

# How Do We Properly Keep Shabbat?

by John K. McKee posted 24 November, 2005 www.tnnonline.net

How the Messianic community is to properly keep *Shabbat*, or any Biblical commandment for that matter, is a mystery for many. There are many issues and questions that have to be weighed and taken into consideration when establishing a proper *halachic* orthopraxy for oneself, one's congregation, and the movement as a whole. In the Jewish community, whether you are Orthodox or Conservative, keeping the seventh-day Sabbath is an important sign of who you are as a Jew. It is the sign that God gave the people of Israel from Mount Sinai to distinguish them from the world. When one goes to Israel today, stores close, public transportation stops, and the Old City of Jerusalem comes to a virtual standstill for a full twenty-four hours. When some in the emerging Messianic movement see how our Jewish brothers and sisters keep the Sabbath, it can seem almost foreboding and something that needs to be minimized. When our Christian brethren see how Orthodox Jews keep the Sabbath, they often run away, believing it to be a time of forced "unwork," legalism, and anything but rest.

But as you can imagine, this is not what God originally intended. The Lord gave us the gift of *Shabbat* so that we might rest and abstain from our labors, focus exclusively on Him, and be rejuvenated for the week of work ahead. Yeshua the Messiah tells us, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NRSV). God gave *Shabbat* to all people so that it would be a special time for us, not a time that is burdensome or intended to place people into bondage. He asks us to "Sanctify My sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God" (Ezekiel 20:20). Anything surrounding *Shabbat* is to be focused on this end: the Sabbath is to be a time so that we might "know" the Lord. *Yada* (יָדָע) is a common verb in Biblical Hebrew not only used to describe knowledge, but most importantly is "used for the most intimate acquaintance" (*TWOT*).<sup>1</sup> On *Shabbat*, we are to be intimate with our Heavenly Father, and with other Believers in the community of faith.

While those of us who have salvation in Yeshua, and have the gift of the Holy Spirit present inside us, should leap inside when we realize that the Sabbath is to be a time when we commune with our Father, how we keep *Shabbat* is another story. It begs many difficult questions. When we are convicted that Sunday Church is not what God originally intended, and that we need to keep *Shabbat*, changes in our lives begin to take place. The transition to *Shabbat* is difficult for many, given the many Christian misconceptions about what the seventh-day Sabbath is, and why God gave it to His people. While on paper many Messianic Believers say they keep the Biblical Sabbath—keeping *Shabbat* is not just transferring a Sunday Church experience to Saturday. While the Sabbath has elements of worshipping God involved with it, *Shabbat* is not about "worshipping on Saturday." It is, rather, one of the appointed times or *moedim* of Leviticus 23. It is to be "a sacred occasion" (NJPS) or "a sacred assembly" (NIV). But being these things involves much more than just worship:

"For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings" (Leviticus 23:3).

The question of *why we need to keep the Sabbath* is fairly easy to answer. Our Heavenly Father wants us to abstain from our labors. Exodus 20:11 attests, "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy." The verb *nuach* (נָח), in this instance, means to "rest, settle down and remain" (*BDB*).<sup>2</sup> Every week, we need to just stop what we are doing, and "settle down" for a while. We need to abstain from our labors and stop working. However, there is a great amount of discussion concerning what it actually means to *stop working*. Keeping the Sabbath is a wonderful thing—but how are we to keep it properly? How do we not forget the essence and joy of *Shabbat*, but at the same time not eliminating its primary aims?

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<sup>1</sup> Jack P. Lewis, "יָדָע," in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:366.

<sup>2</sup> *BDB*, 628.

## What Do We Have to Consider?

We as the emerging Messianic community today have a substantial amount to consider when we contemplate *how we are to properly keep the Sabbath*. We have to make some serious ideological and philosophical value judgments, and also weigh our testimony to both our Christian and Jewish brethren, and sometimes our Messianic Jewish brethren, if we are non-Jewish. We have to answer some serious questions relating to our individual and corporate callings, and what we believe that God is trying to achieve through our obedience to Him. We have to ask ourselves if we want to alienate ourselves from others, or let others be drawn toward us because we are truly being blessed by obeying the Lord. We also have to allow for some flexibility among those who keep *Shabbat*, because not everyone is going to keep it exactly the same way that we are.

