh day by not creating, so too do we make a day holy by not making. The boundaries of holy time are defined first and foremost by letting go of production. These boundaries demarcate a hiatus that enables something profound and powerful—communion with God, with community, and with our own inner-lives.

Movement from Space to Time

During the first six days of creation, God created a beautiful “bridal chamber” in space. However, the creation of Shabbat occurs in the dimension of time. As we observe Shabbat, we can feel empowered to resist the barrage of messages around us telling us that we need to acquire bigger cars, fancier houses, and more clothing. We cease pursuing material objects and create a sanctuary in time. As [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#) said so poetically in his masterpiece “The Sabbath”, the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals (p. 8):

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world... (p.10)

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 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. (p. 13)



[Shabbat Prayer](#)

Shabbat as Holy Consumption in Space

Shabbat is a holiday in time. However, the fact that phones, television, and car travel are discouraged necessarily alters our relationship with space. We turn inwards rather than run elsewhere, thus elevating the role of family and home. Some of the most nostalgic elements of Shabbat observance—candles, wine (*Kiddush*), challah (*motzei*), and (at least for the Ashkenaziot amongst us) chicken soup—are home centered.

Many evocative artistic representations of Shabbat focus on the family Shabbat dinner, with its accompanying rituals: welcoming of the angels in the hymn [Shalom Aleichem](#), [blessings of the children](#), [Kiddush](#), the singing of the [Woman of Valor](#) hymn which simultaneously praises Shabbat, the [Divine Shekhinah](#), and the woman of the home who traditionally provided the delicious [Shabbat feasts](#). Thus, while Heschel teaches us that Shabbat is a cathedral in time, our lived experience is also of Shabbat as an intimate sanctuary in the family home.



[Moritz Oppenheim's Friday Night Blessings, 1867](#)

While the cathedral in time is created by abstaining from production, the sanctuary in the home is centered around consumption. Shabbat is a time of refraining, but it is certainly not a day of asceticism!

We have already discussed the fourth commandment as found in Deuteronomy: **Observe** (*shamor*) the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Deuteronomy 5:12). However, in Exodus, the fourth commandment reads: **Remember** (*zachor*) the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8). Tradition suggests that at Sinai, God pronounced both words simultaneously (Mechilta DRSBY 2:8). (This is the source of the opening stanza of the famous [Lecha Dodi](#) prayer). While we have shown that *observing* Shabbat is understood as refraining from creating, *remembering* Shabbat is fulfilled through the positive commands of Shabbat, specifically enjoying a glass of wine while making Kiddush and [Havdalah](#) (Talmud Pesachim 106a).

Thus, even as Shabbat enshrines the core value of letting go of material pursuits and acquisition, it also gives pride of place to enjoying earthly delights. This dual nature of Shabbat is perhaps best captured in Isaiah's injunction to honor and delight in the Sabbath:

*If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,
From pursuing your affairs on My holy day;
If you call the Sabbath "delight,"
The Lord's holy day "honored";
And if you honor it and go not your ways
Nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains—
Then you can seek the favor of the Lord. (Isaiah 58:13-14).*

Elaborate meals, fancy clothes, even family board games are wonderful ways to heed Isaiah's words.

The dual nature of Shabbat as a day of refraining as well as a day of enjoying the physical world can also be found in the following midrash:

"And the Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it"- Rabbi Yishmael says: "God blessed it" with manna "and sanctified it" with manna, God blessed it with manna - for on weekdays one omer [portion] fell [per person], but on Friday two omer [portions] fell [per person]. God sanctified it with manna [on Shabbat] it didn't fall at all.

Rabbi Elazar says: "God blessed it" with a candle. And this happened to me, one time I lit a candle on the eve of Shabbat and I came and I found it [still] lit at the end of Shabbat and it wasn't diminished at all.

"God blessed it" with the light of the human face, "God sanctified it" with the light of the face of people. The light of a person's face throughout the week isn't comparable to [his or her face] on Shabbat. (Gen. Rabbah 11:2)

In Rabbi Yishmael's mind, sanctification and blessing are contrasting actions. "Sanctification" is created through restriction and abstention, i.e. not collecting the manna. This fits with the picture we have developed above of Shabbat as a day of cessation on which less is more. But God also "blesses" Shabbat, and that means sending a double portion of manna on Friday so that Shabbat can be a time of delicious and abundant food. Rabbi Elazar adds that God also sends us the warm light of candles and the pleasant countenance of family and friends. Thus, sanctification can facilitate blessing—letting go of the harried pursuit of acquisition is what allows us to inhabit Shabbat fully and be present for the power of Shabbat candles and friendship. Shabbat casts a glow on the physical delights of food, the appreciation of the natural world and its light, and the power of interpersonal relationships.

