

# Jubilee of Freedom And Equality

by Niels-Erik Andreasen

**The seventh day is the armistice in man's cruel struggle for existence, a truce in all conflicts, personal and social, peace between man and man, man and nature, peace within man. . . .<sup>1</sup>**

Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally associated the Sabbath with creation (nature walks), worship (church attendance) and covenant sign (obedience to God's law). None of these associations is denied by the late Rabbi A. J. Heschel in our opening statement, which will serve as an organizing principle for this essay. Instead, Heschel notes two other areas of the Christian's life which may be blessed by the Sabbath. One is man's attitude towards work, and the other is his attitude towards people, including himself.

First, man's attitude towards work: "The seventh day is the armistice in man's cruel struggle for existence." General agreement exists that the fourth commandment is not a double injunction: man must work on six days and must rest on the seventh day. The commandment assumes that a man (and

woman) will work. Its exclusive concern is to limit work to the six days.

This interpretation does not mean, of course, that the Bible lacks injunctions to work. The most familiar is St. Paul's dictum: "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (II Thess. 3:10). The Old Testament conception of man's work is far broader and somewhat ambivalent.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, work is part of the commission to man received from God Himself (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:15). According to Genesis 2:5, the earth was originally lacking in two areas — it had no water and no man to cultivate it. The mist mentioned in verse 6 could serve as a potential source of irrigation, but without the work of man "to till it and keep it" (vs. 15), the planting of gardens (vs. 8) would not flourish. The reason for this commission to work must not be sought solely in man's need to extract from the ground such products as he required to live (cf. Ps. 104:14f.), for man is here also called upon to protect the land for its own sake (lit. "to keep it" Gen. 2:15). His work must be seen as a part of God's work of creation (Ps. 104:22f.), and herein lies the real reason for man's commission to work. Nowhere is work in itself understood as a curse or a burden. The work done "in the sweat of your face" (Gen. 3:19) is burdensome only because of the adverse circumstances surrounding it. As a principle, work is not deplored.

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The teachers of Israel ever since the days of Solomon encouraged hard, consistent work as the only way to success and security (Prov. 6:6-11; 24:30-34). However, their teaching is also ambivalent about work, and this is our second point. They do not question work as such, but *hubris* — work that entices the worker into trusting his own strength and forgetting God (Prov. 11:28; 15:16). Perhaps the most vivid warning of such deception is given in Psalm 127:1f. It is at this point that Heschel suggests that the Sabbath can improve the important relationship between man and his work.

To begin with, the biblical warning against *hubris* in the worker is urged by the Sabbath. Exodus 16 illustrates this fact in the teasing story about the Israelites who gathered manna, “some more, some less” (vs. 17). Since each gatherer had just enough, any manna kept overnight bred worms and spoiled (vs. 20). H. W. Wolff has suggested that this story is an almost humorous criticism of man’s restless ever-zealousness for work.<sup>3</sup> That point is made clearly by the worms and the rot, but it is pressed home in a far more effective, yet felicitous way by the Sabbath. The commandment to cease all work on the Sabbath emphasizes the complete adequacy of the manna gathering on six days and undercuts that human *hubris* which drives man into the field once again on the seventh day despite the fact that he has a sufficient supply of manna left over from the sixth day. The record comments tartly that such people “found none” (vs. 27). Seen this way, all the Sabbath laws, of which Exodus 16 contains the first (and earliest) in the Old Testament, may be taken as a judgment upon *hubris* in the worker.

Perhaps a more obvious relationship between the Sabbath and the worker is the permission to stop all work which the Sabbath insists on granting to everyone.<sup>4</sup> The reason, according to Deuteronomy 5, is the exodus deliverance: “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God

commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (vs. 15). All of Israel, bond and free, must be given the opportunity to participate in the Sabbath’s exodus experience.<sup>5</sup> On the Sabbath Israel is a community of equals.

In this passage, however, the emphasis on equality is overshadowed by the demand for freedom. The Sabbath commands Israel to let her dependents go free. It issues a humanitarian appeal for Israel to extend her experience of the exodus freedom to all workers.<sup>6</sup> It brings freedom not only from human bondage, but also from the demands of nature — the heavy requirements of sowing and harvesting (Ex. 34:21). The Sabbath, then, faithfully protects man from totalitarianism of all kinds, whatever the source.

The armistice in the cruel struggle between man and his world, about which Heschel speaks, provides two benefits: freedom of the worker from his work, but also freedom of the work (that is the world and its resources) from man’s exploitation. The Sabbath has notably contributed to this second aspect of the truce in man’s struggle through its sister institutions, the sabbatical and jubilee years.<sup>7</sup> The Sabbath most likely inspired these institutions whose intentions were to protect people, land and property from exploitation by the worker.<sup>8</sup> In short, the Sabbath brings a respite in “man’s cruel struggle for existence” whether that cruelty is directed towards the worker or the object of his work.