I believe that there are three critical questions that we all have to consider as we contemplate how we are to properly keep *Shabbat*. Obviously as you will see below, these questions do not exclusively relate to the Sabbath, but for the purposes of this article, we will assume that they are:

1. How am I to keep *Shabbat* as an individual?
2. How is my congregation or fellowship to keep *Shabbat*?
3. How are we to keep *Shabbat* as the Messianic community, and are we trying to emulate Jewish practice in any respect?

How you answer these questions will affect how you interpret the Biblical commandments regarding the seventh-day Sabbath. There are many people in the Messianic community today who say that they keep *Shabbat*, but then we have those in our midst who accuse such people of not keeping the Sabbath, because they do not keep the Sabbath as “they do.” Consider the fact that while the Written Torah absolutely prohibits work from being done on *Shabbat*, what one person considers work, another person might not consider work. While the commandments themselves are not what are in dispute among Messianic Believers who believe that *Shabbat* is to be observed—their application is. This begs the questions of not only how we are to develop an individual *halachah* of how the Sabbath is to be kept, but to what degree, if any, the emerging Messianic movement considers Jewish tradition and commentary regarding *Shabbat*.

One of the things that I think many non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic movement do not realize is that salvation has gone out into the nations, so that non-Jewish Believers might provoke their Jewish brethren to faith in Yeshua. Paul writes this in Romans 11:11, “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious” (NIV). Whatever we do regarding our Torah observance is to make the Jewish people jealous of us. This is because they see non-Jewish Believers keeping “their Torah,” and doing the things that “they are supposed to do.” I can tell you from personal experience that those who are the most jealous of us are non-religious or nominally-religious Jews. When they see a non-Jewish Believer, a “Christian” in their minds, keeping the things of the Torah, they get extremely offended. They get offended because they know that *they should be doing these things*, and have decided instead not to do them. According to Paul, these things need to make our Jewish brothers and sisters *jealous for faith in the Messiah!*

But what can happen, and what often does happen, is that in the emerging Messianic movement many non-Jewish Believers think that they “know better” than Judaism in regard to the Torah. Hence, we have seen many interpretations and applications of Torah commandments that are foreign to the mainline Conservative and Orthodox Judaisms of today, and certainly to the Judaisms of the First Century. This can occur for any number of reasons, but notably because such non-Jewish Believers want to be “Scripture Only” in the strictest sense of the term, and believe that the Jewish people have rejected Yeshua because of their own customs and traditions. In extreme cases, some non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic community are anti-Semitic.<sup>3</sup>

I believe these sentiments are misguided. The Protestant Reformers themselves, while believing in the primacy of written Scripture, never envisioned an interpretation of Scripture that did not take into consideration history and tradition, and for that same matter, reason and one’s personal faith experience. Secondly, Jewish New Testament studies, which involve the examination of First Century history and

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<sup>3</sup> Consult the editor’s article “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement.”

literature, is revealing more and more that Yeshua the Messiah followed more of the traditions of Second Temple Judaism than He is commonly given credit for in most evangelical Christian exegesis. In fact, not only is scholastic opinion leaning more and more toward Yeshua keeping many of the oral traditions of the Rabbis,<sup>4</sup> but it is being shaped by the fact that Yeshua's (and for that same matter, Paul's) theology is quite Pharisaical at its core. The foundation of Pharisaical theology is a belief in the bodily resurrection, an afterlife, angels, demons, miracles, and a compatibilist position of predestination and free will.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of *Shabbat*, many have decided to keep the Sabbath without considering any Jewish traditions or opinions concerning it. This is disconcerting because non-Jewish Believers will be unable to fulfill the call of provoking Jews to jealousy for faith in Yeshua if they follow the Torah without any Jewish elements present. While the statement of, "You don't want to come out of the Church and trade one set of traditions of men for another set of traditions of men," has become commonplace in certain parts of the Messianic community, the simple fact of the matter is that traditions help bind a community together. Tradition has been what has kept the Jewish people bonded for almost two-thousand years since the destruction of the Temple. Tradition is what allows a group to formulate an established working opinion of how things are to be done. While "tradition" can be a "buzz word," in certain sectors, any objective reading of the Apostolic Scriptures, coupled with history, is revealing more and more that Yeshua and His early followers kept many of the Jewish traditions of the time. The Apostle Paul commended the Corinthians with the following word: "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Corinthians 11:2).<sup>6</sup> Should we not consult Jewish tradition when developing a viable *halachah* for ourselves?

