

# A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions 2015

Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee

That the Jewish people have widely and faithfully observed the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת)<sup>1</sup> throughout their history is a testament to God's declaration in Exodus 31:16: "The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time"<sup>2</sup> (NJPS). The view of a Conservative Jewish figure like Samuel H. Dresner, in his book *The Sabbath*, presses how "It is one of the basic institutions of humanity—an idea with infinite potentiality, infinite power, infinite hope, perhaps, as some claim, the single most significant contribution of Judaism to world culture."<sup>3</sup> The need for people to rest and sanctify a day unto their Creator has resonated for Torah-faithful Jews to be certain, as well as many Christian Believers, over the centuries.

If there is any area where today's Messianic movement tends to absolutely excel, it is with integrating a wide selection of the mainline Jewish traditions and customs for observing the Sabbath. Regardless of their background before coming to Messiah faith, religious or secular, today's Messianic Jews tend to remember *Shabbat* with the common elements of lighting candles, breaking *challah*, drinking wine, and attending synagogue services with traditional liturgy and Torah readings. Non-Jewish Believers who have been led by the Lord into the Messianic movement, seeking to embrace more of the Hebraic and Jewish Roots of their faith, have also taken a hold of *Shabbat*, the opportunity for rest it offers to the people of God, and many of the significant traditions that can make the Sabbath a very holy and sanctified time.

The Hebrew term *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) itself mainly involves the "day of rest, sabbath" (*CHALOT*).<sup>4</sup> There is debate, for sure, regarding how close this noun should be associated with the verb *shavat* (שָׁבַת), "cease, desist, rest," with *TWOT* broadly noting that "There is still some question as to whether the noun *shabbāt* is derived from the verb *shābat*, or whether *shabbāt* is primary, and the verb derived from it. In any case, it should be observed that the meaning of *shābat* is 'to rest' in the sense of repose only when the verb is used in a Sabbath context."<sup>5</sup> Whether the Sabbath, for example, was instituted as a Creation ordinance or as just a memorial of Creation (cf. Genesis 2:2-3;

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced as *Shabbos* in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. *l' dorotam b'rit olam* (לְדֹרוֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם).

<sup>3</sup> Samuel H. Dresner, *The Sabbath* (New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1970), 14.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 360.

<sup>5</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "שָׁבַת," in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:902; also Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1407.

# Messianic Sabbath Helper

Exodus 20:11), is a theological debate, with multiple sides represented among both Jews and Christians. Yet, even with some difference of opinion, the relationship of the noun *Shabbat* and verb *shavat* still communicates, as indicated by the *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* by Ronald L. Eisenberg, that this is a “day of rest and refraining from work.”<sup>6</sup> One indeed is to cease and desist from normal activities on the Sabbath day.<sup>7</sup>

Those who recognize the importance of *Shabbat*, and the admonition for the seventh-day (“Saturday” on the Western calendar)<sup>8</sup> to be sanctified, enter into a special time between themselves, among themselves, and most importantly the Creator God. Keeping the Sabbath holy, both as a means of obedience to God and recognizing what it has meant to the Jewish people throughout the ages, is most vital for all of us. Most people in today’s Messianic community do not think of *Shabbat* rest as a time when they can just sleep all day long; they do recognize that there are edifying and Spirit-inspired traditions, many of which were observed during the time of Yeshua of Nazareth, which should be followed today. The value of these traditions is witnessed in how they bring consistency to one’s weekly routine, and a sense of unity and community to those who keep them. If there is anything negative to be observed, the exact places where many of the mainline Jewish *Shabbat* traditions originate, do need to be documented—from their origins in Scripture, Second Temple Judaism, or in post-Second Temple Rabbinic literature.

## Sabbath is the Fourth Commandment

The seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is quite unique, in that it is not just a weekly observance for the people of God; it is the Fourth of the Ten Commandments. As Exodus 20:8 declares, *zakor et-yom ha’Shabbat l’qad’sho* (זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ), “Remember the day, *Shabbat*, to set it apart for God” (CJB). The Sabbath is observed from what we reckon as sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening, per the statement appearing multiple times throughout Genesis 1, “And there was evening and there was morning, one day” (Genesis 1:5), with the new day beginning in the evening.

There are a number of key admonitions surrounding *Shabbat*, which appear in the Torah or Pentateuch, later elaborated upon in the Tanach, and certainly appealed to in various ways in the Jewish theological tradition:

- ***Shabbat* is a memorial of God’s Creation:** “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:1-3).
- ***Shabbat* is to be a permanent sign between God and His people:** “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you’” (Exodus 31:13).
- **God’s people must expel the effort to actually observe *Shabbat*, in order for the day to be made holy:** “Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you” (Deuteronomy 5:12).
- ***Shabbat* is to be a time when the Exodus of Ancient Israel from Egyptian servitude is remembered:** “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land

---

<sup>6</sup> Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 125.

<sup>7</sup> Encountered in the Greek Septuagint and Apostolic Scriptures is the term *sabbaton* (σάββατον), “the Hebrew *sabbath*, i.e. Rest, N.T.; also in pl. of the single day, heterocl. dat. pl. σάββασι [sabbasi] (as if from σάββας [sabbas])” (H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 722).

<sup>8</sup> Here we cannot overlook how our widely secular Western calendar is affected by terms originating in Greco-Roman paganism, as the seventh-day or “Saturday” does originate from the Old English “*Sæterdæg*, Saturn’s day” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, second edition [Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, Inc, 2002], 568).

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

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 5:15).

- **Shabbat is to be a time when people cease from their labors, in particular any heavy manual labor:** "You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; *even* during plowing time and harvest you shall rest" (Exodus 34:21).

Most frequently, one sees in the Torah how the institution, of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, is closely tied to God's Creation of the world or the Exodus. Keeping the Sabbath is certainly connected to recognizing the God of Israel as supreme over the cosmos and the affairs of humankind, and in celebrating His salvation acts in history. It is to be astutely witnessed that while the Torah considered idolatry against God to be among the most serious of offenses (Exodus 23:24; Deuteronomy 4:25), that in the estimation of Eisenberg, "the exilic and post-exilic prophets considered profanation of the Sabbath the most damaging religious violation" (Isaiah 58:13-14; Ezekiel 20:11-12).<sup>9</sup> **Shabbat is not at all to be something just casually dismissed.**

### Biblical Sabbath Observance

Throughout the Torah and Tanach, some key things were observed by the Ancient Israelites, in order to sanctify the Sabbath. A special offering of two lambs, in addition to the daily burnt offering, were presented at the Tabernacle/Temple (Numbers 28:9-10; cf. 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 8:12-13; 31:2-3). Twelve loaves of showbread were to be presented at the Tabernacle/Temple (Leviticus 24:5-9; 1 Chronicles 9:32; 2 Chronicles 2:4). The severity of the Sabbath is realized in how an Israelite gathering wood was actually stoned to death (Numbers 15:32-36). While a cessation from general labor was to be recognized on the Sabbath, this did not apparently apply to guard duty at the king's palace in Jerusalem (2 Kings 11:4-12). It may also be deduced that various forms of travel likely did take place on the Sabbath (2 Kings 4:23-24).

The Torah and Tanach do mention various **types of work prohibited**, some of it specific. This included field labor (Exodus 34:21),<sup>10</sup> the kindling of a fire (Exodus 35:2-3),<sup>11</sup> commerce and various types of lifting heavy objects (Jeremiah 17:22;<sup>12</sup> Nehemiah 10:31;<sup>13</sup> cf. Amos 8:5), various forms of travel outside of a specific area (Exodus 16:29-30),<sup>14</sup> and treading wine presses and loading animals (Nehemiah 13:15-18).<sup>15</sup>

While canonical Holy Scripture mentions various forms of prohibited work and activity, literature germane to Second Temple Judaism and the time following, would elaborate significantly—with differences of opinion and application to also be witnessed for sure—regarding

---

<sup>9</sup> Eisenberg, 127.

