

What Can Adventism Learn from the Jews About the Sabbath? | BY JACQUES B. DOUKHAN



Rabbi Howie Stein, left, sits with students and faculty at a weekly Shabbat dinner at Grinnell College.

Why Should Adventists Learn from the Jews about the Sabbath?

A Historical Reason

The anti-Semitic rejection of the seventh-day Sabbath by traditional Christianity played a crucial role in the Jewish-Christian separation (see Samuel Bacchiocchi for the early Christian testimony and Mordechai Arad for the early-rabbinic testimony). The rediscovery of the Sabbath by Christians should, therefore, oblige them to reconnect with the Jews in their quest about the Sab-

bath. Also the Jews have a much longer historical experience of the Sabbath than Seventh-day Adventists. Paradoxically, although the Adventists have now become the most numerous human group keeping the Sabbath, the Sabbath still remains in the world a testimony associated with the Jews. And as a result, the Jewish testimony about the Sabbath sounds much louder in the world than the one by SDAs. Still today when we say “Sabbath,” people generally think “Jews.” The Sabbath has been defined as “the essence of Judaism” (Abraham Heschel).

A Theological-Philosophical Reason

Unlike Greek/philosophical thinking which reaches truth *directly* through the rational or spiritual process, Hebrew (biblical) thought reaches truth only through the necessary testimony of the other human person. For in Greek thought, the truth is essentially an abstract concept, and one may have access to it by oneself; in Hebrew thought, on the other hand, the truth is essentially related to a historical event or to a historical person; it is essentially an experience. Thus, from biblical Israel to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, humans needed the testimony of other humans to have access to the divine truth (see Claude Tresmontant, *Essay on Hebrew Thought*). Seventh-day Adventists' often-claimed argument that the Sabbath came from God from the event of creation, even before Sinai, to justify their independence from the Jews is therefore suspect. The pious direct reference to God is presumptuous, denying the above biblical principle of human dependence and may in fact disguise the old anti-Semitic prejudice: they do not want to have anything to do with the Jews, precisely the motivation which led the early Christians to reject the Sabbath (see among others Bacchiocchi's dissertation, and more recently Sigve Tonstad's *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*).

Question: Celebrate Versus Keep?

Once Adventists have come to the truth of the Sabbath whether by themselves through the genius of their spiritual enquiry or through the humble remembering of the Jewish testimony, is there something about the Sabbath that they might have left behind? What is it that SDAs could learn from the Jews which they have not yet learned or not yet so well understood?

We may ask ourselves the question: Why do Adventists come across as "keeping" the Sabbath in contrast to the "celebrating" of the Jews? Indeed for Jews, "the primary aim of Shabbat is to create an atmosphere of pleasure and fulfillment" (Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 163). This primary mitzvah of the Sabbath is derived by the rabbis from Isa 58:13: "call the Shabbat a delight [*oneg*]." I suppose this Adventist accent on the "keeping" rather than on the "celebrating" is due to the Christian setting of Seventh-day Adventists, who feel the need to defend their position against other Christians: Adventists keep the seventh-day Sabbath while the other Christians have lost it since they

are Sunday keepers. In fact, if you ask a Seventh-day Adventist, "What is Sabbath for you?" He/she will most probably answer, "It is not Sunday." This accent on the "keeping" belongs also to the Adventist's concern to be obedient to God's Law rather than to the tradition of men. The vertical, holy dimension of keeping the commandment is here emphasized at the expense of the human dimension of celebrating and enjoying.

In this paper, I will try to suggest, then, by reference to the Jewish testimony of the Sabbath, a lesson of celebration and enjoyment of the Sabbath which SDAs could learn from the Jews. I will do it around what I have identified as the five main categories of the Jewish celebration/enjoyment of the Sabbath, namely, (1) beauty, (2) food, (3) relationship, (4) grace, (5) hope.

1. Beauty

The experience of the Sabbath is (should be) first of all an aesthetic, sensual experience, something we enjoy aesthetically through all our senses. This involves the visual senses: the beauty of your home and of the house of prayer, the lighting of the candles, the special setting of the table with a nice tablecloth and the finest silver and china, the flowers, dressing in nice clothes, etc. This involves the auditive senses: music and poetry. This



Beauty and candlelight

involves olfactive senses: the fragrance of myrtle or other aromatic herbs we smell as the hors d'oeuvres for our meal. The enjoyment of beauty is the first mitzvah, the first commandment-requirement for the Sabbath. Yet, beauty is not just the first chronological apprehension of the Sabbath experience, the first immediate one; it will also always remain included in all the other categories of enjoyment. For beauty provides the continuous environment for all the rest of the experiences that take place on Sabbath.