I do not believe that the emerging Messianic community must follow all of the Jewish traditions that exist relating to *Shabbat*. In fact, there are many variances among the customs and traditions that exist, which have evolved in different types of Jewish communities, i.e., the Ashkenazic or Sephardic communities, for hundreds of years. Some in the Messianic community want to act just like "Orthodox Jews." Is this something that we want? Many in the Orthodox Jewish community live and act like they live in Seventeenth Century Eastern Europe, and enclose themselves to not interact in society. Consequently, how the Sabbath is kept also needs to be tempered by the fact that we also live in a modern world. The evolution of technology has changed our ability to communicate, travel, and do things that in the ancient world, *especially the period of when the Torah was originally given*, was extremely difficult. When considering *how* the Sabbath is to be properly observed, we also have to weigh how much differently we live from the ancients. When consulting tradition, how much weight do we give to those who shut themselves off from the world, versus for example, Conservative Jews today, who strive to be obedient to God in a modern world?

As we list the specific *Shabbat* prohibitions that Scripture gives us below, these are all factors that must be considered as we endeavor to have a viable Messianic *halachic* orthopraxy—not only for our individual selves, but also for our congregations, and for the movement at large. This is not intended to be a detailed exposition by any means, but attempts to offer practical solutions as to how we might keep the Sabbath as Messianic Believers in a modern world.

## The Shabbat Prohibitions

Here are a collection of specific admonitions in Scripture as they relate to properly keeping *Shabbat*. These are the prohibitions that we will be examining and commenting on, hopefully so that we can have a good idea about how we are to conduct ourselves on *Shabbat*, and how it is probably not as complicated as we often think it is.

1. The Seventh Day is the Sabbath, requiring a suspension of all labor.
2. The Sabbath is to be a holy convocation.

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<sup>4</sup> Consult some of the works by scholars such as W.D. Davies, E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, and others whose focus is on the historical background of the Gospels. W.D. Davies, for example, spent a vast portion of his life and works concentrating on the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7.

<sup>5</sup> Consult the author's article "You Want to be a Pharisee" which more thoroughly explains this.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word *paradosis* (παράδοσις) specifically pertains to "tradition, of teachings, commandments, narratives et al.," and can refer to "the tradition of the rabbis" (*BDAG*, 763).

3. Work is to be done in the first six days of the week.
4. The Sabbath is to be a day of complete rest.
5. Fire shall not be kindled on the Sabbath:
6. On the Sabbath, we are to remember that the Ancient Israelites were once slaves in Egypt:
7. We are not to be concerned about our own carnal pleasures:
8. Conducting in business is prohibited on the Sabbath:

## 1. The Seventh Day is the Sabbath, requiring a suspension of all labor.

The Torah commands us in Exodus 20:10, “the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.” We are told the reason why God wants His people to abstain from their work in v. 11, “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.” The purpose of *Shabbat* is so that we can remember God’s supremacy as Creator, how He created the universe for His Divine purposes, and how when He had completed His work creating the universe, God rested. While some might argue, “How can a Supreme Being who controls the universe actually ‘rest?’”, the truth of the matter remains that God’s ways are not our ways. The Lord moved upon human beings to write in corporeal terms infinitely more profound truths that we will not fully understand until we enter into His Kingdom. But until that time, just as God ceased from the labor required to build the universe on the seventh day, so must we stop from our labors.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the two words that are often used to describe “labor” are *avodah* (עֲבֹדָה), meaning “labor, service” (*BDB*), and its verb form, *avad* (עָבַד), generally meaning to “work, serve” (*BDB*).<sup>7</sup> These words are used in tandem in Exodus 1:13-14 to describe the harsh work that Pharaoh had the Ancient Israelites under while in Egypt:

“The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor [*avad*] rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor [*avodah*] in mortar and bricks and at all *kinds* of labor [*avodah*] in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.”

