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Sabbath as the Way to Shalom in the Biblical Tradition

1. The Biblical Tradition

The Biblical word for peace in Hebrew, *Shalom*, does not connote only a cessation of conflict and end of war. Its meaning points to completion, wholesomeness and the achievement of perfection. Thus, the pedagogical aim of the Torah, the Pentateuchal tradition and legislation, is to guide the people in the paths of *Shalom* (Prov 3:17). God in the revealed scriptures intends for the person, singular or collective, to pursue *Shalom*, as the only road to harmonious relationship with the Creator, whose very attribute is *Shalom* (Jud 6:24). The only blessing that God's people can truly enjoy is the blessing of *Shalom* (Ps 29:11), as a divine gift that produces human enrichment and wholesome living. The Rabbinic tradition exalts the ideal *Shalom*¹ and applies its principle in socio-religious legislation (Misnah Aboth 1:18). The very teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount expresses the same: "Blessed are the pursuers of peace (*Shalom*), for they are called the sons of God" (Matt 5:9). This life style can indeed be achieved, if only "you shall be perfect (*Shalem*) as your father in Heaven is perfect" (5:48). The dynamic application of the ruler of *imitatio Dei* in human conduct culminates in the pursuit of *Shalom* in fellowship with God.

The Pentateuch, therefore, opens with the story of creation (Gen 1:1-2:4) in which the purpose of human existence is indicated, for secular and sacred time. God creates the world and all therein with a purpose that his human creature will share in the control and domination of nature that was also created (1:28). The person as co-partner of God was made "in the image of God" to realize this purpose during the six days of secular time, the actual setting for human creative activity. However, human perfection can only be achieved in imitative

1. See the Hebrew "Treatise on Peace" translated with introduction by E. Levine, in *Augustinianum* 14 (1974). This is a post Talmudic work that is based on Tannaitic material.

relationship to God on the Sabbath,² when "heaven and earth with all their hosts were perfected" (2:1). The seventh day is the reserved as sacred (Hebrew: *Qaddos*, means "set apart") by its own blessing of serenity and restfulness (Hebrew: *Sabbath*). Thus, the dynamic complement to human wholesomeness in historical time is biblically determined by the Sabbath, sacred time reserved for spiritual perfection. This canonical introduction to Hebrew Scriptures offers the very key to proper understanding of *Shalom* as the guiding principle of God's law.

The Sabbath legislation in the Pentateuch³ does not only govern the individual's life every week, as one experiences creative work in secular time and restive spirituality in sacred time. It also governs the life of the society as it enters Sabbatical time for an entire year, following six years of secular agrarian existence. Secular time for the individual gives rise to conflict, anxiety and tension as related to daily work and psycho-physical achievement. Similarly secular time for society produces war, class distinction and domination due to the drive for power, monetary and territorial control. Sacred time in the biblical tradition comes to free the person and the society from a secular situation by actually severing them from that type of existence and ushering them into an opportunity in time to enjoy transformationally a new sense of living in God's presence.

The prophet Deutero-Isaiah (58:13,14) describes the nature of this human experience in sacred time. It produces a joyous fellowship with God. ("Then you will delight with the Lord.") The person has radically departed from areas of engagement that affect his daily actions, concerns and thoughts. ("If you refrain from the pursuit of your activities, from seeking your pleasure and from expressing your thought . . .") This actual removal from daily secular preoccupation affects the way the person enters Sabbath time, as the "holy day of the Lord." Thus, the person is open to enjoy the spiritual gifts of life with God. Sabbath

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2. Concerning the Sabbath, see the phenomenological study of Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1951.
 3. The Sabbath Law is already formulated in the Decalogue; see Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-historical Investigation*, Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972.

experience becomes the very model for posthumous existence of the spirit and life in the World to Come.⁴

II. The Sabbath Experience

Two determinants affect the Sabbath experience, a separation from secular activity and the appropriation of the spiritual gifts. The Rabbinic code of Sabbath observance (Mishnah Sabbath 8:2) offers a detailed account of forbidden works, as means to separate once a week from secular activity. This account of thirty-nine main categories⁵ emerged during the second Temple period and it was expanded to include subdivisions in the later period of Rabbinic legislation. Surely, human involvement in war effort on the Sabbath was forbidden, and in pre-Maccabean times⁶ this Jewish practice became known to their enemies. Sabbath, therefore, in light of the historical situation came to be seen as time for preservation of life. Thus, to defend one's life on the Sabbath became the accepted rule in the Maccabean period (1 Macc 2:38-43). This principle guided Jewish action in face of aggression and violent attack.