<sup>10</sup> "You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; *even* during plowing time and harvest you shall rest" (Exodus 34:21).

<sup>11</sup> "For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy *day*, a sabbath of complete rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the sabbath day" (Exodus 35:2-3).

<sup>12</sup> "You shall not bring a load out of your houses on the sabbath day nor do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers" (Jeremiah 17:22).

<sup>13</sup> "As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt" (Nehemiah 10:31).

<sup>14</sup> "'See, the LORD has given you the sabbath; therefore He gives you bread for two days on the sixth day. Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.' So the people rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 16:29-30).

<sup>15</sup> "In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading *them* on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought *them* into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished *them* on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there *who* imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold *them* to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath" (Nehemiah 13:15-18).

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

how *Shabbat* was to be properly kept. This is especially true as the locus for observing *Shabbat* became focused more around the home and local synagogue.

### The Importance of the Sabbath in Second Temple Judaism, and Major Sabbath *Halachah*

While the Torah or Pentateuch itself does issue various Biblical stipulations for observing the Sabbath, along with various applications present in the remainder of the Tanach—attempting to make the Sabbath holy, and evaluating what could and could not be done on *Shabbat*—constituted a major part of emerging Jewish practice in the post-exilic era. That there would be some significant discussions and debates emerge, following the end of the Babylonian exile, is hardly surprising, given the fact that non-observance of the Sabbath was believed to be one of the major factors responsible for the exile. The assertion of *Jubilees* 2:29 is, “Make known and recount to the children of Israel the judgment of the day that they should keep the sabbath thereon and not forsake it in the error of their hearts. And (make known) that it is not permitted to do work thereon which is unlawful, (it being) unseemly to do their pleasure thereon.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who returned to reestablish a presence in the Holy Land, and be faithful to God’s commandments, understandably wanted to develop systems whereby Jews could be considered obedient to the Sabbath instruction. With populations both in the Land of Israel and in a widespread Diaspora, the focus of *Shabbat* would decisively be one’s localized home and localized Jewish community. Unlike various appointed times, such as *Yom Kippur* or Passover, and their required sacrifices<sup>17</sup>—it was much easier for the home to become the central nexus for observance of *Shabbat*. As the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* describes, “in the rabbinic period, [the Sabbath] attained a special place as a weekly observance that in the absence of the cult [and sacrifices], could continue as a family holiday practiced in individual homes.”<sup>18</sup>

A wide degree, of very strict Sabbath regulations, is witnessed in the materials of the Qumran community. Among some of their significant practices include things that many would consider to be legitimate derivations of Torah instructions, while other things would be considered (quite) excessive by other sectors of Second Temple Judaism:

“About the Sabbath, how to keep it properly. A man may not work on the sixth day from the time that the solar orb is above the horizon by its diameter, because this is what is meant by the passage ‘Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy’ (Deut. 5:12). On the Sabbath day, one may not speak any coarse or empty word. One is not to seek repayment of any loan from his fellow. One may not go to court about property or wealth. One may not discuss business or work to be done the next day. A man may not go about in the field to do his desired activity on the Sabbath. One may not travel outside his city more than a thousand cubits. A man may not eat anything on the Sabbath day except food already prepared. From whatever was lost in the field he may not eat, and he may not drink unless he was in the camp. If he was on a journey and went down to bathe, he may drink where he stands, but he may not draw water into any vessel. One may not send a Gentile to do his business on the Sabbath day. A man may not put on filthy clothes or clothes kept in wool unless he washes it in water or if they scrub it with spice. A man may not voluntarily cross Sabbath borders on the Sabbath day. A man may walk behind an animal to graze it outside his city up to two thousand cubits. One may not raise his hand to hit it with a fist. If it is uncooperative, he should leave it inside. A man may not carry anything outside his house, nor should he carry anything in. If he is in a temporary shelter, he should not take anything out of it or bring anything in. No one should open a sealed vessel on the Sabbath. No one should carry medicine on his person, either going out or coming in, on the Sabbath. No one should pick up stone and dust in an inhabited place. No

---

<sup>16</sup> O.S. Wintermute, trans., “Jubilees,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 58.

<sup>17</sup> Obviously, there are components of the yearly appointed times that can be observed in homes, but the transition of the appointed times into a home and synagogue affair, was only completed after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Consult the relevant volumes of Messianic Apologetics’ *Messianic Helper* series, on the Spring, Fall, and Winter holidays.

<sup>18</sup> “Sabbath,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 538.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

caregiver should carry a baby on the Sabbath, either going out or coming in. No one should provoke his servant, his maid, or his employee on the Sabbath. No one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath; and if it falls into a well or a pit, he may not lift it out on the Sabbath. No one should rest in a place near to Gentiles on the Sabbath. No one should profane the Sabbath for wealth or spoil on the Sabbath. Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with a ladder, rope, or other instrument. No one should offer any sacrifice on the Sabbath except the Sabbath whole burnt offering, for so it is written, 'besides your Sabbaths' (Lev. 23:38)" (CD 10.14-11.18).<sup>19</sup>

Also rather strict in their own right, are the various rulings witnessed in *Jubilees* 50:6-13:

"And beyond the commandment of the sabbaths I have written for you and all of the judgments of its law. Six days you will work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD your God. You shall not do any work in it, you, or your children, or your manservant or your maidservant, or any of your cattle or the stranger who is with you. And let the man who does anything on it die. Every man who will profane this day, who will lie with his wife, and whoever will discuss a matter that he will do on it so that he might make on it a journey for any buying or selling, and whoever draws water on it, which was not prepared for him on the sixth day, and whoever lifts up anything that he will carry to take out of his tent or from his house, let him die. You shall not do any work upon the day of the sabbath except what you prepared for yourself on the sixth day to eat and to drink and to rest and to observe a sabbath from all work of that day and to bless the LORD your God who gave to you the day of festival and the holy day. And a day of the holy kingdom for all Israel is this day among their days always. For great is the honor which the LORD gave to Israel to eat and to drink and to be satisfied on this day of festival and to rest in it from all work of the occupations of the children of men except to offer incense and to bring gifts and sacrifices before the LORD for the days and the sabbaths. This work alone shall be done on the day of the sabbath in the sanctuary of the LORD your God so that they might atone for Israel (with) continual gift day by day for an acceptable memorial before the LORD. And so that he might accept them forever, day by day, just as he commanded you. And (as for) any man who does work on it, or who goes on a journey, or who plows a field either at home or any (other) place, or who kindles a fire, or who rides on any animal, or who travels in sea in a boat, and any man who slaughters or kills anything, or who slashes the throat of cattle or bird, or who snares any beast or bird or fish, or who fasts or makes war on the day of the sabbath, let the man who does any of these on the day of the sabbath die so that the children of Israel might keep the sabbath according to the commands of the sabbaths of the land just as it was written in the tablets which he placed in my hands so that I might write for you the law of each time and according to each division of its days."<sup>20</sup>

Various of the stipulations seen above, in both the DSS and Pseudepigrapha, do include interpretations that would be adhered to, even today, among Jews keeping *Shabbat*. At the same time, it is hardly surprising that many of these sorts of regulations have stirred the interest of Biblical scholars, given how there are conflicts between Yeshua of Nazareth and various Jewish leaders, recorded in the Gospels, over Sabbath application. As is noted by S. Westerholm and C.A. Evans in the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*,

"With laws whose scriptural background seemed clear, and with customs long and widely established, many Jews could be expected to comply. It can also be seen, however, that questions of proper observance were often a matter of interpretation. The various religious parties of Jesus' day not infrequently differed in their practice. And though each group doubtless pressed on the others the claims of its interpretation to represent the will of heaven, such claims in our period were terrestrially unenforceable."<sup>21</sup>

Disagreements that would be detectable between the Messiah, and various Jewish leaders of the Second Temple period, would often be over observances of Sabbath restrictions that would be less strict than those witnessed at Qumran, among others. In *Jubilees* 50:8, intercourse between a husband and wife is prohibited on the Sabbath; in the Talmud it is (later) encouraged that sexual

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp 68-69.