While this kind of work could be in mind in the Sabbath prohibition given in the Decalogue, what is more specifically in mind is the type of work that brings financial gain. The prohibition given by God to Ancient Israel is that they are not to perform any *melakah* (מְלָאכָה). In the Hebrew Scriptures this has a wide variance of possible applications, including, “trade mission, business journey,” “business, work,” and “handiwork, craftsmanship” (*HALOT*).<sup>8</sup>

The challenge with properly interpreting the Fourth Commandment text given here is noted by Nahum M. Sarna: “The definition of prohibited labor (*m’lakhah*), which limits the commandment explicitly to creation (Gen 2:2), is not given here.”<sup>9</sup> While the Fourth Commandment tells us that work is not to be done by anyone in the community, the types of specific work that are forbidden are not explained. This leaves the interpreter with one of two options when applying this text today: (1) examine further Scriptures that describe prohibitions of work on the Sabbath that build upon the Fourth Commandment, or (2) apply modern definitions of “work” to this Scripture.

The challenge, of course, with applying modern definitions of “work,” i.e., “going to work,” is that the largely agrarian society of the Ancient Israelites did not have the same concept of “work” as we know it in the Western world today. The Ancient Israelites did not “go to jobs” and clock-in as employed workers from nine-to-five as we consider work today. They lived on their farms or in a particular trade and had a much less-defined view of “work.” The First Century Jews for that same matter, even merchants in the Diaspora, did not have the same context, did not consider “work” as we do. In applying this commandment in a Twenty-First Century model, we have to see how religious communities have applied it for their particular setting, and as Believers ask the Holy Spirit to show us how we can properly apply it today while maintaining the integrity of the prohibition not to “work.”

<sup>7</sup> *BDB*, 715, 712.

<sup>8</sup> *HALOT*, 1:586.

<sup>9</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, “Exodus,” in David L. Lieber, ed. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 446.

## 2. The Sabbath is to be a holy convocation.

While the Torah identifies that the Sabbath is to be a time when we abstain from work, it is also listed in the series of appointed times or *moedim* that the Lord establishes for His people. Leviticus 23:3 attests, “For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings.” There are some Jewish theologians who do not believe that *Shabbat* should be considered one of the “appointed times,” per se, arguing instead that if one simply keeps the Sabbath, then he or she will be naturally inclined to keep the high holidays of the Lord. This logic is valid, but regardless of one’s view, Leviticus 23 says that *Shabbat* is to be “a day of sacred assembly” (NIV). What is this *miqra qodesh* (מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ)?

The Hebrew word *miqra* generally means a “summons” or an “assembly” (*HALOT*).<sup>10</sup> It is derived from the verb *qara* (קָרָא), meaning “call, proclaim, read” (*BDB*).<sup>11</sup> It is from these various roots that the Jewish custom of assembling in a synagogue on *Shabbat* is derived. Nehemiah 8:8 indicates that this practice was evolving after the Southern Kingdom exiles returned from Babylon: “They read [*qara*] from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.” This verse attests that the Torah was read aloud publicly to crowds in Hebrew, and also translated verbally into Aramaic for those who had returned, but had forgotten Hebrew. Centuries later as synagogues were planted in Greek-speaking lands, the Septuagint translation was largely used in the liturgy and worship. We see here the beginnings of how services were to be conducted in the Jewish synagogue, with the focus being the reading of the Torah and the Prophets.