A similar development occurred with the issue of whether life in jeopardy can be saved on the Sabbath when work is required. This was the question faced by Jesus (Mark 3:1-5, parallels) and later by the rabbis (Mekhilta R. Ismael to Exod 31:13). Sabbath comes to enhance human existence and not to curtail it.⁷ Saving life became the accepted rule on the Sabbath. The way the Sabbath was perceived for religious life did affect human behavior in secular time. Thus, only war of defence can be fought and no one should conduct military

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4. See Mishnah Tamid 7:4 and compare the explanation rendered by R. Akiba in Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 31a.
 5. Jubilees 2:15, 21-32 refers to twenty-two acts of creation as the paradigmatic guide to the prohibited works on the Sabbath. The rabbis view the thirty-nine works necessary to build the Tabernacle as the guide. Refer to the juxtaposition of Exod 31:1-11, on building the Tabernacle and its works, with 31:12-17, on the law of the Sabbath. The tabernacle itself is the microcosmic model of the universe in the Rabbinic thought.
 6. So told in 1 Macc 2:29-37 and compare Josephus, *Jewish War* 1; 7, 3.
 7. Jesus teaches, "The Sabbath was made for the person and not the person for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). So Rabbi Simeon ben Menasya taught and Rabbi Nathan added the explanation: "It is better to desecrate one Sabbath for the life's sake, so he can keep other Sabbaths" (Mekhilta, idem).

action for conquest and expansion. This basic rule of political behaviour in secular time was determined in rabbinic thought governing war and peace.⁸ The Sabbath served as the model for behaviour in the secular world. Similarly, the lesson to save life and care for it on the Sabbath guided the person in secular time to pursue acts of mercy and charity.

Sabbath time engaged the person in careful consideration of his actions, desires and thoughts. Not only is secular work rejected but also profane use of speech and frivolous engagement with secular thought curtailed. Body, mind and heart are engaged with matters of the spirit on the Sabbath. It is a day on which hearing of and reflecting on God's words are the focus through Scriptural reading and affective preaching in a religious assembly, the synagogue. It is a day for praying and chanting in God's presence as well as sharing food and showing love to members of the family and to the stranger. The agapic meals of the Sabbath are to be sanctified (the *Qiddush*) and partaking in the already prepared food becomes a holy activity (*miswah*). Thus, "love of God" affecting Sabbath observance is dynamically linked with "love your neighbour" (Lev 19:18).

The dual commandment of love, so affectively promoted in Jesus' own teaching (Mark 12:29-31) and approved in Rabbinic thought (12:32-33), engages the completely in the proper harmonization of the transpersonal with the interpersonal during Sabbath time. To "love God with all the heart, soul and mind" (Deut 6:5) governs the transpersonal relationship in human experience (the person in relation to transcendent Reality). Sabbath time, that mainly engaged the person spiritually in facing God, becomes the actual setting to develop altruistic sensitivities in sharing food and in the show of love. When these two realms of human relationship are effectively experienced, the person is open to relate positively to the two other realms of human experience, the subpersonal and the intrapersonal. The subpersonal realm (the person in relation to the non-person, i. e. nature) is clearly affected by the Biblical legislation for the Sabbath. Even the animal is commanded to enjoy rest from work by its owner on the Sabbath (Exod 20:11). Such a concern expressed for the animal and human

8. See S.Y. Zevin, *Le Or Hahalakhah*, 2nd edition, 1957, concerning war. Compare J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, vol. I, 1977, ch. 1.

control sensitizes the person to a humane attitude towards animal suffering in secular time. The intrapersonal realm (the person in relation to the self) is clearly affected on the Sabbath. The rabbis describe the transformation during the Sabbath as acquiring an extra soul.⁹ The spirit in the person is so moved by the experience that evil thought and evil speech are arrested. The person is therefore actively engaged in the betterment of the inner self.

The Sabbath provides the opportunity for the individual to the achieve wholesomeness (*Shalom*) in life, through deepening awareness and through proper harmonization of the four realms of human experience to the ethical perfection of the person. A calming restfulness (*menuhah*) is achieved in the enhancement of agapic feeling and spiritual joy. Thus, the afternoon prayer for the Sabbath¹⁰ comes to express the culminating experience with the following words: "A restfulness (rooted) in love and compassion, a restfulness (expressing) truth, faithfulness, a restfulness of *Shalom* (that bespeaks) tranquility, serenity and confidence, a restfulness that is wholesome which Thou (God) desirest."