<sup>20</sup> Wintermute, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 142.

<sup>21</sup> S. Westerholm and C.A. Evans, "Sabbath," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 1032.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

relations take place on the evening opening the Sabbath, *Erev Shabbat* (b.*Bava Qama* 82a;<sup>22</sup> b.*Ketuvot* 62b<sup>23</sup>). The Sabbath distance listed in CD 10.20 is a thousand cubits, whereas two thousand cubits (around a thousand yards if a cubit is regarded as being 17.5-18.0 inches) is the more standard distance for a Sabbath day's journey (cf. Exodus 16:29; Acts 1:12) witnessed in Rabbinical literature (m.*Eruvim* 4:3;<sup>24</sup> 5:7;<sup>25</sup> b.*Eruvim* 51a<sup>26</sup>).

While the attitude at Qumran in the DSS was apparently *not* one of helping others on *Shabbat* who needed intervention (CD 11.13, 16), this is not the overall Jewish attitude, which was very much favorable toward helping others in various levels of distress. A general approach, as witnessed in the Mishnah, details how the prohibitions of working on *Shabbat* can be overridden—ranging from the need to give someone medicine to clearing away a building that has fallen on a person:

"Further did R. Mattiah b. Harash say, 'Who who has a pain in his throat—they drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath, because it is a matter of doubt as to danger to life. And any matter of doubt as to danger to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath.' He upon whom a building fell down—it is a matter of doubt whether or not he is there, it is a matter of doubt whether [if he is there], he is alive or dead, it is a matter of doubt whether [if he is there and alive] he is a gentile or an Israelite—they clear away the ruin from above him. [If] they found him alive, they remove the [remaining] ruins from above him. But if they found him dead, they leave him be [until after the Sabbath]" (m.*Yoma* 8:6; further discussion in b.*Yoma* 85a-b).<sup>27</sup>

While the standard *halachah* or orthopraxy of the Pharisees was to be lenient in terms of a life needing to be saved on *Shabbat*, of critical importance are the thirty-nine main prohibitions, widely taken from Exodus 35, in terms of the activities required for the construction of the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant. The main list frequently referenced comes from m.*Shabbat* 7:2:

"The generative acts of labor [prohibited on the Sabbath] are forty less one: (1) he who sews, (2) ploughs, (3) reaps, (4) binds sheaves, (5) threshes, (6) winnows, (7) selects [fit from unfit produce or crops], (8) grinds, (9) sifts, (10) kneads, (11) bakes; (12) he who shears wool, (13) washes it, (14) beats it, (15) dyes it; (16) spins, (17) weaves, (18) makes two loops, (19) weaves two threads, (20) separates two threads, (21) ties, (22) unties, (23) sews two stitches, (24) tears in order to sew two stitches; (25) he who traps a deer, (26) slaughters it, (27) flays it, (28) salts it, (29) cures its hide, (30) scrapes it, and (31) cuts it up; (32) he who writes two letters, (33) erases two letters in order to write two letters; (34) he who builds, (35) tears down; (36) he who puts out a fire, (37) kindles a fire; (38) he who hits with a hammer; (39) he who

---

<sup>22</sup> "That is on account of the requirement that sexual relations take place on Friday night, as it is written, 'That brings forth its fruit in its season' (Psa. 1:3), and said R. Judah, and some say, R. Nahman, and some say, R. Kahana, and some say, R. Yohanan, 'This refers to one who has sexual relations on Fridays'" (b.*Bava Qama* 82a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM).

<sup>23</sup> "Said R. Judah said Samuel, 'Once a week, on Friday night.' 'Who brings forth its fruit in its season' (Psa. 1:3) – said R. Judah, and some say R. Huna, and some say R. Nahman, 'This refers to one who has sexual relations every Friday night'" (b.*Ketuvot* 62b; *Ibid.*).

<sup>24</sup> "He who went forth [beyond the Sabbath line] on a permissible mission, but they said to him, 'The deed already has been done,' has two thousand cubits in every direction [in which to walk about]" (m.*Eruvim* 4:3; Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], 214).

<sup>25</sup> "He who was in the east and said to his son, 'Prepare an *erub* for me in the west,' in the west and said to his son, 'Prepare an *erub* for me in the east,' if the distance between him and his house is two thousand cubits, and between him and his *erub* is more than this distance, he is permitted to go to his house and prohibited from going to his *erub*" (m.*Eruvim* 5:7; *Ibid.*, pp 217-218).

<sup>26</sup> "[If he said], 'My place of residence for the Sabbath is at its root,' he may then go from the place at which he is standing to the root, for a distance of two thousand cubits, and from the location of its root up to his house, for two thousand cubits. So he turns out to have the right to go four thousand cubits after it gets dark: [With regard to the rule that if he specified a particular spot of four cubits, he acquires it as his Sabbath locus and may walk to that place and another two thousand cubits beyond it to his home (Slotki),] said Raba, 'And that is the rule only if by running toward the root he can get there before it got dark and the Sabbath began'" (b.*Eruvim* 51a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>27</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, 278.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

transports an object from one domain to another—lo, these are the forty generative acts of labor less one.”<sup>28</sup>

Another list, reflecting prohibited activities from the broad Second Temple period, is seen in m.*Beitzah* 5:2:

“For (1) any act for which [people] are liable on grounds of Sabbath rest, for (2) optional acts, or for (3) acts of religious duty, on the Sabbath, are they liable in regard to the festival day. And these are the acts for which people are liable by reason of Sabbath rest: (1) they do not climb a tree, (2) ride a beast, (3) swim in water, (4) clap hands, (5) slap the thigh, (6) or stamp the feet. And these are the acts [for which people are liable] by reason of optional acts: (1) they do not sit in judgment, (2) effect a betrothal, (3) carry out a rite of *halisah*, (4) or enter into levirate marriage. And these are the acts [for which people are liable] by virtue of acts of religious duty: (1) they do not declare objects to be sanctified, (2) make a vow of valuation, (3) declare something to be *herem*, (4) raise up heave offering or tithe. All these actions on the festival they have declared [to be culpable], all the more so [when they are done] on the Sabbath. The sole difference between the festival and the Sabbath is in the preparation of food alone.”<sup>29</sup>

While the Rabbinic tradition includes various stipulations regarding what is, and what is not, prohibited on *Shabbat*—stipulations that many Bible readers may conclude go well beyond the intention of the Torah commandments—it is important to be aware of much of the logic behind the Jewish religious leaders who formulated these rulings. The religious leaders of Israel were granted God-given authority to make judgments regarding Torah application, Deuteronomy 17:11 stating, “You must follow the laws as they interpret them; you must not wander to the right or to the left from the verdict they declare” (Scharfstein).<sup>30</sup> While one can be free to wonder about some of the reasoning behind making certain *Shabbat* prohibitions—with debates in future Jewish history certainly positing a difference between ancient levels of technology, and more automated and industrialized levels—the intention of such prohibitions was indeed not to defame the Sabbath, but rather to sanctify it. The Rabbinic intention behind some of the main prohibitions (m.*Shabbat* 7:2; m.*Beitzah* 5:2) was to keep people away from unnecessary work, and to get their attention focused on God—and was indeed influenced by the past tragedies, at least partially caused by Sabbath violation. *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* addresses some of the significant Rabbinical logic in formulating various *Shabbat* prohibitions:

“In order to prevent anyone from unwittingly transgressing any of the prohibitions, or doing something not in harmony with the spirit of the day, the rabbis enacted further rulings. Examples of these, which serve as a ‘fence around the law,’ are: *gezerot* (‘decrees’...), e.g., a tailor should not go out just before sunset with a needle on him, lest he forget about it until after the onset of the Sabbath and ‘carry’ it (*Shab* 1:3); *MUKTSEH* (‘set apart’), i.e., certain things should not be touched even if they are not forbidden as such, since this might lead to a prohibited act; *nolad* (‘born’), i.e., something that comes into existence during the Sabbath, such as a freshly laid egg, is not to be used; and *shevut*, i.e., an act not in the spirit of the day, for example climbing a tree (*Béts.* 5:2).

“Rabbinical sources devote much space to discussing the prohibition against carrying objects. One is not to carry them from the public domain to the private and vice versa, and from one point to another within the public domain. Since this may involve effort under certain circumstances, and in order to allow carrying in the prohibited areas, they formulated the ERUV, involving legal devices making carrying possible within a determined area.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 187-188; further discussed in George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), pp 81-84.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>30</sup> Sol Scharfstein, *The Five Books of Moses, an Easy-to-Read Translation* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2005), 483.

The issue of considering the Pharisees as having a consultative authority for matters of Torah *halachah*, is discussed in the exegesis paper on Matthew 23:2-3, “Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

<sup>31</sup> “Sabbath,” in Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. et. al., *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 2002), 667.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

Many of the discussions on what is, and what is not, proper for the Sabbath are witnessed in the Talmud tractate *Shabbat*. One will certainly find, as indicated by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, how “In rabbinic law, each category is subjected to further expansion through the delineation of derivative varieties of forbidden labor. In some interpretations, this yields as many as 1,521 forbidden activities (Y. *Shabbat* 7:1, 9b-c).”<sup>32</sup> An observation made in the Mishnah is, “The laws of the Sabbath, festal offerings, and sacrilege—lo, they are like mountains hanging by a string, for they have little Scripture for many laws” (m. *Chagigah* 1:8).<sup>33</sup> One can surely see how a figure like Yeshua of Nazareth could indeed observe, “Woe to you *Torah* experts too! You load people down with burdens they can hardly bear, and you won't lift a finger to help them!” (Luke 11:46, CJB). While there are useful, and perhaps even edifying, principles to be found in the Rabbinic tradition surrounding *Shabbat*—keeping track of all of these regulations, *often at the expense of the Torah commandments themselves*, can be an unnecessary burden.

In much, much later times, with the emergence of Reform Judaism, and subsequently Conservative Judaism, in the Nineteenth Century, significant adaptations of the Rabbinic stipulations surrounding *Shabbat* would be made. These would often have to account for a much different situation for modern Jews, not living in the same Ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean conditions in which these directions were originally formulated.<sup>34</sup>

One needs to have an as-balanced-as-possible approach when reviewing extra-Biblical instructions on Torah practices like *Shabbat*, especially in view of the Apostle Paul's word that his fellow Jewish people “were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2), with it needing to be recognized how *logos* (λόγος) has a wide variety of applications, including things that are “chiefly oral” (*BDAG*).<sup>35</sup> It is up to the people of God, filled with His Holy Spirit, to sift through some of the Rabbinic materials—widely claimed to be the Oral Torah or Oral Law—and discover “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute” (Philippians 4:8).

Some of the principal Talmudic opinions surrounding *Shabbat* reveal how significant the Sabbath has been to the Jewish people throughout history. It is fair to say that these sentiments have some useful things to communicate, that others highlight how important Sabbath observance has been approached, and that some others go far beyond the intention of the institution:

- ***Shabbat* is a precious gift given by God to Israel:** “*So, too, it has been taught on Tannaite authority: ‘That you may know that I the Lord sanctify you’ (Exo. 31:13): The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, ‘Moses, I have a fine gift [for you] in my treasury, and it is called Sabbath, and I desire to present it to [the people of] Israel. Go and inform them’*” (b. *Shabbat* 10b).<sup>36</sup>
- **those who delight in *Shabbat* will be granted their heart's desire:** “Said R. Judah said Rab, ‘To anyone who makes the Sabbath a time of rejoicing they give whatever his heart desires: “Delight yourself also in the Lord and he will give you your heart's desires” (Psa. 37:4). Now I don't know what this “delight” is, but when it says, “and you shall call the Sabbath a delight” (Isa. 58:13), you must say, that refers to the pleasure of the Sabbath’” (b. *Shabbat* 118b).<sup>37</sup>
- **observance of two successive Sabbaths is key to bringing about the final redemption:** “Said R. Yohanan in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai, ‘If the Israelites

---

<sup>32</sup> “Sabbath,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 539.

<sup>33</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, 330.

<sup>34</sup> Dresner, pp 80-81 includes a Conservative Jewish modern list of work for consideration; Mark Dov Shapiro, *Gates of Shabbat: A Guide for Observing Shabbat* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1996), pp 49-59 includes a similar one for the Reform movement.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 599.

<sup>36</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

keep two successive Sabbaths in a proper manner, they will be saved immediately: "Thus says the Lord concerning the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths" (Isa. 56:4), followed by, "even them will I bring to my holy mountain" (Exo. 56:7)" (b.*Shabbat* 118b).<sup>38</sup>

- **a special spice is to be used for Sabbath dishes, which is actually the Sabbath itself:** "Said Caesar to R. Joshua b. Hananiah, 'How come the food cooked for the Sabbath has such a wonderful fragrance?' He said to him, 'We have a special spice, called "Sabbath," which we put into it, and its fragrance is wonderful.' He said to him, 'Give us some.' He said to him, 'It works only for someone who keeps the Sabbath, but it doesn't work for someone who doesn't keep the Sabbath'" (b.*Shabbat* 119a).<sup>39</sup>
- **those who observe *Shabbat* are thought to be participants with God in His Creation:** "For said R. Hamnuna, 'Whoever says the Prayer on the eve of the Sabbath and says the Sabbath verses, "And the heaven and the earth were finished" (Gen. 2:1), is regarded by Scripture as though he had become a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in the works of creation, as it is said, "And the heaven and the earth were finished" (Gen. 2:1) — don't read the words to yield "finished" but rather "and they finished."' Said R. Eleazar, 'How on the basis of Scripture do we know that speech is equivalent to action? "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Psa. 33:6)'" (b.*Shabbat* 119b).<sup>40</sup>
- **prayer before *Shabbat* is thought to purge one of sins:** "Said R. Joshua b. Levi, 'Whoever says the formula, "Amen, may his great name be blessed," with all his strength — they tear up for him the decree that has been issued against him: "When retribution was annulled in Israel, for the people offered themselves willingly, Bless you the Lord" (Jud. 5:2). Why was "retribution annulled"? Because "the people offered themselves willingly.'" R. Hiyya bar Abba said R. Yohanan [said], 'Even if he is marked by a taint of idolatry, they forgive him. Here it is written, "when retribution was annulled," and elsewhere, "And Moses saw that the people had broken loose for Aaron had let them loose" [and the words for annulled and broken loose correspond] (Exo. 32:25)'" (b.*Shabbat* 119b).<sup>41</sup>
- **a Sabbath violator is considered to be the same as an idolater:** "...the apostate, of one who pours libations [before idolatry], and of one who violates the Sabbath in public" (b.*Chullin* 5a).<sup>42</sup>

While there are a diverse array of Talmudic opinions present surrounding *Shabbat*, that the Sabbath was taken seriously by many Jewish people during the time of Yeshua, and immediately after, cannot be avoided. Some of these sentiments were probably present during the Judaism of Yeshua's time, and would have been agreed with, in various parts, by the Messiah and His early followers. Others would clearly be disregarded. And then, some others would be toned down. As Paul observed in Romans 10:2, "For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Many religious Jews of the First Century period and onward were indeed quite serious about their belief in the God of Israel, but they did not always have the appropriate knowing of Him to go along with it.