Some in the independent Messianic community believe that assembling for worship services on *Shabbat* is not what the Leviticus 23 commandment tells us to do and that *Shabbat* is only about “rest.” But if this were the case, then we would see it borne out in the actions of Yeshua and the Apostles. Yeshua the Messiah’s custom was to go to the synagogue on *Shabbat*. The narrative of Luke 4:17-20 shows how he was handed a scroll of Isaiah and read it aloud publicly. A cursory reading of the Book of Acts will reveal time and time again that the Apostles, notably Paul, would always go to the Jewish synagogue in a city and reason with the Jews—on *Shabbat*—from the Torah and the Prophets regarding who Yeshua was as the Savior of Israel. Surprisingly to many people, the post-Reformation Christian custom of going to Church on Sunday, submitting to some kind of “Sunday school” teaching, and then engaging in corporate worship and instruction, is loosely based on the practices of the First Century Jewish synagogue.

What should we do today to fulfill the commandment to have a holy convocation in regard to Sabbath observance? It is fairly safe to say that in a community where you can assemble and fellowship at a Messianic congregation—that you should. The important thing that only a few non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic movement realize is that the Torah is to be kept in a community. The Torah should not be kept as though you are a hermit in a cave somewhere or out on a deserted island. The Torah is to be kept where you can be accountable to other people, and solicit their opinions—especially the opinion of a qualified “rabbi.” The Jewish community today is centered around the local synagogue, and Jewish rabbis have the profound responsibility in instructing members of the Jewish community in how they are to function as Torah observant members of society. Interestingly enough, the Protestant Reformers used the template of the Jewish rabbi to train pastor-teachers. While “rabbi” (Heb. *rav*, רַב) is merely a Hebrew term meaning “teacher,” a rabbi also functions as a spiritual mentor to his fellow Jews. A pastor-teacher likewise must be a teacher, but be responsible for the spiritual well-being of his parishioners.

The challenge for some in the emerging Messianic community is that in some locations Messianic congregations are few-and-far-between. As an evolving religious movement, some people have to drive long distances to attend a Messianic congregation, that is if any one can be found. No longer feeling comfortable at a local “Church,” many are left to keep *Shabbat* in their homes with family members and close friends. Is this in violation of the commandment to make *Shabbat* a “holy convocation”? Must it always be done in some kind of assembly building? No. In fact, as many of you may not be aware, many Jewish synagogues in the First Century Diaspora met in homes. There were

<sup>10</sup> *HALOT*, 1:629.

<sup>11</sup> *BDB*, 894.

only synagogue buildings in cities where there were large Jewish communities. In Corinth, for example, the Believers were actually booted out of the synagogue, and instead assembled in the home of Titius Justus, who lived right next to the synagogue (Acts 18:7). In Phillipi, which was administered as a Roman military colony with a high Roman patriotism, the Jews were not permitted to establish a religious assemblage and instead had to go outside the city to pray by the riverside (Acts 16:3). Keeping *Shabbat* in one's home is consistent with many examples that we see in the First Century community of faith. Oftentimes new Messianic fellowships have had to begin in the home. But this by no means discounts the value of a larger, established Messianic congregation that meets in its own "building." The command is ultimately that the Sabbath is to be a special time of assemblage for instruction, teaching, and spiritual exhortation by worshipping the Lord.

### 3. Work is to be done in the first six days of the week.

The purpose of the days leading up to *Shabbat* are detailed for us quite clearly in Exodus 20:9: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." In this text, we see the two words *avad* and *melakah* employed together: "Six days shall you work [*avad*] and accomplish all your work [*melakah*]." Context clearly indicates that *avad* and *melakah* are indeed connected together and are somewhat synonymous. The Septuagint translation makes no distinction rendering *ta'avod* as the verb *erga* (εργα), and *melakah* is rendered by the noun *erga*. What is perhaps most interesting is that the Hebrew verb *ta'avod* (תעבד) appears in the qal imperfect tense, meaning that an absolute literal translation would appear as "You work," but that the LXX translators thought of it as *erga*, appearing in the future middle indicative tense. *Erga* would be translated into English as "you will work," and that you are involved in the work as though it is unavoidable. This is because work is a part of the human condition that each one of us must experience.