III. The Sabbatical Experience

The way of *Shalom* is open to the individual through the Sabbath experience, the very key with which the Bible opens. This theme guides also revolutionary account of Sabbatical-Jubilee law¹¹ affecting the socio-economic structure of society. The agrarian society of Biblical times is commanded to enter Sabbatical time, for an entire year of conscientious living in God's presence. This radical experience of collective life in the "sacred year of the Lord" deepens the spiritual dimension of national existence under God. It produces life of *Shalom* in historical time and prophetic tradition recognizes that failure to abide by this law invites national calamity through moral decline ushering

9. See Babylonian Talmud *Besah* 16a, in the name of Palestinian Amora Resh Laqish.

10. See *Daily Prayer Book* (ed. Joseph H. Hertz), p. 579; the Medieval rabbinic tradition viewed this prayer expressing the culminating experience as typifying life also in the world to come.

11. Refer to Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985 and compare John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.

in a violent destruction of the state.¹² For the nation has faced the same historical predicament of rise and fall that ends in internal corruption and external aggression.

The Sabbatical legislation affects three areas of socio-economic life that in secular time give rise to conflict: class difference, enslavement and war. Property, possessions and territorial claims exclude the poor and the stranger while promoting human control and self-aggrandizement. These in turn invite violence and show of power in order to confiscate goods. Political history of nations and tribes is written by the struggle for land and possessions. Collective society in secular time knows this violent development that also gave rise to a mythical philosophy that sanctions worship of the self (defied monarchy) and nature (polytheism). Biblical faith, however, is rooted in the human experience of creatureliness¹³ in facing God the Creator. Both the person and nature are subject to God and through this humbling orientation the person recognizes that ultimately all lands and possessions belong to God. People are but tenants on Earth who remain responsible to God's creation as they enjoy its blessings. This realization affectively deepened during Sabbatical time, "for the land is mine and you are but residents and tenants with me" is the Sabbatical aetiology (Lev 25:23). Thus, all properties during the sacred year revert to God and no one can claim land ownership for the use of its produce. All people may enter the field and enjoy its yield, for during the Sabbatical year the land remains fallow and all farming activities that bespeak human control are prohibited.

Sabbatical time becomes the year of release (*Shemittah*). It releases the land from human control and it also releases people from monetary control (deut 15:1-18). All debts are cancelled at the start of the Sabbatical year, while all people share in the produce of the land. Furthermore, the seventh year becomes the period for release of human beings from enslavement. Slavery, a human evil towards the fellow

12. Jeremiah 34:8-22 refers to the sin of not freeing slaves on the seventh year. He also speaks of seventy years in exile as punishment to the nation (25:12). This is based on the priestly tradition (Lev 26:33f.) that sees in the revocation of the Sabbatical legislation during the monarchical period for five hundred years, the punishment of exile of seventy years. There are seventy Sabbaticals in the period of 490 years. See further Daniel 9:2 on the apocalyptic reflection of said cycle.

13. See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

person, was practised in Biblical time and the Sabbatical terminated this ordeal. All slaves are to be released on the seventh year and when such slaves desire to remain in the employ of their master they are set free on the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year came at the end of a cycle of seven Sabbatical years, which terminated all agreements concerning property or person that were made in perpetuity. Adult human life was seen to span a cycle of fifty years; "for the number of our years but seventy" was the norm for mortal life (Ps 90:10). The end of such a cycle was a Jubilee, when the horn was blasted awakening the person to his mortal condition. That nothing remains in perpetuity by human action is the lesson of Jubilee. Thus, all purchases had to be made conditionally, leasing out property or hiring out people in service. Slavery, therefore, was abolished in Israel and the land of Israel remained holy unto God even when the people were expelled or it was occupied by others.

The "year of the Lord" became a year of release from property and monetary control as well as from release from enslavement and perpetual bondage, the very evil perpetrated by human society in secular time. A transformational experience of living in sacred time affects the entire socio-economic order. As such, Sabbatical time served the model for the Kingdom of God in the anticipated eschatology of prophetic teachings. For in the Kingdom of God the rule of *Shalom* prevails, the subpersonal realm is at rest in its release from human control and activity. The interpersonal realm effects sympathetic relationships by remissions of debts. The transpersonal realm is deepened by the affective awareness of God the Creator and Provider in view of human creatureliness and mortality. The intrapersonal realm enjoys harmony between intention and action.