A hugely significant feature of ancient *Shabbat* observance, which continues even to this day, was the reading and exposition of Scripture at one's local synagogue. The English term "synagogue" is actually derived from the Greek *sunagōgē* (συναγωγή), which has a classical usage pertaining to

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

how, "In Greek writings a *bringing together, gathering (as of fruits), a contracting; an assembling together* of men." It is more widely, of course, known in a religious context, involving "the Septuagint for *קהל* [*qahal*] and very often for *עדה* [*eidah*]," and "the *building where those solemn Jewish assemblies are held* (Hebrew *בית הקנסת* [*beit ha'kneset*], i.e. 'the house of assembly'). Synagogues seem to date their origin from the Babylonian exile. In the time of Jesus and the apostles every town, not only in Palestine but also among the Gentiles if it contained a considerable number of Jewish inhabitants, had at least one synagogue, the larger towns several or even many" (Thayer).<sup>43</sup> Both the Jewish philosopher Philo, and the historian Josephus, from the broad First Century, testify to how reading Scripture on the Sabbath was an important practice:

"[I]n accordance with which custom, even to this day, the Jews hold philosophical discussions on the seventh day, disputing about their national philosophy, and devoting that day to the knowledge and consideration of the subjects of natural philosophy; for as for their houses of prayer in the different cities, what are they, but schools of wisdom, and courage, and temperance, and justice, and piety, and holiness, and every virtue, by which human and divine things are appreciated, and placed upon a proper footing?" (On the Life of Moses 2.216).<sup>44</sup>

"[F]or he {God} did not suffer the guilt of ignorance to go on without punishment, but demonstrated the law to be the best and the most necessary instruction of all others, permitting the people to stop their other employments, and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, and learning it exactly, and this not once or twice, or oftener, but every week; which thing all the other legislators seem to have neglected" (Against Apion 2.175).<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly enough, one of the most important historical records attesting, to First Century synagogue worship and exposition of the Torah and Prophets, is the New Testament. Even with there being some sectarian differences present before the fall of the Temple in 70 C.E., it is still to be recognized how the local synagogue was a major meeting place on *Shabbat* for Jewish communities:

"...[D]istinguishing the sabbath from the other six days of the week more than all else were, from the sixth century B.C. onward, the weekly assemblies in the local synagogues for communal worship by means of an established and steadily expanding ritual, in which the reading of the Pentateuch and selected passages from the Prophets and the expounding thereof by recognized authorities played a central role (Jos. Antiq. XVI.ii.3; Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:21-22; 6:2; Luke 4:16-21, 31-33; Acts 13:27; 15:21; 17:1-2; 18:4). Quite probably the singing or chanting of selected psalms also constituted an important part of the early synagogal sabbath ritual (cf. Ps. 92:1). There is ample ground for the assumption that prior to the destruction of the third temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 such synagogal worship was in considerable measure sectarian in character. But following this momentous event sabbath worship in the synagogue became, and has been ever since, the primary institution of Jewish ritual" (IDB).<sup>46</sup>

One of the most useful Talmudic thrusts is that whatever activity or labor can be done, before the Sabbath, may not be done on the Sabbath (b.*Pesachim* 66a-b). Most frequently, this involves not heavy labor generally, but instead various specific forms of food preparation (cf. m.*Shabbat* 3:4) or warming. In ancient times, food eaten on the Sabbath was prepared the day before. Obviously, in more modern times, food eaten on the Sabbath might be prepared the day before, but warmed using some form of modern technology.

---

<sup>43</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 600.

<sup>44</sup> Philo Judaeus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 510.

<sup>45</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), pp 804-805.

<sup>46</sup> J. Morgenstern, "Sabbath" in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:140-141.

He goes on to state, "The Sunday-sabbath and ritual worship thereon in the church are quite obviously a part of Christianity's heritage from Judaism."

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

There are different styles of approach witnessed throughout Judaism today toward much of the traditional *halachah* for *Shabbat*. The Orthodox Jewish community would be one of the more stringent sectors to observe the bulk of the prohibitions present during the time of Yeshua (although notably not the restrictions of the Qumran community), whereas Reform Judaism would be the most liberal, perhaps found to dismiss most of the stipulations as ancient and outdated, or reinterpret them in some way. Conservative Judaism would be found to certainly observe far less of the Mishnaic and Talmudic prohibitions than Orthodox Judaism, but far from dismissing their authority, would be more apt to interpret or adapt them in new ways for Jews in a modern setting, although many would be deemed irrelevant as they were for another time.

### Welcoming and Honoring the Sabbath

It is quite common, in the Jewish tradition, to witness how the Sabbath or *Shabbat* is greeted as some kind of a queen or bride on Friday evening. It is stated in the Talmud how, "R. Hanina would stand in his cloak on the eve of the Sabbath at sunset and exclaim, 'Come and let us go forth to greet the Sabbath, the Queen.' R. Yannai would put on his garments on the eve of the Sabbath and say, 'Come, bride, come, bride'" (b.*Shabbat* 119a).<sup>47</sup> Recognizing how *Shabbat* is to be a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt, Ruth Perelson observes in her book *An Invitation to Shabbat*, "For many poor people, Shabbat was the one bright spot in an otherwise bleak existence, the one time each week a man was a king and a woman was a queen, no matter how humble his or her surroundings. In each generation, Shabbat continues to remind us on a regular basis of our roots and of our covenant with God."<sup>48</sup>

On the evening that opens the Sabbath, *Erev Shabbat* (עֶרֶב שַׁבָּת), the traditional feature in Jewish homes is the dinner table, as the Sabbath meal tends to be a unique gathering of all members of the family, to focus on God and fellowship with each other. A wide amount of preparation will go into the Sabbath evening, involving typical activities such as cooking and cleaning house, but also preparing for guests, and often making sure that the best is ready for this sacred time. When *Erev Shabbat* begins, there is traditional liturgy that is recited, sanctifying the time to the Lord, praising God for His provision, and a mutual blessing of family members such as husband and wife one to another, but most especially of parents to their children. Specific rituals and customs are observed, notably including the lighting of *Shabbat* candles, partaking of wine and bread with the *kiddush* and *challah*, and frequently also a traditional handwashing.<sup>49</sup>

*Shabbat* begins with **the kindling of Sabbath lights**, in the form of candles today (m.*Shabbat* 2:1),<sup>50</sup> which in the Orthodox Jewish tradition will usually take place around eighteen minutes or so before sundown. Part of lighting candles is to make the Sabbath a holy time, per the tenor of the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). Kindling a Sabbath lamp is thought to bring a degree of solace to the home (cf. b.*Shabbat* 25b). Customarily, a woman, the wife (m.*Shabbat* 2:6),<sup>51</sup> lights the Sabbath candles, often with some kind of hand motion over the flame, followed by a traditional blessing. As detailed by Eisenberg in the *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*,

"Before reciting the blessing, some women pass their hands three times over the candles to symbolically draw in the essence of light and the spirit of holiness, thus enhancing the powerful emotion of ushering in the Sabbath. It is customary for women to cover their eyes while reciting

---

<sup>47</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Perelson, *An Invitation to Shabbat: A Beginner's Guide to Weekly Celebration* (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>49</sup> A basic summary of home *Shabbat* traditions is offered in Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, pp 86-88; Eisenberg, pp 136-143.

