



5 Sabbath images

For observant Jews, the Sabbath is a day set apart. At sundown on Friday work ceases, whether it's finished or not. In Jewish interpretative traditions the Sabbath is described as the betrothal between God and the human person. Every Sabbath is a joyful renewal of the love-relationship between God and people, between individuals, and involving the whole created universe. Sabbath is all about love-making! And how beautifully this theme weaves its way through Jewish rituals. Five examples follow:

1. As the Sabbath begins, the Song of Songs is recited: *'Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses! Your sweet loving is better than wine...'*

2. In synagogue worship, the congregation sings love songs, a popular one being *Lecha Dodi: 'Come, my beloved, to meet the bride; the Sabbath presence, let us come.'*

3. In the *Shema*, a prayer central to the Sabbath worship, the congregation is exhorted to love God *'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'* (Deut. 6:4-5) The love referred to here is one of passionate

involvement, like that of a love-sick lover!

4. The Sabbath table at home is laid with symbolic twosomes—two candles, two loaves of bread (*challah*) made from two intertwined strings of dough—all suggesting the intertwining of lives, as well as scripture's two versions of the fourth commandment: to *remember* (Exod. 20:8) and *observe* (Deut. 5:12) the Sabbath.

5. The Sabbath meal itself is a feast of love, filled with song, scripture, blessing, warm conversation, family and friendship.



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2010

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 35:1—38:20

Vayakhel:
'he convoked'

Why reflect on Torah?

"The church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets." (NA, 4)

At the Second Vatican Council the Church gave powerful recognition to its origins, that is, the faith of ancient Israel: its scriptures, its traditions, its fidelity to the covenant. It affirmed the fact that the Jewish and Christian peoples are profoundly linked by a shared spiritual and biblical heritage.

How natural and beautiful, then, for us as Christians to turn to the Jewish tradition for insight and encouragement as we reflect on the scriptures we share in common, especially those biblical texts which the Jews call (by its Hebrew name) 'Torah' and which we often call (by its Greek name) the 'Pentateuch': the first five books of the bible. These texts were precious to Jesus, himself a faithful Jew. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the Gospels rest.

This *Light of Torah* series is devoted to encouraging parish communities in a deeper appreciation of the Torah and Jewish interpretative traditions.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 35:1—38.20

Now that the crisis of the Golden Calf has been resolved, the story returns to the building the Tabernacle. God gives detailed instructions to the people through Moses.

Just before these instructions begin, two verses appear (35:2-3) where God reminds the people to keep holy the Sabbath. *What is the significance of the placing of these verses?* This question intrigued the Jewish sages through the ages, right down to our own day. Let's listen to some of those voices now...

Tasting Torah

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the Sabbath day. (Exod. 35:2-3)

The command to keep holy the Sabbath has already been given (Exodus 20:10; 23:12; 31:15; 34:21). Why repeat it here? Remember that the people have sinned, repented and are ready to set themselves to a most sacred work: building the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle is the sign of God's enduring presence amidst the people. One could be forgiven for thinking that a work of such sacred value would be more important than the inactivity of resting on the Sabbath. And this, say the rabbis, is exactly why the Sabbath commandment is repeated here: to insist that *even the work of building the tabernacle is not to interfere with the holiness of Sabbath rest.*

Touching Torah

Why is the Sabbath so important? Says Heschel:¹ one of the most distinguished words in the bible is the word *kadosh* ('holy'). What was the first holy object in the history of the world? A mountain? An altar? Rather, a day. *"God blessed the seventh day and made it holy"* (Genesis 2:3). In the bible, holiness in *time* is what comes first. When we give this time to God, our priorities and lives find their proper order. Sabbath observance prevents us from becoming enslaved to the things and activities of this world.

Depthing Torah

In the storytelling of the *midrash*, the people of Israel say to God:

"The kings of the pagans have their palaces and altars, candlesticks and other royal trappings. Should not You, our King, possess the same royal trappings?" God answers: "Human beings require these trappings but I, who created and give light to the whole world, have no need. But, if you feel that you need them, by all means make them, but make them according to my designs..."²

In other words, there is a distinction in the biblical text: at Israel's insistence holiness was applied to a *place*; but the holiness of *time* was pronounced by God at the beginning of the world. It was Moses who sanctified the Tabernacle when it was completed (see Numbers 7:2), but it was God Almighty who sanctified the Sabbath.

Doing Torah

- Ponder and share your response to this insight into the holiness of *time*, as well as the holiness of *place*.
- Share something of your efforts to stay focused on the Lord amidst the many busy activities that fill your life. What shabbat experiences are part of the rhythm of your week?
- Learn more about the Jewish Sabbath: (www.jewfaq.org/shabbat) and its relevance to Christians (www.batkol.info/?page_id=354).



Faith & life

Whoever does any work on [the Sabbath] shall be put to death. (Exodus 35:2).

How might we interpret this verse today? Let's consider the 'deathly' effects of *not* heeding sabbath rest: burn-out, lack of energy, susceptibility to illness or accident, alienation from loved ones. Indeed, to live life to the full we need to work with, not against, the rhythms of life and love as designed by our Creator in whose image we are fashioned. Without the refreshment of the Sabbath and the spiritual values it prioritizes, one cannot truly live!

1. Abraham Heschel, 1907-1972: American rabbi and leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century.
2. A paraphrase of Midrash Aggadah: Terumah. See Leibowitz, p.658.

Bibliography: Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (NY, 2007); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.