Whether we personally "like" work or not, surprisingly there is to be a Divine calling when it comes to one's work. This is realized when we examine many of the varied Jewish and Christian traditions regarding the workweek. J.H. Hertz writes, "Work during the six days of the week is as essential to man's welfare as is the rest on the seventh. No man or woman, howsoever rich, is freed from the obligation of doing some work, say the Rabbis, as idleness invariably leads to evil thoughts and evil deeds."<sup>12</sup> The Protestant work ethic, which largely came from the teachings of John Calvin and others, was birthed out of the belief that if one is a member of God's elect, then he will demonstrate it through faithful labors during the six days designated for work. This even led to some of the Reformers preaching that if an individual does not work during the designated time, that he or she is actually sinning! Of course, the Protestant Reformers were limited by their inability to see the validity of *Shabbat*, as opposed to the Christian Sunday,<sup>13</sup> but to many of them a "Sunday sabbath" was rigidly enforced, and no work of any kind was permitted. The Protestant work ethic largely led to the great technological advances made in Northwestern Europe and Great Britain, which were largely not paralleled in Catholic France and Southern Europe.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, work is really not something that is looked down upon. It is simply something that people are supposed to do. Of course in our modern context in the West, we generally have a five-day work week, with Saturday and Sunday off. In our society this has allowed for Jewish people to worship on the Sabbath, and for Christians to go to Church on Sunday. Generally, this allows for Messianic Believers to abstain from working on *Shabbat*. However, it is very easy to say that many of us have lost sight of what it means to truly "work," and what it likewise means for us to truly "rest." Many Christian pastors today have observed that we live in a "weekend culture," where one works and works, but does not take seriously a day of rest that God has prescribed. Is this occurring because the Lord is in the process of restoring the seventh-day Sabbath to His people, and that by keeping *Shabbat* on the right day of the week we will be able to truly experience *all of the rest that He has for us?*

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<sup>12</sup> Hertz, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, while the principle of one-day-in-seven was believed to be valid by these Protestant Reformers and theologians, they believed that the Messiah's so-called "Sunday resurrection" validated the transfer of the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day. The Reformers did not have access to the Jewish resources that we have today, which continually show us that the Apostles kept *Shabbat*. Nevertheless, God did great deeds through these men and women, and we would not be where we are today without them.

Interestingly enough, while it is easy for some in the Messianic community to accuse Christians who do not even take a “Sunday sabbath” that seriously, of holding to “Greek” or “Hellenistic” ideas of “work,” the modern day concept of work really does not have that much in common with the Hellenistic idea of work. The modern concept of work is largely focused around financial theories, the stock and trade markets, and any plan for companies and individuals to make the most money during all days of the week, regardless of whether or not the stock market is closed on Saturday and Sunday. Jews and many Christians over the centuries have historically viewed work as being something that was a calling given to them by God. The Greeks, in stark contrast, viewed work as nothing less than a curse that people were to avoid at all costs. R. Paul Stevens explains the Greek view of work in his book *The Other Six Days*:

“While there was no uniformity in the ancient Greek world in its view of work, the classical period generally held work in disdain, especially the philosophers. Work was a curse, unmitigated evil; and to be out of work was a piece of singularly good fortune. Unemployment allowed for one to participate in the political domain and to enjoy the contemplative life. The whole of society was organized so that a few could actualize the highest human potential. Not surprisingly, 80 per cent of the Greek city-states were comprised of slaves, which Aristotle defined as instruments endowed with life. Work was called ‘unleisure’.”<sup>14</sup>

When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek centuries before Yeshua, the Jewish translators rendered Exodus 20:9 as “you will work” in the future tense. Perhaps this is because they knew that those who would be reading it did not have a high view of work. When such Greeks would accept the God of Israel as the One True God, and entered into the community of Israel, many of them would then be forced to finally “work.”