IV. The Kingdom of God

According to the Gospel of Luke (4:16-21) Jesus' ministry is inaugurated on the Sabbath and comes to proclaim the Kingdom of God in an affective and experiential manner for his people. The emergent church itself, according to Luke's companion volume (Acts 2:42-46; 4:32; 5:11), offers examples for living sabbatically in the realization of Jesus' programme. Jesus came to announce the coming of the kingdom on the Sabbath,¹⁴ when the community was affectively attuned

14. See A. Finkel, "Jesus' preaching in the Synagogue on the Sabbath," *SIDIC Review* vol. 17 (3, 1984).

to a Scriptural reading that came to deepen their response to God's words. Through a dramatic reading of the prophetic words (Is 61:1-2), Jesus pointed to a fulfilment in his own ministry. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . (in order) to declare the acceptable year of the Lord." This year of Jesus' ministry is to usher in the Kingdom by his word and work as a Sabbatical year, "the acceptable year of the Lord." For Jesus preceded with an additional statement of meaning, "to set at liberty those that are oppressed," an explanation not to be found in the prophetic text. This indeed is the very meaning attached to the Pentateuchal legislation for the Sabbatical year (Lev 25:10, "You will declare liberty in the land for all her inhabitants").

Jesus calls upon his followers to release themselves from enslavement to *Mammon* (money, Lk 16:13) by sharing their wealth (12:33) and by promoting the dual commandment of love in their life (10:27, 28). He further suggests by his own action that the year of release also offers a genuine removal from sinfulness by forgiving sins in human relations and by releasing a person from bondage to evil and illness (5:24; 13:16). Both are the very domain of the Satan, the evil force affecting the human mind and body, causing deterioration, division and conflict. The very formulation of Jesus' prayer for forgiveness of sins is rendered in Matthew from the Aramaic¹⁵ as "remission of debts" (6:12). Freeing the person from monetary and spiritual debts heals him/her to become wholesome again in both psycho-physical and religio-spiritual orders. This is demonstrated by Jesus' action in healing and exorcizing as release from Satanic domination. Thus, the Kingdom of God is ushered in as a Sabbatical reality. Significant is the fact that Jesus' ministry relates to a Jewish calendar that reckoned years by Sabbatical cycles, as attested by recent archaeological evidence.¹⁶ The very year in which John the Baptist began his ministry, synchronically presented in Luke (3:1, 2) and by Jewish calculation, was a Sabbatical year¹⁷. John came

15. See A. Finkel, "The Prayer of Jesus in Matthew," in *Standing Before God* (ed. A. Finkel and L. Frizzell) New York: Ktav, 1981.

16. See B. Z. Wacholder, "Sabbatical," in Supplementary Volume to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1976).

17. The year 70 C. E. is a post Sabbatical year, see Seder Olam Rabba 30 in the name of Rabbi Yose. Thus, the fifteenth year of Tiberius (beginning with 14 C.E., the year of Augustus, death) is the year 27 C.E., a Sabbatical year. So is the year of Quirinius' census a Sabbatical year on 6 C.E., that gave raise to Messianic expectation and the Zealotic appeal to God's kingship.

to prepare the people to live under God in the holy year through baptism for forgiveness of sins. Jesus, however, extended the invitation into Sabbatical time through his own ministry in the release of people even in the secular year. Both ministries enjoy the dynamics affecting life of the people in Sabbatical time by extending its meaning to release them from sinfulness as means to enter God's Kingdom. For Jesus, however, his own words and works were seen as the activities of "the Prince of *Shalom*", a messianic designation in prophetic prospect (Is 9:5).

The Biblical tradition governing Jewish and Christian life offers through Sabbatical legislation an opportunity to realize the eschatological expectation of the prophets and to achieve an era of *Shalom* in human history. The Jews recognize that the coming of the Messiah will restore the Sabbatical order in the life of the people¹⁸, and as long as they live in times of persecution and oppression, the Sabbatical reality has not been realized but it demands patient waiting for the believing community until the final coming of the Messiah. The Christians see in Jesus the promised "Prince of *Shalom*", whose first advent inaugurated a transformational age for humanity that comes to realize the Sabbatical time, which consummated reality for universal experience will take place with the second advent. Both Judaism and Christianity converge meaningfully on the dynamic reality of the Messianic final coming, while both can promote affectively the "way of *Shalom*" through a Sabbath experience for Jews¹⁹ and through a Sabbatical realization for Christians²⁰.

18. The Sabbatical rule exists formally in the Modern State of Israel concerning agricultural matters on the seventh year. The same rule of release of debts applies for world Jewry. However, the Jubilee count and its implementation depends on the restoration of the Temple and the coming of the Messiah. See further S.Y. Zevin, *Le Or Hakalakhah*, concerning the "year of release".
19. Observance of the Sabbath day spells out for the Judaism today the very road to final redemption. "If Israel can observe two Sabbath days fully, they will immediately be redeemed" (Babylonian Talmud Sabbath 118b).
20. Sabbatical realization is defined by contemporary theologians as realized eschatology, without paying attention to its phenomenological dimension. See further N. Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teachings of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1963.