The Seventh-day Adventist Application

Making the Sabbath beautiful is consistent with the SDA affirmation of the faith in Creation. How can we proclaim the message of Creation (Rev 14:7) and not make our homes, our church, and our Sabbath worship services beautiful? How can we sing a hymn with no poetry in it or with a miserable musical quality and claim to honor the Sabbath? It seems, indeed, that the aesthetic concern associated with Sabbath is not a priority in SDA thinking, which tends to focus on the correctness of the doctrinal truth of the Sabbath (the right day) rather than on the beauty of its experience. Paradoxically, by missing that experience of beauty, we may miss the essence of the doctrinal truth. In other words, a Sabbath lived in an ugly environment without the sensitivity of the beautiful is inconsistent with the very purpose of the Sabbath which is supposed to revive in our minds and in our bodies the sense of the beauty of Creation.

2. Food: The Taste of Shabbat

The food is the most important ingredient for the sanctification of Shabbat. The ancient rabbis tell us that through eating the Shabbat foods we experience a "taste" of the Garden of Eden. Their unique aroma, their taste, is something that cannot be duplicated.

The enjoyment of food is so important that it is recommended that one eat little on Friday and thus begin the Sabbath with a great appetite and so enjoy the food all the



Savoring the gift of food

more. The mitzvah of enjoying food on Sabbath is also illustrated in this mystical reading of Exodus 16:25: "And Moses said: 'Eat this today; for today is Sabbath.'" The phrase can be read in Hebrew as "eat the day for the day is Sabbath," meaning eat the day itself! The Sabbath is supposed to be so delicious that it can only be experienced by biting into it and savoring its taste. Celebrating Sabbath implies, then, the enjoyment of special breads, drinks, and meals which are particularly associated with the Sabbath. It is, therefore, imperatively forbidden to fast on the Sabbath. Marcion¹ knew this requirement so well that he commanded his disciples to fast on the Sabbath in order to clearly mark his contempt of the Jewish Shabbat.

The Seventh-day Adventist Application

It is interesting to note that the first time the Hebrew verb *ntn* "give" occurs in connection to humans is in the Creation story with regard to the gift of food by the Creator (Gen 1:29). It is also noteworthy that when Daniel, a role model in Adventist tradition, needed to justify his particular vegetarian diet he quoted that very text (Dan 1:12). The Sabbath is also the anniversary of the gift of food. The celebration of Creation on Sabbath makes sense only if you enjoy good food on Sabbath. We need to review, here, our

Celebrating community:
a school production
of *Fiddler on the Roof*.



menus in our homes, our school cafeterias, and in the potlucks of our churches. As for the SDA habit of fasting on Sabbath, this is highly problematic. We cannot, on the one hand, praise the Lord for Creation and the gift of food and then fast: this is impolite and an insult to the God of Creation.

3. Relationship

Shabbat is the special moment when we enter into a special relationship with God. The first day of humanity was marked by this human-divine fellowship. "When we experience the holiness of Shabbat, we attain the highest levels of *da'at*, of knowing God. And the highest level of this *da'at*-consciousness that we can achieve is the realization that God is altogether incomprehensible" (Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan* II, 83). By referring to the notion of *da'at*, the Hebrew concept of "knowledge," the rabbis have in mind a special relationship with God, a relationship of love. The association of the Sabbath with the word *qadash* ("holy") is significant in that connection: the basic idea is that this day is set apart for a special relationship of love with God. And yet this vertical relationship is accompanied with a horizontal relationship. It is not fun to celebrate alone. Even celebrating with God implies being with people. This is why the Shabbat is the day when we meet

together with the community, and we enjoy the company of friends and the family. Learning, eating, and laughing together is a major activity of Shabbat. I have warm memories of these Friday evenings when we gathered together around the great Shabbat meal and my beautiful mother dressed in her blue Shabbat apron; turbulent brothers and sisters were laughing and discussing passionately while my father was praying and striving to maintain some sense of holiness.

It is also a tradition for married couples to celebrate Shabbat with sexual intercourse. It is a special Shabbat mitzvah to make love on Friday night. Kabbalists teach that on this evening the holy union of the masculine justice of God and the Shechinah, the feminine grace side of God, occurs.