It is absolutely true that we see Greeks and Romans of the First Century criticizing the Jewish people for taking a complete day off of work on the Sabbath. Such Jews were often criticized as being “lazy.” But what was the context of this? Jewish people in ancient times, and largely today, are often described as being very industrious, productive, and successful. A Greek or Roman slave, or common worker, could see such people and easily criticize them as being “lazy” or “slothful” for taking off a day of rest. Do we not see the same thing even happening to us who are industrious during the workweek and then take *Shabbat* off?

One of the challenges for many in the Messianic community today is that many people, because of our modern world, must still go to work on *Shabbat*. This would have been largely unknown to the Ancient Israelites, or even the Jews of the First Century. Clearly this would be prohibited by the Torah, but difficult ethical questions are posed nonetheless. What if a husband still has to go to work to support his family? What if someone is a business owner in an industry that requires some work to be done on *Shabbat*? What happens if someone does not work on the Sabbath, but is called in to work?

Thankfully, we live in a time when Messiah Yeshua has come and has been sacrificed for our sins. His atoning work at Golgatha (Calvary) covers any violation of God’s commandments, be it intentional or unintentional. He was the one who asked a group of Pharisees, “have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?” (Matthew 12:5). The priests were doing the hard, sweaty, dirty, back breaking work of sacrificing animals, putting them on the altar to burn, and cleaning up their charred remains—among some of their responsibilities. Certainly, if the priests in the Temple are not considered violating the Sabbath for doing this work, then in our modern world, when “life happens” and you are required to work, God’s grace is there to cover us. If you are in a difficult position that requires you to work on the Sabbath, please pray that God enables you to find favor with your employer, who will let you work on Sunday instead, or schedule you differently. There are always exceptions to the rule, as is continually shown in Scripture. But the existence of exceptions likewise does not mean that we should *desire to work on Shabbat*. We all go to our Father daily to ask for His provision, and should ask Him that we not have to receive that provision by violating the Sabbath day.

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<sup>14</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 110.

#### 4. The Sabbath is to be a day of complete rest.

Repeated in the midst of the Exodus narrative, the commandment to rest on the Sabbath day is given: “You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; *even* during plowing time and harvest you shall rest” (Exodus 34:21). Whereas in Deuteronomy 5:14, the Hebrew verb *nuach* (נָח) is used for “rest,” Exodus 34:11 reads with, *u’b’yom hashevi’i tishvot* (וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי תִשְׁבּוֹת), “on the seventh day you shall rest.” The verb for rest in this text is *shabat* (שָׁבַת), meaning “to rest, celebrate, with direct or indirect connection with the Sabbath” (*HALOT*).<sup>15</sup> The command could be understood as meaning that on the seventh day we are to *observe Shabbat*.

What a day of complete rest is, of course, is subject to a substantial amount of interpretation. When God originally gave the command to rest, He conditioned it with the requirement, “you shall cease from labor even at plowing time and harvest time” (NJPS). Anticipating that Israel would be a largely agrarian society, the Israelites were told that on the Sabbath day they were not to be out harvesting and plowing their fields, or any other agricultural activities. The principal, of course, is that ordinary work is not to be performed on *Shabbat*. In our modern age, while many of us may not have fields to harvest or crops to plant, we often do have homebound responsibilities that we like to work on during the weekend. Mowing the grass, doing yardwork, planting things in a personal garden, cleaning one’s house, washing the car, and things that can clearly be done on other days are prohibited. But there are always exceptions. Certainly if there is a storm (as we have experienced with hurricanes here in Florida) and there are fallen tree limbs in one’s yard that are causing serious problems, one should remove them. Weather and climate can affect things that require immediate attention. But unnecessary yardwork or house work that can be done on another day is something else.

But what would constitute “rest” from one’s labors? Is God simply expecting us to spend *Shabbat* lying on our sofas taking a nap? Not surprisingly, this is exactly what many people do. In fact, some people spend most of *Shabbat* sleeping.

One of the things that we have to keep in mind, as previously discussed, is that the Sabbath is to be a holy convocation. We should not simply enter into the *Shabbat* rest by “falling asleep.” We are admonished in Scripture to convene a holy assembly, worshipping God and studying His Word. It is to be a special time of intimacy between ourselves as Believers, and the Lord. In that special time we are to be consecrated, and not be doing things that we would normally do during the rest of the workweek.