<sup>50</sup> "With what do they kindle [the Sabbath light] and with what do they not kindle [it]?..." (m.*Shabbat* 2:1; Neuser, *Mishnah*, 181).

<sup>51</sup> "On account of three transgressions do women die in childbirth: because they are not meticulous in the laws of (1) menstrual separation, (2) in [those covering] the dough offering, and (3) in [those covering] the kindling of a lamp [for the Sabbath]" (m.*Shabbat* 2:6; *Ibid.*, 182).

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

the blessing after lighting the Sabbath candles. One explanation is that this enables the woman to exclude all extraneous thoughts and concentrate her full attention on the words she is saying...Covering her eyes permits the woman to delay (until after finishing the blessing) the spiritually elevating experience of gazing on the glowing light of the Sabbath candles."<sup>52</sup>

**Kiddush** (קידוש), the customary blessing of the wine and bread, before the Sabbath meal begins, is taken from the Hebrew *qadosh* (קדוש), "holy" or "sanctified." This tradition is taken from Tanach sentiments such as Isaiah 58:13, "call[ing] the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable," as well as Psalm 104:15, "wine to gladden the human heart...and bread to strengthen the human heart" (NRSV). Among Sephardic Jews, the blessings of *kiddush* are normally stated while all are standing up at the dinner table, whereas among Ashkenazic Jews, it is more common for people to be seated.<sup>53</sup> While any kind of kosher wine could be used, it is frequent for a sweet wine to be employed, although grape juice can also be used. The bread called **challah** (חלה), is derived from "the priest's share of the dough...the quantity to be set aside for the priest" (*Jastrow*),<sup>54</sup> with two loaves often representative of the double portion of manna that the Ancient Israelites were to have (Exodus 16:22-26). Some of the key significance of *challah* is summarized by the *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*:

"For each Sabbath meal, two whole loaves of bread (challah) are placed on the table and covered with a cloth. These are reminiscent either of the double portion of manna that fell on Friday and sustained the Israelites over the Sabbath or of the two rows (12 loaves) of the showbread (*lechem panim* [לֶחֶם פָּנִים]) eaten on the Sabbath by the *Kohanim* [priests] (Exod. 25:30). The Hebrew word 'challah' is mentioned in the Bible (Num. 15:20) as the small portion of dough (1/24 for an individual; 1/48 for a baker) that was to be set aside when baking bread and then offered to the *Kohanim* in the Temple. Because *Kohanim* can no longer observe the laws of priestly purity and thus are disqualified from eating anything related to a holy sacrifice, in observant households (and kosher bakeries) where bread is baked, an olive-size challah portion is now thrown into the fire and burned. According to the Mishnah, Jews are responsible for separating the challah portion when baking bread from at least three pounds of flour of any of the five grains—wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye (Hal. 1:1).

"...The Sabbath challot are usually covered with a decorative cloth, a symbol of the layer of dew that protected the manna in the wilderness. Covering the challah also prevents it from being 'sighted' by having its blessing preceded by the *Kiddush* over wine—for if bread is served at a meal, at all other times the blessing over it takes precedence...Another explanation of this practice relates to the traditional likening of the Sabbath to a bride. Just as the bridal veil is removed after reciting the blessings under the wedding canopy, so the 'veil' of the challot is lifted after their blessings have concluded and before the bread is cut...Because the dinner table is considered to be symbolic of the altar in the Temple (Ber. 55a),<sup>55</sup> where all was brought with all offerings, the custom developed of sprinkling salt on the challah to commemorate the sacrificial system."<sup>56</sup>

As a home dinner, there are a wide variety of traditional Jewish recipes, seen in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish homes.<sup>57</sup> Given the Talmudic dictum (b.*Shabbat* 119a), about a special spice to be used for *Shabbat* (which is actually *Shabbat*), it is hardly a surprise why many Jewish dishes served for *Erev Shabbat* may include various special and unique spices,<sup>58</sup> or at the very least, some sort of significant preparation, distinction, and ornateness. It is also most

---

<sup>52</sup> Eisenberg, 137.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 465.

<sup>55</sup> "For it is written, 'The altar of wood three cubits high... and he said to me, This is the table that is before the Lord' (Eze. 41:22). The verse begins by referring to the altar and concludes by referring to a table. *Both R. Yohanan and R. Eleazar say*, 'So long as the house of the sanctuary stood, the altar atoned for Israel. Now a person's table atones for him'" (b.*Berachot* 55a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>56</sup> Eisenberg, pp 141-142.

<sup>57</sup> Consult Perelson, pp 15-19 for some recipe ideas.

<sup>58</sup> Shimon Finkelman, *Shabbos: The Sabbath—Its Essence and Significance* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1990), 105.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

traditional for the *Erev Shabbat* meal to frequently, or even always, include fish.<sup>59</sup> (Consult the **Evening Shabbat Dinner** section for an example of a Messianic-adapted customary home order of service.)

While the *Erev Shabbat* dinner tends to get the most amount of attention for preparation and consumption, it is traditional for three meals to actually be eaten in association with *Shabbat* (b.*Shabbat* 117a),<sup>60</sup> with additional meals to occur after the morning *Shabbat* service, and another meal to occur before the close of the Sabbath in the late afternoon.<sup>61</sup> One custom of note is how the *Erev Shabbat* meal should be spurred on by eating sparingly the day before: "A man should not eat on the eve of the Sabbath from afternoon onwards, so that he should be hungry at the start of the Sabbath," the words of R. Judah" (t.*Berachot* 5:1).<sup>62</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* details a variety of additional *Shabbat* practices that are customary, often to the Orthodox community, but also adapted in various degrees by Conservative and Reform Jews:

"Essentially, the Sabbath is a day of physical rest and spiritual joy, centered around the twin poles of home and synagogue...As the men leave for synagogue for the evening service...the women recite a special blessing over the Sabbath candles...Upon his return, the husband blesses his wife...and the children...Then the \*Qiddush prayer, sanctifying the Sabbath day, is recited over wine and the \*Birkat ha-Motsi' is received over two loaves of bread (*hallah*), which recall the two portions of manna gathered by the Israelites on the Sabbath eve. The festive meal is punctuated with the singing of Sabbath \**zemirot*. At the conclusion of the meal, the \*Birkat ha-Mazon is said. In non-Orthodox homes, the Sabbath meal may be eaten before the family goes to a late synagogue service. It is a widespread custom to invite guests to the Sabbath meals. Marital intercourse is regarded as especially meritorious on the Sabbath eve. In general, the Sabbath should be a 'day of delight'..."<sup>63</sup>

While the home tends to be the focal point for Sabbath observance on Friday evening, traditions and customs vary among branches of Judaism regarding different kinds of Friday activities at one's local synagogue, with various kinds of services indeed being held. In Reform Judaism, an ***Erev Shabbat* service** may be held at the synagogue sometime after 8:00 PM, to allow for a Sabbath home dinner.<sup>64</sup> It is the ***Shabbat morning service on Saturday***—often including traditional prayers, liturgy, and some kind of teaching—that most faithful Jews will attend. (Consult the **Morning Shabbat Service** section for an example of a Messianic-adapted customary order of service.)