Revaluing Feminine Characteristics and Bringing the Shabbat Queen into the 21st Century

We have explained the two central characteristics of Shabbat: first, to observe (*shamor*) Shabbat (Deut. 5) by refraining, letting go of acquisition and domination, and feeling the blessing of what we already have, and second, to remember (*zakhor*) Shabbat (Exodus 20) by indulging in family centered physical pleasures like festive meals and wine. What is the connection between these principles and the rabbinic association of Shabbat with femininity? And how are we to relate to them in the 21st century?

With respect to remembering Shabbat, once we understand Shabbat as a holiday of home, nurturing family, delicious food and sexual intimacy, the association with traditional notions of bride and queen hardly needs explaining. Is there anything more stereotypical than the association of women with the home and nurturing?



[Candlelighting](#)

To understand the relationship in the rabbinic imagination between femininity and the contentedness and rest of observing Shabbat it is helpful to look back at creation.

Genesis 2:27-28 reads:

"And God created Adam in God's image, in the image of God, God created him; male and female God created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase fill the earth

and conquer it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth.”

The Torah is deliberately ambiguous—the first clause implies that man is created first, and then immediately clarifies that man and woman are created together. God blesses them both with fertility and dominion. However, in a midrash, the rabbis use an irregularity in spelling to subvert the simple reading and understand the verb “conquer” as directed only at the individual male:

and conquer it: *The “vav” [in וּנְכַבְּשָׁה] is missing, [allowing the word to be read וְנְכַבְּשָׁה, the masculine singular imperative] to teach you that the male subdues the female that she should not be a gadabout (Gen. Rabbah 8:12), and it is also meant to teach you that the man, whose way it is to conquer, is commanded to reproduce, but not the woman. (Rashi Gen. 1:28)*

[It may seem absurd to assign the duty of procreation to men, but nevertheless the halakhah does so. Read more [here.](#)]

As portrayed by this creative rabbinic misreading of the Torah, domination and conquest are uniquely masculine pursuits. If so, then it is natural that the rabbis considered Shabbat’s refraining from conquest and domination to be feminine characteristics.

How are we as modern women to relate to these stereotypical gender associations? As proud as we may be of our contributions as mothers and homemakers, it’s hard not to feel ambivalent about this characterization in an era when women have fought to expand their roles in society. The saying: “A princess’ glory lies within” (Psalms 45:13), has traditionally been used against us to conscribe a woman to the private realm. It must not be used to confine us solely to the home. Similarly, if the association of Shabbat with queen and bride also includes an assumption of a woman’s submissive character, can it hold any value today? Haven’t these characteristics of submissiveness and the home been central to the devaluing of women throughout the ages?

Before passing judgment, it is helpful to examine Genesis 1:28 from another perspective. Lynn White in his seminal essay, “[The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis](#),” blames this verse for being at the core of a long history of environmental destruction wreaked by humans. According to White, the position of humans at the apex of six days of creation and the blessing to “master and conquer” has been understood as Divine license to exploit the earth for our own exclusive material interests. The result (he argues) is a Judeo-Christian culture of ceaseless exploitation of the world that has caused us to produce without regard for our actual needs or for our impact on the ecosystem – and this is the root cause of our environmental crisis.

[Scholars](#) have already leveled many [basic critiques](#) against White’s influential accusation. For our purposes, it is sufficient to return to how in the rabbinic imagination the male characteristic of domination is balanced with the female characteristic of Shabbat. As we have already seen, Shabbat is the apex of creation, not humans. Humans are empowered to harness the earth and its inhabitants to their benefit, but that license is not unbridled. To be partners with God means to balance humility with domination. Shabbat reminds us to pause and observe our impact, to see ourselves as just one of the many inhabitants of the earth and to feel the power of restraint. In short, a close reading of the Torah does not support White’s argument; White failed to understand how according to Torah, the male characteristic of domination must be balanced by the female characteristic of contentedness.

This discussion directs us to a meaningful understanding of Shabbat and her gender. With all its faults, White’s argument highlights that what the world needs now more than ever is to elevate the neglected

female value of Shabbat. As women in the twenty-first century, we do not want narrow notions of gender roles to be prescribed for us. However, we also hold the values of home, family, physical nurturing, and contentedness in place of conquest in tremendous esteem. Shabbat comes to teach us that these traditionally female values are absolutely essential to both men and women. Rather than defining a narrow female identity, let the elevation of these values through the precious institution of Shabbat be a source of inspiration for us all.