The biblical key texts to read on Sabbath are Proverbs 31:10-31 and the Song of Songs, two texts which promote and exalt conjugal relationship.

The Seventh-day Adventist Application

The Bible supports the paradigm just suggested. It is interesting that the Sabbath section (seventh) in the first Creation story (Gen 2:1–3) parallels the couple's section (seventh) in the second Creation story (Gen 2:18–24). Proverbs 8:30, which marks the seventh section of the reflection on Wisdom in Creation, corresponds to the Sabbath section of the Creation story, emphasizing enjoyment. The words "delight" and "rejoicing" are both repeated twice. The concept is first introduced as a daily experience, an allusion to God's daily responses to His daily creations, "God saw that it was good." The Hebrew word for "good" (*tov*) could be translated "delightful," "enjoyable." Then the words "delight" and "rejoicing" are focusing on the living beings and especially the sons of men. It is noteworthy that the Sabbath commandment is located in the center of the Decalogue, sandwiched between the section dealing with the relationship with God (commandments 1–3) and the section dealing with the relationship with humans (commandments 5–10) and functions as the hinge of the two sections. The Sabbath is itself the only commandment

which explicitly refers to both relationships, with God and with humans (see my article in *Shabbat Shalom*). The quality of the vertical relationship (your religion) depends on the quality of the horizontal relationship; and reversely, you may relate to the human other insofar as you have learned to relate to the divine Other.

It may happen sometimes in our zeal for God that we are so concerned to do God's holy work of the Sabbath that we may neglect to see and enjoy the wonder of God's presence and to even notice and enjoy the human face of each other. We need to learn the value of taking time to be with the Other and with each other instead of just *do* holy things together.

4. Grace

Sabbath is the time in touch with eternity, the time when we have time. The time of the Sabbath day is expanded beyond the borders of the normal day. Jews begin this holy time before sunset and end it after sunset. On Sabbath we are required to change the pace, to walk slowly and with smaller steps. It is forbidden to hurry (Shabbat 113ab). On Sabbath we sleep longer, and we stop doing things. For it is the day that reminds us of God doing things for us who did nothing. Sabbath is the day of receiving and enjoying what God has done for us. The 39 categories of work prohibited on Sabbath are modeled on the types of works involved in the building of the Temple (Shabbat 49b), whose construction is itself modeled on Creation. By putting the doing of the week in the perspective of the not doing of the Sabbath, Jewish tradition suggests a specific theology of work: it is not just the day of rest we deserve for our hard work during the week ("Thank God it's Friday!") to refresh us in order to ensure a more efficient work. The Sabbath is the goal, the ultimate purpose of the week. The Hebrew naming of the days reflects this whole philosophy. Weekdays do not have any identity; they only exist in connection to the Sabbath. Sunday is called the first day toward the Sabbath; Monday is called the second day toward the Sabbath, and so forth. Only the Sabbath has a name and exists by itself. The Sabbath is not an appendix, a weekend at the end of the week. This is the most important time of the week, its climax toward which the whole week is oriented. What could we do, what could we give, then, to make the Sabbath, Sabbath? "Nothing!" This is not what we do or what we give, our contribution, that makes the Sabbath; this is what He does, what He gives that

makes the Sabbath Sabbath. This view has been registered in the Jewish liturgy of Sabbath. The Jewish prayer of the *Amidah*, which is recited every day, changes on Sabbath. While the heart of that prayer during the weekdays is made of requests, on the Sabbath the requests have been replaced by praises and an emphasis is put on receiving. Sabbath morning is spent searching, studying, and commenting on the *parasha* of the week. The heart of the morning service is the Torah reading, which involves the whole congregation. On Sabbath afternoon in most Jewish traditions, we study and discuss chapters of the *Pirkey Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers"). According to Jewish tradition, study is more important than prayer because when we pray we are speaking, while when we study God is speaking and we are receiving. Studying is then lived in Jewish tradition as an enjoyment that is a part of worship. The Talmud refers to learning as the great joy of the Shabbat: "Said Rabbi Gerachya: 'The Shabbat was only given for joy.' Said Rabbi Hagai: 'The Shabbat was only given for learning'" (*Pesiqta Rabbati*).