When three stars are sighted in the sky at twilight on Saturday, *Shabbat* can be officially said to be in the process of closing. A traditional ceremony to close *Shabbat* is ***Havdallah***. The Hebrew term *havdallah* (הַבְּדִלָּה) widely means "separation," but also specifically involves "Habdalah, a formula of prayer for the exit of the Sabbath or the Festivals" (*Jastrow*).<sup>65</sup> The custom of *Havdallah* is witnessed in the Mishnah, in differences between the Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai (m.*Berachot* 8:5).<sup>66</sup> The purpose of holding *Havdallah* is so that *Shabbat* can close in a

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp 143-144.

<sup>60</sup> "How many meals is a person required to eat on the Sabbath? Three. R. Hidqa says, 'Four meals is a person obligated to eat on the Sabbath.' Said R. Yohanan, 'Both authorities interpret the same verse of Scripture: "And Moses said, eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord, today you shall not find it in the field" (Exo. 16:25).' R. Hidqa takes the view that the three 'todays' are counted in addition to the meal of the prior evening, while rabbis maintain that they encompass the meal of the prior evening" (b.*Shabbat* 117b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>61</sup> Eisenberg, pp 142-143.

<sup>62</sup> Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 1:29.

<sup>63</sup> Chaim Pearl, "Sabbath," in R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp 595-596.

<sup>64</sup> Perelson, 3; Shapiro, pp 42-43.

<sup>65</sup> *Jastrow*, 329.

<sup>66</sup> "The House of Shammai say, '[The order of the blessings at the conclusion fo the Sabbath is] lamp, meal, spices, and *habdalah*.' But the House of Hillel says, 'Lamp, spice, meal, and *habdalah*.' [The blessing over the lamp—] the House of Shammai

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

similar manner to that in which it was entered. Four features of *Havdallah* that are witnessed include: (1) a blessing over wine, (2) a blessing over spices, (3) a blessing over lights, and (4) a blessing for the new week. While there is varied symbolism attached to the elements of *Havdallah*, most frequently it is recognized how smelling spices or lighting a fire, was a prohibited activity for *Shabbat*, but now is permitted with the work week getting ready to begin. *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* includes an important summary of what is to be widely witnessed:

{It includes a} Blessing recited at the end of the SABBATH and FESTIVALS marking the passage from a concentrated day to a routine weekday....

The *havdalah* ceremony comprises four blessings: three over WINE, SPICES, and lights, and the *havdalah* blessing. In the various rites (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Yemenite), the blessings themselves are almost identical, the lead phrase being *kos yeshu'ot essa* ("I will lift the cup of salvation")....

Although wine is the preferred beverage for the blessing, if none is available, other liquids, except water, may be used.

It is now customary to use aromatic spices for the second blessing, but until the 12th century plants such as myrtle (*hadass*) were used. In some Sephardi and Oriental communities sweet-smelling plants are still used. They recite the alternate benedictions on *asté vesamim* ("fragrant trees" or "plants") alongside the more common phrase, used by both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, *miné vsamim* ("kinds of aromatics"). The origin of this blessing is unknown. Some...attribute it to the ancient custom, predating Mishnaic times, of burning aromatic plants at the end of a meal to give a pleasant fragrance to the dining room. As this could not be done on the Sabbath, a blessing over spices was instituted.

The *havdalah* spices are often kept in a special container called a *besamim* box or *hadass*. The containers, first noted in a literary source in the 15th century, come in a wide variety of shapes, such as towers, fish, and flowers, and are made of silver, wood, and other materials (see SPICEBOX).

The *havdalah* candle has more than one wick, as there has to be a combination of at least two flames, stemming from the plural form "lights" used in the blessing (*Boré me'oré ha-esh*, "who creates the lights of the fire"). The candle often has six wicks and is made of interwoven strands in colorful combinations. The blessing signifies that kindling, traditionally prohibited on the Sabbath, is once again permitted on the weekday....

A variety of customs are associated with *havdalah*, from filling the cup to overflowing and extinguishing the candle in wine poured from the cup to dipping one's fingers in the wine and putting drops on the forehead or in the pockets. It is customary to extend one's fingers or look at one's nails with the blessing over the light....Each community has its own rules regarding the drinking of the wine cup, the inhaling of the aroma of the spices, whether the *havdalah* is recited sitting or standing, and so on.

REFORM JUDAISM has an alternative *havdalah* service incorporating additional readings with the traditional blessings, and it also uses the occasion for various expressions of religious creativity, such as song, dance, etc.<sup>67</sup>

## Shabbat in the More Modern Period

Observance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is something that Jewish people, faithful to God's Torah and to their ancestral heritage, have kept in various forms or fashions, across the centuries to the present. For those such as the Orthodox, *Shabbat* begins eighteen minutes before sundown on Friday evening; for those such as the Reform, *Shabbat* begins when everyone can sit down at the dinner table on Friday evening.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, ranging from issues such as finding oneself living in the modern West, with Twentieth and Twenty-First Century levels of technology and convenience—to living in the Jewish State of Israel, with a religiously-influenced civil law—there are many discussions, debates, and diverse forms of Sabbath application to be seen.

One of the most highlighted components of Sabbath observance in the modern period tends to surround the difference of approach to driving cars on *Shabbat* and the usage of modern electrical devices—and whether they fall within the Exodus 35:3 prohibition of kindling a fire. *EJ* details some of the main differences of allowance between the major branches of contemporary Judaism:

---

say, 'Who created the light of the fire.' But the House of Hillel say, 'Who creates the light of the fire'" (m.*Berachot* 8:5; Tzvee Zahavy and Alan J. Avery-Peck, trans., in Neusner, *Mishnah*, 12).

<sup>67</sup> "Havdalah," in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, pp 349-350.

<sup>68</sup> Perelson, pp 2-3.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

“Modern inventions have produced a host of new questions regarding Sabbath observance. Orthodox Judaism forbids travel by automobile on the Sabbath, Reform Judaism permits it. Conservative Judaism has differing views on this question, but generally permits travel by automobile on the Sabbath solely for the purpose of attending synagogue. The basic legal question regarding the switching on of electric lights is whether the noncombustive type of burning produced by electricity falls under the prohibition of making a fire or any of the other [traditional] prohibitions...Orthodox Jews refrain from the use of electrical appliances on the Sabbath, with the exception of the refrigerator, which may be open and closed on the grounds that any electrical current produced in the process is incidental and without express intention. It has, however, become the practice for observant Jews to use electrical appliances on the Sabbath which are operated by time switches set before the Sabbath. In Israel, on religious kibbutzim, the same procedure is used to milk the cows on the Sabbath. Israel also has local bylaws forbidding certain activities on the Sabbath. There is, however, no comprehensive law covering the whole country. Thus, whereas the public transport does not operate on the Sabbath in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv, it does in Haifa. Except for specifically non-Jewish sections of the country, the Sabbath is the official day of rest on which all business and stores must close.”<sup>69</sup>

So much of the discussion over “Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exodus 35:3, NIV) will concern a contrast and comparison on *what it actually took* to kindle or light a fire in the Ancient Near East for Ancient Israel—and what it takes today. Is it or is it not “work” to flip a light switch, via an ongoing “fire” provided by a coal, petroleum, or nuclear power plant? Is it or is it not “work” to turn the keys of a car ignition—versus how in ancient times a fire could only start via some semi-intense human labor of striking a flint over and over? Is it or is it not even “work” to initiate a fire by striking a match or flipping a lighter?<sup>70</sup>

The major thrust to be sure, of course, is how *Shabbat* is intended to be—whether witnessed in Holy Scripture or mainline Jewish tradition and custom—a **special time committed unto the Lord**. Eisenberg addresses in the *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*,