Finally, it may be asked if the Sabbath restrictions on work actually will enhance work. The most familiar version of the Sabbath commandment reads: “Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is the sabbath to the Lord your God; (in it) you shall not do any work . . .” (Ex. 20:9f.). A general commandment, not concerned with specific tasks such as gathering manna, sowing or harvesting, it encompasses all man’s activities, tasks, business or trade. Whatever occupies man must be completed in six days, before the Sabbath, on which day he must perform no work. By thus demanding that all work stop after six days, the Sabbath commandment invites limits and goals to be placed before man’s work and urges on the worker such creative efforts

as will bring his work to its completion before the seventh day. God brought His work to completion in this way before the Sabbath.

Does such a Sabbath understanding of work mean anything in our time? Recent studies of the theology of work generally begin with the view of Max Weber and R. H. Tawney<sup>9</sup> that the Protestant Reformation, notably the reformed branch, introduced a new concept of work: all work, not only that of priests and monks, represented a religious calling or vocation worthy of the most faithful Christian.<sup>10</sup> While other factors also contributed to the economic system of our time,

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Protestantism certainly did help to alter the meaning of work. It made work worthy, desirable and rewarding. It also helped to pave the way for an expanding, industrious economy with all its blessings and curses.

In recent years, this Protestant work-ethic (as our attitude to work in the West is sometimes called) has been seriously challenged by a new protest against the evils which have accompanied it: materialism, greed, ruthless ambition and empty, bored, depersonalized workers. Many solutions have been proposed. Some have attempted to make work more interesting, creative or varied. I believe that a serious consideration of the Sabbath understanding of work can also help us respond to current problems of the work-ethic. The Sabbath coldly condemns *hubris*, that arrogant, “take-all” attitude of many producers and manufacturers. It introduces an armistice in the struggle between man and work. Both bring freedom to man from drudgery and relieve the world from those

who would exploit it. Finally, the Sabbath urges a completion of work by setting limits and goals for it, thus making it creative. In short, the Sabbath holds the potential for being a catalyst in restoring a proper relationship between man and work.

Heschel’s second point deals with man’s personal and social conflicts. The Sabbath, he notes, brings “peace between man and man, man and nature, peace within man.” The peace to which Heschel refers is not simply absence of war, like a *pax romana*. It is *shalom*, meaning peace, well-being, harmony, security and understanding. A deeply personal word, *shalom*, when spoken, restores broken relationships and heals the inner person. Peace (*shalom*) attends the individual whose person is whole and whose relationship to others is sound.

According to the Bible, a person is whole when soul, spirit, heart and body combine into an ideal of unity and harmony. “The Hebrew,” writes H. Wheeler Robinson in commenting upon the unity of man in Old Testament thought, “conceived man as an animated body, and not an incarnate soul.”<sup>11</sup> By the same token, a community is sound when the relationships within its families, clans, tribes and nation are characterized by the ideal of unity and solidarity. But such ideals of harmony and solidarity are not always achieved. Within the individual, the spirit may “faint” (Ps. 142:3), the soul may be “bowed down to the dust” (Ps. 44:25), intoxication may take away the heart or understanding (Hosea 4:11), the flesh may “waste away” (Job 33:21). Within the community, interpersonal relationships can also break down. Two touching and masterful portrayals of such breakdowns are the Old Testament stories of Michal, David and Paltiel (II Sam. 3:14-16; 6:23) and of Amnon and Tamar (II Sam. 13:1-15). Does the Sabbath offer some solution to these disorders, as Heschel suggests?

Perhaps the most natural place to begin is with the freedom which the Sabbath provides. It is essentially a freedom from work, as we have seen, provided for those not in a position to secure it (Ex. 23:12; Deut. 5:12-

15), but it also includes freedom from servitude imposed by the pressures of work (Ex. 34:21). We further noticed that the Sabbath's sister institution, the sabbatical year, offered the slave permanent freedom in the seventh year of servitude (Ex. 21:1-6; Deut. 15:1-18).

However, such freedom does not necessarily bring *shalom* to the parties involved. The master to whom these laws of liberation are given may still view his fellow as a freed slave or servant. He is not necessarily united to him in a bond of unity and solidarity characteristic of the highest order of interpersonal relationships. To be complete, freedom must become independent of the one who bestows it. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 makes that very clear by urging that the master who sets his slave free should also make that slave independent through generous gifts. Only then does the slave become a free man, not just a liberated slave. The regulations of the jubilee year concerning restoration of land and property on the fiftieth year further contribute to that freedom which becomes independent of its liberator.

