



SABBATH

is for love

I have always kept the Sabbath and welcomed it. Yet it was not until I lived in Israel that I discover how festive the Sabbath can be or what an opportunity it provides for celebrating the love of family and friends. In fact, I did not want to go to Israel at all, so this story came close to never happening.

My husband, Dick, was just finishing his doctorate in Old Testament studies when the opportunity came for him to study Hebrew in Israel before he began teaching. For him it was the dream of a lifetime. But not for me!

Jo Ann Davidson discovers and experiences the joy of Sabbath through Jewish traditions.

Our daughter was a newborn, and now that five years of Dick's concentrated doctoral studies were behind us, I was looking forward to some relief from the pressure we'd experienced on our time and finances. I encouraged Dick to go to Israel alone. I would stay home with our baby girl. Financially, it seemed foolish for all of us to go, and as a new mother, I just didn't feel up to a major excursion.

Dick listened carefully and responded gently. "Honey, I respect your counsel. And if you don't think it is wise for us to go now, we won't go. But I won't go without you."

Well, that settled it. We wouldn't go. That night, however, the "still, small Voice" inside me swelled to a very uncomfortable thunder. I began to reconsider. Reluctantly, I admitted to Dick that we could probably manage the trip.

While I now believed we should go, I was still very unhappy. I didn't anticipate that God had opened much more than merely an opportunity for my husband to study Hebrew with Hebrews.

However, God had a pivotal life experience waiting for me. I was about to discover new dimensions of Sabbath joy.

starting it right

When we moved to Israel, it became obvious to me that Jewish

families have been rejoicing in the delicate art of Sabbath keeping for thousands of years. Learning about it in their midst was a rich privilege. Our family also found that incorporating some of their special traditions into our own Sabbath keeping has helped us become more aware of the goodness and beauty of the Lord.

In Judaism, Sabbath and family are inseparable. Long before the sun sets on Friday, Sabbath becomes the focal point of all activity. By mid-afternoon, family members make their way home, carrying flower bouquets and beautifully braided challah bread.

■ Sabbath preparations include a table festively set with a white tablecloth, the best dishes, silver candlesticks, and a vase for the flowers. Favorite Sabbath foods fill the rooms with delicious aromas. An air of expectancy pervades the house. As one of our Jewish friends expressed it, "The Sabbath starts coming Friday afternoon. By sundown it is all here."

The mother of the family has the honor of officially receiving the Sabbath. At sundown she lights at least two Sabbath candles, although in some homes a candle is lit for each member of the family.

Candlelight represents the Sabbath blessing that still shines from Creation. One can light a whole roomful of candles from a single taper

without diminishing the luster of its light. Just so, the rich blessing God intended for us on the Sabbath has not diminished since He blessed the first Sabbath day.

Sabbath prayers

After lighting the candles, the mother offers the following prayer, asking God to bless her family: “O God of Your people Israel, You are holy, and You have made the Sabbath and the people of Israel holy. You have called upon us to honor the Sabbath with light, with joy, and with peace.

“As a king and queen give love to one another, as a bride and her bridegroom—so we have kindled these two lights for the love of the Sabbath day. Almighty God, grant me and all my loved ones a chance to truly rest on this Sabbath day.

“May the light of the candles drive out from among us the spirit of anger, the spirit of harm. Send Your blessings to my children, that they may walk in the ways of Your Torah, Your light. May You ever be their God and mine, O Lord, my Creator and my Redeemer. Amen.”

The father then takes his children in his arms or puts his hands on their bowed heads and recites a blessing for each one. For his sons, he prays, “May God make you like unto Ephraim and Manasseh!” and for his daughters, “May God make

you like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah!” He then concludes with the priestly benediction:

“May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace.”

To affirm his wife’s place of honor on the Sabbath and her important position in the home, the husband sings a love song from Proverbs extolling her virtues: “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. . . . ‘Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all!’” (Proverbs 31:10–29).

Jews do not believe the intelligence, strength, wisdom, and kindness that characterize the woman Proverbs 31 praises to belong only to married women. They also affirm single women with these words.

Following the blessings, the family enjoys the choicest meal of the week. Throughout the evening they pause to sing joyous table hymns that reflect the jubilant mood of the Sabbath. The sumptuous meal, festive hymns, and warm fellowship crowd out weekday burdens, drawing the family toward the Creator and one another.

■ Family ties are cherished in Israel. If there are no children in the home, the priestly blessing may be bestowed

on children invited into the home for the Sabbath. The prayer is often extended to children in one's extended family or congregation.

a blessing for everyone

We brought these rich customs home with us from Israel. Today, I relish the warm bonding our family enjoys on Friday night. I especially appreciate Dick reading or singing the words of Proverbs 31 to me. He knows very well all the rough edges I'm working on. Yet when he's done repeating all the noble attributes of this "woman of strength," he hugs me with a smile that says, "That's you, honey!"

This mother's heart is also stirred as my husband puts his arms around the shoulders of our two children and prays that they may grow up to be noble, wise, and true in the ways of God.

During a recent Christmas holiday, my parents invited all their four children with spouses and grandchildren home for the holidays. During worship on Friday night, my own father went around the entire family circle and placed his hands on each of our shoulders individually, giving every one of us a personal blessing. It was a sacred and extraordinary event. Even as a grown woman, I found it a wondrous thing to be blessed by my father.

These experiences help me to

understand better what my heavenly Father wants to do for each of us as we come to the sacred hours of the Sabbath.

rest and remember

This Friday evening I hope you will linger on the first word of the Sabbath commandment: "Remember." Listen for God's voice. The inflection is not cold, demanding, arbitrary. It is the same tone God used through the voice of Elijah on Mount Carmel, "'Come here to me'" (1 Kings 18:30). It is the same voice that cried through the prophet Hosea, "'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?'" (Hosea 11:8). It is Jesus' voice weeping over Jerusalem, "'How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing'" (Matthew 23:37). It is Jesus inviting, "'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest'" (Matthew 11:28).

Rest from the busyness of our lives, yes. But far more significantly, rest from all our attempts to save ourselves. Rest in the abundant salvation provided in Jesus Christ. Rest in the unconditional love of God.

Sabbath is for love. It is a day to experience God's love for the human family, and a day to express our love and God's love to one another. ↪