

Is Your Work Done?

The text of the fourth commandment, which sanctifies the seventh day, declares: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days shall you labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God (Exodus 20: 9 - 10)." What strikes our ancient commentator in the Mekhilta is the word "all." Is it really possible for anyone ever to finish all of his or her work in six days? Of course not, and so we must understand the Torah as saying that "we should rest as if all our work were done."

Torah Temimah elaborates: It is a commandment to enjoy the Sabbath, as it states, "You will call the Sabbath joy," and Moses hinted at this in the Torah in 'do all your work.' How can a person do all his/her work in a single week? Rather, a person should regard each Sabbath as if all his/her work had been completed, and there is no greater joy than that.

How can we feel as if our work is done when we know very well that it is not? There is a hint from our parashah: Yitro, Moses' father-in-law joins the group and observes Moses sitting as a judge and counsellor for the people from morning until evening. He questions Moses, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this all alone and making the people stand around you all day?" Moses says, "The people want answers from God, so they come to me. I'm the one who knows God's laws, so I have to be the judge."

Yitro answers in judgement himself: "The thing you are doing is not right. You are going to wear yourself out, and the people as well. You cannot bear this great task alone."

He counsels Moses to delegate some of the responsibility of leadership and judgement to other capable leaders, and only the most difficult matters would be brought to Moses. Yitro counsels: If you can do this, then you will be able to bear the burden. It will be easier for you and the burden will be shared.

So, how can we feel as if our work is done when we know very well that it is not? We can give some of it away. I mean this not only literally—in that we can delegate to others or ask others for help; but we can let ourselves off the hook. Sometimes we take on too much—we take on things for which we cannot possibly bear responsibility; things that are outside of our control, outside of our choices or abilities.

Our prayers speak of Shabbat as "the loveliest of days," a status we denote by refusing to confer a name to any other day of the week. In Hebrew, the days of the week are merely numbered in reference to Shabbat. The higher the number, the closer we come again to the ultimate realm of existence. Indeed, Shabbat is all that is left from the Garden of Eden, a dim memory of perfection expressed in moments of holiness. It also anticipates the restoration of that blessed state at the end of time through personal experience. Each week we relive a moment of timelessness which promises that creation shall end in redemption. The poem with which we welcome the Sabbath, *Lekha Dodi*, "O Come my Beloved," affirms our faith in this linkage as it moves from the Shabbat of the here-and-now to a vision of national redemption in a messianic age. Shabbat is the assurance that history will come full-circle, ending where it started in timeless perfection.