Genuine freedom must lead to equality. While the Old Testament Sabbath texts themselves do not advocate complete human equality, Isaiah 56 refers at least indirectly to the equality between all people which the Sabbath provides. Isaiah is here responding to the role of foreigners and eunuchs in the congregation of Israel. Traditionally, they were excluded, but the prophet wants that practice reversed. These outcasts, of whom the Assyrian and Babylonian wars produced many, were to be welcome in the Sabbath worship of the temple, if they genuinely wished to belong to God. The remarkable prominence in this chapter of the Sabbath as a sign of such belonging would suggest that this day was an important symbol of membership in the covenant community of Israel, but it must also have been a powerful symbol of equality among all worshippers, something which these former outcasts desperately needed.

The Sabbath thus represents not only freedom for all but also equality among all. Hence, it brings a truce into social conflicts and establishes solidarity and unity in the

community. This result must also apply today. On the Sabbath the executive and his janitor share the same pew; no one gives the other an order or extracts a service. The Sabbath sets all men free and makes them equal. It restores the ideals of solidarity and unity in the community.

Finally, the Sabbath brings to man a certain kind of serenity, what Heschel calls "peace within man," and what we have called the ideal of inner harmony. It is caused

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partly by man's release from the conflicts of this world, whether through work, or ambitions or social relationships, and partly by the vision of the transcendent which man receives in the worship and joy which this day can provide.

So far, nothing has been said about the Sabbath as a day of celebration and worship, although the Old Testament presents ample evidence that it was not, as some have charged, a day of gloom, but a day of joy. The command to not light fires (Ex. 35:3) and to stay indoors on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:29) are case laws applying the Sabbath principle to specific circumstances, not primitive taboos associated with early Sabbath observance. Whatever glimpses we get of the early Sabbath suggest that in addition to being a day without work, it also provides an occasion for worship.<sup>12</sup> The one psalm (Ps. 92) which is specifically assigned (in intertestamental times) to Sabbath worship is a psalm of thanksgiving, sung in a festive mood with musical instruments (vs. 3). Isaiah's opposition to the Sabbath (Isa. 1:13) was not caused by the festivity it provided, but by the impossible juxtaposition of a religious festival and iniquity.

This festive and worshipful quality of the

Sabbath has enabled it to transform strict prohibitions of work into a freedom from work, and thus it has made room for the experience of joy in the life of man. Such Sabbath joy is nourished by the satisfaction found in the completion of all work. The creation Sabbath itself (Gen. 2:2f) illustrates this point. The creator rested on the Sabbath, blessed it, and sanctified it because his work was completed. Seen this way, the Sabbath becomes symbolic not simply of God's creative work, but particularly of the completion of that work, and this makes the Sabbath symbolic of God's redemption which is but "completed creation." Similarly, on the Sabbath man's inner conflicts which arise over problems with unfinished work, or badly accomplished tasks or strained relationships are neutralized by the Sabbath assurance that all work will be completed in God. Here is an occasion for joy, and this joy is expressed in a temporal experience of divine presence bringing serenity to man, inner harmony, "peace within."

In the opinion of many interpreters, the

beautiful Sabbath text in Isaiah 58:13f ought not to be read as a separate promise of materialistic rewards to those who do not transgress the Sabbath law. After all, the context of these verses deals with a true fast which the prophet interprets as practical religion and personal integrity.<sup>13</sup> Verse 13, which deals with the Sabbath, contributes to these concerns of the chapter by making the Sabbath into a festal occasion which is not inhibited by personal or materialistic interests. It warns against letting religion turn in upon itself. It urges the religious person to transcend his preoccupations with gain and profit by caring for others and serving them by means of redemptive works. Such works are characterized by harmony and completion and, like the finished words of God, they bring true Sabbath joy. Riding on the high places (vs. 14) is therefore not a materialistic reward, but a spiritual experience of sharing in God's finished works and taking delight in them. This is the true Sabbath joy which brings inner personal harmony — "peace within."

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York, 1952), p. 29.
2. H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London, 1974), pp. 128-33.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
4. They are servants, foreigners, children and even domestic animals (Ex. 20:8-11; 23:12; Deut. 5:12-15). Cf. N.-E. Andreasen, "Festival and Freedom," *Interpretation*, 28 (1974), 281-97.
5. Cf. B. S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London, 1962).
6. Cf. Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22.
7. Ex. 21:1-6; Lev. 25, 26; Deut. 15:1-18; II Chron. 36:21.
8. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel I: Social Institutions* (New York, 1961), p. 174.
9. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London, 1930); R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1938).
10. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 10, 6.
11. *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1946), p. 70.
12. II Kings 4:23; 11:4-12; I Chron. 23:30f.; Isa. 1:13; Hosea 2:11.
13. There is good reason for accepting the unity of Isaiah 58 in spite of many contrary critical opinions on the matter. Cf. J. Muilenburg, "Isaiah 40-66," *The Interpreter's Bible*, V (New York, 1956), p. 677. In this chapter, the worshipers are accused of fasting to gain material blessing while pretending to offer sincere devotion to God.