

## **Text from the Tradition: The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel**

*The Sabbath in Time, not Space* (text drawn from pp. 4, 79, 96-97 80, 21, 73-74, 82)

The mind's preoccupation with things of space affects, to this day, all [human] activities. Even religions are frequently dominated by the notion that the deity resides in space, within particular localities like mountains, forests, trees or stones, which are, therefore, singled out as holy places; the deity is bound to a particular land; holiness a quality associated with things of space, and the primary question: where is the god? There is much enthusiasm for the idea that God is present in the universe, but the idea is taken to mean that [God's] presence is in space rather than in time, in nature rather than in history; as if [God] were a thing, not a spirit.

Holiness in space, in nature, was known in other religions. New in the teaching of Judaism was that the idea of holiness gradually shifted from space to time, from the realm of nature to the realm of history, from things to events. The awareness that sanctity is not bound to a particular place made possible the rise of the synagogue.

Fundamental to the consciousness of time is the distinction between earlier and later. But is time only a relation between events in time? Is there no meaning to the present moment, regardless of its relation to the past? A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time. We all live it and are so close to being identical with it that we fail to notice it. The world of space surrounds our existence. It is but a part of living, the rest is time. When we learn to understand that it is the spatial things that are constantly running out, we realize that time is that which never expires, that it is the world of space which is rolling through the infinite expanse of time.

The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere. It is not a different state of consciousness but a different climate; it is as if the appearance of all things somehow changed. Primary awareness is one of our being *within* the Sabbath rather than of the Sabbath being within us. The difference between the Sabbath and all other days is not to be noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, and the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear.

That the Sabbath and eternity are one—are of the same essence—is an ancient idea...Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come.

The sense of holiness and time is expressed in the manner in which the Sabbath is celebrated. No ritual object is required for keeping the seventh day, unlike most festivals on which such objects are essential to their observance...On that day the symbol of the Covenant, the phylacteries, displayed in all days of the week, is dispensed with. Symbols are superfluous: the Sabbath is itself the symbol. The Sabbath is all holiness. Nothing is essentially required save the soul to receive more soul. For the Sabbath “maintains all souls.” It *is* the world of souls: spirit in the form of time.

## **Teaching on Text from the Tradition:** by Christine Luna Munger

It is one thing for folks in the Abrahamic traditions to *recognize* the seventh day as Sabbath; it is another layer of practice to *honor* it wholly in the way that Heschl suggests is possible. Yet even for those who are not part of a human culture or religious tradition which fully honors the spiritual nature of Sabbath in the way that Heschl imparts, there are myriad ways to participate in what Heschl is describing.

The first might be described as a commitment to simplicity. In Heschl's brilliant turning around of our conventional notions of space and time, he lands on the seventh day as the time set apart for us to remember what we most fully called to be. By stripping away "the technologies of civilization" we recollect ourselves and remember the core of our being. Each time we deny ourselves more than we need; each time we choose a product that is sustainable over one that is toss-able; each time we say no to that one-more-thing-packed-in-a-day, we cultivate simplicity and we honor Sabbath. Heschl reminds us that all objects and even most events are passing through time, that they will not sustain the test of time, and that as such, as passing and temporal, such things do not lie at the core of who we are. When we set aside the materials and things, for a day or for a moment, we are better able to enjoy the beauty. We are also more likely in the future, to not acquire that thing or technology, to the point of excess. How we relate to "things" is a call to order and structure in our daily life.

A second way to participate in Sabbath is through spirituality. By spirituality, I do not mean the conventional, popular and passing notions of spirituality, such as, "the spirituality of wine-making," tasty as it might be. Rather, I refer to one of Heschl's main points, itself ancient-yet-easy-to-forget, that we are living, breathing spirits participating in the life of Creation within the One Great Spirit. If simplicity is a way of participating in Sabbath through the structure of our daily life, spirituality is a way of participating in Sabbath through the structure of our Being, our very purpose as creatures. In another great turn, Heschl points to the relationship between time and eternity, and points to our participation in eternity through our experience of linear time. In this sense, both the twenty minutes on the sitting pillow and the brief pause for a moment in the day to enjoy the sunshine, are equal expressions of the spirit of Sabbath. For if time is continually marking the passing of eternity, then both a single moment and every passing hour are precious indicators of the pervasive Presence of Spirit in all of Creation.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What catches your attention from the text, in your mind, your heart, and your senses?
- In what ways might you participate in Sabbath through the art of simplicity?
- In what ways might you participate in Sabbath through the practice of spirituality?