[Shabbat family prayer](#)

Resources for Further Study

Kabbalat Shabbat and Lecha Dodi: Perhaps the most famous gendered Shabbat ritual is the Kabbalat Shabbat service and its centerpiece the Lecha Dodi prayer. Building on the custom of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yannai to greet the Sabbath Queen cited in the opening of this unit (Shabbat 119a), 16th century kabbalists in Safed (a town in the Galilee) went out into the fields dressed in white, singing this special liturgy to greet her. Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (1505-1584) composed the famous Lecha Dodi prayer which has become ubiquitous in Jewish liturgy despite its relatively late composition. According to this world view, Shabbat is a time for the union not just of Israel and the Sabbath Bride, but also the union of the male and female aspects of the Godhead which is also symbolized in the earthly union of husband and wife.

For an outstanding summary of Shabbat as a marriage ritual, see [Abigail Sarah Bargain's explanation](#) of her artwork above. To read at length about the Kabbalat Shabbat service and the Lecha Dodi prayer specifically see Noam Zion's [collection of articles](#). You can also listen to beautiful productions of the Lecha Dodi by [Rowna Sutin](#), the [Maccabeats](#), [Craig Taubman](#),

Reclaiming Shabbat in an increasingly Electronic World: As we find ourselves more and more overstimulated by social media, liberal Jews are increasingly clinging to Shabbat as a refuge and an opportunity to unplug. Internet pioneer Tiffany Schlain speaks with Krista Tippet about her decision to unplug for 25 hours a week in [On Being](#). Rabbi Arthur Green has promulgated a [Shabbat Manifesto](#) and calls for all Jews to unplug for at least one Shabbat a year. And mothers of [different denominations](#) speak about their favorite family Shabbat activities, and the way Shabbat [has shaped their families](#).

Given the nostalgic power of **family Shabbat** in Jewish memory, it may be fun to read about traditional [Shabbat foods and customs](#) in Eastern Europe, to read about [what to expect](#) in a Shabbat dinner today, or to [sign up to join](#) one.

Questions for Discussion

The Woman of Valor: Another of the gendered rituals that has its roots in kabbalah is the hymn Eshet Chayil which is [traditionally sung](#) just before Kiddush at Friday night dinner. [Originally](#), this biblical passage was recited at this time to praise the Shechinah, the feminine manifestation of the Divine presence. It also [widely understood](#) as a song of praise to the woman of the home who has labored tirelessly to produce the elegant feast about to be enjoyed. [Feminists](#) have had a lot to say about this 22-verse acrostic from Proverbs which put a very particular type of woman on a pedestal. At the same time, [others](#) have argued that it does not make sense to disparage rituals that value women's central role in the

family. How do you connect with the traditional role of women in the Shabbat rituals? How do you feel about putting efficient household management on a pedestal as an ideal for women? How can we value traditional women's work, without locking either gender into particular roles?

Which is Primary: Shabbat or the rest of the week? For some, Shabbat is an opportunity to rejuvenate so that we can work during the week. For others, we work during the week so that we can rest and enjoy Shabbat. What is [YOUR relationship](#) with Shabbat and the week? Why? What does this say about where you are in your life?

Public Shabbat in Israel: Secular Zionist, Ehad HaAm famously said: "More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." Haim Nahman Bialik, Israel's national poet, also felt that [public observance of Shabbat was a national imperative](#). Secular affection for Shabbat aside, Israeli society wrestles continuously with the question of [public observance of Shabbat in a Jewish and Democratic state](#).

Is public Shabbat observance a form of enforced religion [or an expression of Jewish culture](#)? Is it possible that closing stores and businesses by law protects the rights of all Israelis to a day of rest? Should stores be allowed to be open? Leisure venues? Public transportation? If businesses are permitted to be open, how will the rights of Sabbath observant Jews be preserved in the face of employment discrimination? Conversely, if there is no public transportation available on Shabbat, does this not discriminate against non-observant Israelis who cannot afford private cars and are thus tied to their homes against their will?



[Progressive Jews reclaim Kabbalat Shabbat on the beach in Israel](#)

Kabbalah and Misogyny: We have discussed the kabbalistic roots of the Kabbalat Shabbat service. Controversy arises about how modern Jews should interact with the kabbalistic approach to gender. While on the one hand, the notion of a broken world and Godhead with male and female aspects in need of unification that can be healed through human action has held tremendous appeal. On the other hand, many find the male and female characteristics in the kabbalah misogynistic. How should we as modern women relate to these texts? Is it best to reject the texts entirely, given their misogynist roots? ([here](#) and [here](#)) Or to read them selectively and a historically in order to cull whatever remains relevant? ([here](#) and [here](#)) How important do you think intellectual honesty is when searching for relevance in tradition? How much picking and choosing renders something inauthentic? If it is personally meaningful, is authenticity important?

Thoughts? Questions? Feedback? Please share them with me: meesh@pardes.org.il