“According to Samuel Raphael Hirsch, the prohibition of creative activity on the Sabbath is a critical acknowledgment of God as the Creator. Human beings are permitted to rule over the natural world for six days by divine decree, but on the seventh day they are forbidden to make anything for their own purpose. In effect, on the Sabbath humans relinquish their temporary control over the world and return it to the ultimate Creator of all.”<sup>71</sup>

To be sure, while committing one’s observance of the Sabbath unto the Lord and to His sovereignty is something positive to be embraced, to what degree does the Prophet Isaiah’s admonition, “if you honor it and go not your ways nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains” (58:13, NJPS), specifically apply? It should hardly be a surprise how there is not uniformity regarding how *Shabbat*-honoring is not present in contemporary Judaism. While the Sabbath has been something recognized as important among the branches of mainstream Judaism, varied levels of application and emphasis on *Shabbat* being an *oneg* (אָנֵג) or “delight” (Isaiah 58:13)<sup>72</sup> are present. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* entry on “Sabbath” offers a fair presentation of the different approaches present in contemporary Judaism:

---

<sup>69</sup> Louis Jacobs, “Sabbath: Laws and Customs of the Sabbath,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp 44-46 for some of the main features of Sabbath keeping in modern Israel, in particular in Jerusalem, as well as some of the controversy that it has stirred.

<sup>70</sup> Much of this is evaluated further on in Chapter 8, “Being Realistic About Shabbat,” by J.K. McKee.

<sup>71</sup> Eisenberg, 128.

<sup>72</sup> In today’s broad Messianic movement, the noun *oneg* is typically used to describe the post-service refreshments or mealtime following an *Erev Shabbat* or *Shabbat* service. This tends to be an excellent community-builder for Messianic assemblies and fellowships, as it will stimulate interaction among brothers and sisters.

At the publishers’ own local Messianic congregation, Eitz Chaim of Richardson, TX, there is an *oneg* lunch following the morning *Shabbat* service.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

All streams in Judaism have stressed the centrality of the Sabbath. For several decades the REFORM movement distanced itself from traditional observances and practices, including attempts to transfer the Sabbath to Sunday (an idea which did not succeed). Today, in both CONSERVATIVE and Reform Judaism the main weekly synagogal service is held on Friday night and/or Sabbath morning. Lighting CANDLES in the home and reciting the KIDDUSH are widely practiced private rituals. Abstention from commercial activity and gainful employment are encouraged, as is dedication of the Sabbath day to spiritual and contemplative endeavors. Although Reform Judaism does not require fulfillment of all the traditional commandments as defined in the *halakhah*, it stresses the fundamental goals of *kedushah* (holiness), *menu'uhah* (rest), and *oneg* (joy) in celebration of the Sabbath day. The specific form of expression given to these values is a matter of contemporary individual interpretation and not merely the adoption or even adaptation of historical expressions and forms. Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist synagogues have experimented with and often adopted creative innovations in their Sabbath services.<sup>73</sup>

Reform Judaism, the most open and liberal of all the mainstream branches of Judaism,<sup>74</sup> permits activities such as circumcision (Genesis 17:11-12; cf. John 7:22), prohibits weddings, and prohibits funerals and cemetery visits on *Shabbat*.<sup>75</sup> Among those who are more Centrist to traditional, it is to be recognized how those hallowing and sanctifying *Shabbat*, have to expel some effort or “work” during the week, in order to make the Sabbath a special time. This not only concerns facilitating the time for *Shabbat*, so that all work- and job-related responsibilities have ceased—but also so that the key instructions from the Torah can be honored. Dresner offers some key application, from a Conservative Jewish standpoint, of what it means to sanctify *Shabbat*:

What do we mean by “keeping the Sabbath holy”?...[D]rawing upon the Tradition, we may say that to keep the Sabbath (*kadosh*), includes, in addition to abstaining from work, basically the following:

- 1) Cleaning, arranging and adorning one’s home, one’s wardrobe and one’s person—and preparing special meals—in advance of the Sabbath in honor of the Sabbath.
- 2) Providing for the needy in advance of the Sabbath; and inviting the stranger, the needy, the lonely and the troubled to share in one’s Sabbath.
- 3) Welcoming the Sabbath with the lighting of candles and *Kiddush*, and ushering it out with *Havdalah*.
- 4) Studying Torah, individually or in groups.
- 5) Eating festive meals, wearing special clothes, taking a leisurely walk, taking special Sabbath rest.
- 6) Increasing one’s appreciation and enjoyment of the creations of the human spirit—such as literature and song.
- 7) Deepening the level of love and affection, of concern and care, of sharing and understanding among members of the household and among friends.
- 8) Turning to God by praying the evening, morning and afternoon services (with a congregation if possible, or else privately) and by reciting the Grace before and after meals—in thankfulness and wonderment at the blessings of creation and the gift of rest; in gratitude for redemption from enslavement; in examination of conscience and request for forgiveness; in sympathy for human suffering and deprivation, and in resolve to aid in their alleviation; in renewal of the covenant-bond with the people Israel; and in petition for an increase in inner resources for living.<sup>76</sup>

Even with a wide number of liberal perspectives and views present in his broad-sweeping *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals*, George Robinson is still right to emphasize how the Sabbath—especially given that common greeting *Shabbat shalom* (שבת שלום)—is to be a day of significant peace. This does require those who truly intended to honor the Sabbath, to alter their orientation of one toward self-importance and self-indulgence—toward one of focusing on God and the ways of God:

---

<sup>73</sup> Pearl, “Sabbath,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 667.

<sup>74</sup> Consult Shapiro, pp 95-99 for a basic list of Reform Jewish prohibited activities for *Shabbat*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>76</sup> Dresner, pp 80-81.

## A Summarization of Jewish Shabbat Traditions

"Shabbat is meant to be a day of peace, *Shabbat shalom*, the peace of the Sabbath. It offers us a chance for peace with nature, with society, and with ourselves. The prohibitions on work are designed to make us stop—if only for one day of the week—our relentless efforts to tame, to conquer, to subdue the earth and everything on it. The prohibition against making fire is also said by the rabbis to mean that one should not kindle the fires of controversy against one's fellow humans. And, finally, the Sabbath offers us a moment of quiet, of serenity, of self-transcendence, a moment that allows us to seek and perhaps achieve some kind of internal peace."<sup>77</sup>

Today's Messianic people do, on the whole, tend to have a very high appreciation level for some of the major traditions and customs observed throughout mainstream Judaism, for honoring the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Certainly, some fine-tuning as to the origination of many of the key, edifying traditions, and how they could be better employed, is in order. Perhaps more than anything else, what we do encounter in today's Messianic movement—given the fact that wide numbers of today's Messianic Jews, and certainly various non-Jewish Messianic Believers, have had significant experience in evangelical Christianity—is a *conscious need for us to move* from a mentality of treating *Shabbat* as some kind of "Saturday church," where we only gather to corporately worship on the seventh-day, to a time of widescale rest and refreshment (cf. Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14). This is indeed achievable and by no means impossible, because we serve a Lord who decreed, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and 'you will find rest for your souls' [Jeremiah 6:16]" (Matthew 11:29, TLV).<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Robinson, 84.

<sup>78</sup> For a further review on the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* in contemporary Judaism, it is recommended that you consult Ruth Perelson, *An Invitation to Shabbat: A Beginner's Guide to Weekly Celebration* (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), for a summary of views from Reform Judaism; Samuel H. Dresner *The Sabbath* (New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1970), for a summary of views from Conservative Judaism; and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), for a relatively philosophical Jewish review.