Shabbat: a Covenant and a Vision: Thoughts on Parashat Yitro

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Yitro

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"…for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Shemot 20:11).

"And you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Devarim 5:15).

After the exodus from Egypt, Moses led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai where they experienced God's revelation of the "Ten Commandments." At this special moment between God and Israel, the commandments are remarkably universal in tone. They reflect basic ideas of faith and moral behavior. Even the Sabbath is presented in universal terms as a remembrance that God created the world (including all people, not just Israel) in six days and rested on the seventh day.

This universal tone was captured in a statement by Rabbi Yohanan: "When God's voice came forth at Mount Sinai, it divided itself into 70 human languages, so that the whole world might understand it" (Shemot Rabbah 5:9). Indeed, many non-Jews revere the "Ten Commandments" and view them as cornerstones of human civilization. Religions other than Judaism also have their Sabbaths.

When Moses recounts the "Ten Commandments" in Devarim, he rewords the passage about Shabbat. Instead of referring to God's resting after the six days of creation, Moses refers to God's having redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses wants the children of Israel to focus on their intimate covenant with God who redeemed them from servitude.

So Shabbat is both universal and particular. It is relevant to all humanity but also has particular meaning for the people of Israel. The dual nature of Shabbat is reflected in how the Torah enjoins Israel to keep Shabbat: "The children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested" (Shemot 31: 16-17).

The passage describes Shabbat as a sign between God and the children of Israel. We would have expected the Torah to root the covenant in God's having redeemed Israel from Egypt—as in Moses' version of the Ten Commandments in Devarim. But the Torah grounded the covenant in the recognition of God's having rested on the seventh day of creation—as in the Ten Commandments recorded in Yitro. At first glance, this seems like a non sequitur; but a deeper message is intended. The children of Israel are to remember and observe Shabbat with two dimensions in mind: a unique covenant with God and a universal message for humanity.

Shabbat is a sign of God's covenant with Israel. We observe Shabbat in a way that distinguishes this day qualitatively from the other days of the week. We dress differently, eat differently, pray differently; we refrain from many weekday activities. Shabbat is a spiritual oasis, refreshing and renewing our bodies and souls. Every Shabbat-observant Jew experiences God's covenant with the children of Israel in a direct, intimate and all-encompassing way.

But Shabbat also expands our religious vision. It is not only a unique covenantal day for the people of Israel; it is a reminder of the Creator of the universe, of all humanity. To be a full "shomer/shomeret Shabbat" we not only must observe the Shabbat rituals; we must also remind ourselves—and humanity at large—that God is our Creator, that all human beings are creatures of One God, that life has ultimate meaning. We celebrate Shabbat as a sign of our covenant with God but also as a prod to work for "a world that is fully Shabbat-like."

The Torah's teachings on Shabbat are particular to Israel and universal to humanity. Our ideal Shabbat incorporates both components—covenantal observances and grand religious vision. Shabbat Shalom.