The Seventh-day Adventist Application

Adventists have not learned the value of receiving and enjoying the gift; they have been educated and programmed to do and to give and make sacrifices for God. On Sabbath Adventists are busy doing and giving. Sabbath is full of holy activities: missionary work, the choir, rehearsals, and all kinds of committees. As long as we do "good" and holy work, we think that this is appropriate on Sabbath. A misunderstanding of Jesus' approach to the Sabbath has even led some Adventists to believe that it is acceptable to do carpentry, repair plumbing, and clean houses on the Sabbath as long as it is doing



“good” for God. I heard, as a justification for this approach, that this is the “Sabbath of the Gospel” versus the Sabbath of the Jews” (the phrasing already sounds suspect to me). This eagerness to do things for God on Sabbath goes against the lesson of Grace contained in the Sabbath: more important than what you do for God is what God does for you. Anyhow, these busy, holy activities keep us from enjoying the eternal quality of this time and from thinking and studying. For some reason studying (and thinking?) is not a value, or at least not a priority in Adventist tradition, certainly not an enjoyable experience. Even our Sabbath School sessions, the only moments when we are supposed to study and think, barely qualify as studying and thinking experiences. They are often the occasion for a pious bla bla bla poured at each other, full of self-centered testimonies and seasoned with superficial references to the Scriptures. No need to say that this trend goes against Adventist ideals which encourage, on the contrary, serious searching, learning, and thinking into the Word of God (See E.G. White, *Education*, 189).

5. Hope: Shabbat, a Foretaste of the Kingdom

The category of hope contains all the others; it will therefore take us to our conclusion. All the experiences of enjoyment and celebration associated with the Sabbath should take us beyond the present order and point to another order.

Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen saw in the joy of the Sabbath “the symbol of the joy” that will characterize messianic times (*Religion der Vernunft* 540). The mitzvah of enjoyment of the Sabbath is so important in Jewish tradition that it is given as a condition for the kingdom of God (see “The Bone of the Three Shabbat Meals”).

Jewish tradition teaches that on Shabbat one gets a supplement of soul (*nefesh yeteira*), which could be translated “a supplement of enjoyment,” and gives a sense of the other order. According to a rabbinic tradition, the two times are so close in quality that if Israel would be able to live and enjoy only one Sabbath completely, then the Messiah would come (*Exodus Rabbah* 25:12).

The Seventh-day Adventist Application

Seventh-day Adventists already carry this association of ideas in their name. It is not an accident that the Sabbath plays an important role in SDA eschatology. The associa-

tion of Sabbath which emphasizes the value of enjoyment of Creation with the hope in the new heavens and earth should teach us the lesson of the necessity of that tension. On the one hand, the Sabbath focuses on the value and the beauty of this creation and urges us to receive and enjoy God’s gifts of creation, to love each other and to take care of this creation on earth. On the other hand, the Sabbath obliges us to think and live according to the categories of God and inspires in us a new song from above, which nurtures our dream of the other Kingdom in heaven. The Sabbath should, therefore, be conjugated with two accents. The accent on “keeping” should be heard in harmony with the accent of “celebration.” It is certainly significant that we have two versions of the Sabbath commandment in the Scriptures. One urging to “keep” (Deut. 5), which implies the duty for holiness within the vertical reference to the divine order; and the other urging to “remember” (Exodus 20), which “connotes commemoration of the Sabbath as a day of celebration” (Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy* 1–11, 302) and implies full enjoyment of our humanness as a gift from the Creator (Eccl. 8:15).

According to Jewish tradition, the two versions of the Sabbath were heard simultaneously, so that one could not distinguish the one from the other. For one cannot celebrate Sabbath without keeping it, and one should not keep it without celebrating it. In fact, the two experiences of “keeping” and “commemorating-celebrating” should be lived in close connection to each other. The human existential experience and the holy eschatological hope should walk hand-in-hand and not deny or despise each other. When Seventh-day Adventists will be able to live that tension completely, then the Messiah will come. ■

Editor’s Note

1. According to *Wikipedia*, Marcionism refers to an “early Christian dualist belief system that originated in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope at Rome around the year 144...Marcion believed Jesus Christ was the savior sent by God and Paul of Tarsus was his chief apostle, but he rejected the Hebrew Bible and Yahweh.”

Jacques Douhkan is professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, Director of the Institute of Jewish-Christian Studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, and author of many books and articles on Jewish-Christian/Adventist relations. This material was first presented at the Adventist Society for Religious Studies in 2010.