Perhaps one issue that needs to be considered is that many Messianic congregations hold their services on *Erev Shabbat* or Friday evening. Those who attend these nightly services often will stay at home Saturday. If you are one of these people, what should you be doing at home? Should you be doing yard work or house work? Or would it be better for you to simply stay in bed? Is it a sin for you to watch television or sports games on *Shabbat*? Is it a sin for you *not* to read the Bible on *Shabbat*? Sadly, these kinds of questions are often not examined from a mature perspective by some in the Messianic community. The Sabbath is to be a time of rest, but “rest” can be interpreted and applied differently among Believers. But one thing is absolutely certain: what goes on in a person’s home is their personal business. If you criticize a person for doing things on *Shabbat* that you would personally not do, than that person should have every right to criticize you in like manner. If a Messianic Believer is doing something on *Shabbat* that you believe violates the principle of “rest,” then lead by your example and demonstrate the better way in a positive tone, and not in a superior attitude that is condemning. Remember how Yeshua said that the Sabbath was made for us; we were not made for the Sabbath.

#### 5. Fire shall not be kindled on the Sabbath.

There is probably no commandment more contested today in regard to the Sabbath than Exodus 35:3: “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the sabbath day.” The decree, “Do not light a fire in any of your homes on the Sabbath day” (HCSB) has been a cause of an unbelievable amount of applications and opinions regarding what it actually means to “light a fire.” In ancient times, lighting a fire was serious work, as a person had to go and collect wood, perhaps even cutting down a tree, and get a flint and strike and strike and strike and hope that a spark would appear that could ignite a fire. There was a challenge to keep the fire lit. The ancients did not know what we know today about the

<sup>15</sup> *HALOT*, 2:1407.

chemical process of combustion, and certainly did not have matches or lighter fluid to aid them in creating a fire. They definitely did not know about the petroleum fuels that power most of our moving vehicles.

The Jewish Rabbis used the premise that this commandment could only be properly interpreted via application of the Oral Law, if not it would be subject to a gross amount of improper interpretations. The Orthodox Jewish *ArtScroll Chumash* gives us a good summary of how the command has been interpreted in Jewish history:

“This prohibition is indicative of the Jewish principle that the Torah can be understood only as it is interpreted by the Oral Law, which God taught to Moses, and which he transmitted to the nation. The Oral Law makes clear that only the creation of a fire and such use of it as cooking and baking are forbidden, but there is no prohibition against enjoying its light and heat. Deviant sects that denied the teachings of the Sages misinterpreted this passage to refer to *all* use of fire, so they would sit in the dark throughout the Sabbath, just as they sat in spiritual darkness all their lives.”<sup>16</sup>

Orthodox Jewish *halachah* today demonstrates that not only is the lighting of an actual “fire” considered prohibited, but likewise turning on any kind of electric device, including a lightswitch, and turning an ignition to a car, is considered in violation of the commandment. This is why many Orthodox Jews have automatic timers on their lights, so that they do not have to perform any work. The practice of having a “Sabbath goy,” or a Gentile to do the work of lighting a fire on *Shabbat*, was adhered to in many Jewish communities. Adam Clarke, writing in the early Nineteenth Century, observes to this end, “The Jews understand this precept as forbidding the kindling of fire only for the purpose of doing work or dressing victuals; but to give them light and heat, they judge it lawful to light a fire on the Sabbath day, though themselves rarely kindle it—they get Christians to do this work for them.”<sup>17</sup>

Conservative Judaism in the United States has a less rigorous interpretation of this commandment. While lighting a fire to be baking something is considered forbidden, flipping a light or electronic appliance on is not. Conservative Jews do not consider driving on *Shabbat* to be sinful, provided that one is driving to the synagogue. It is clear in the Book of Acts, for example, that the Apostles largely held to the tradition of only walking a Sabbath day’s journey: “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away” (Acts 1:12). However, they did not anticipate the modern age where now cars and other *machines* exist to transport people. The big issue is, regarding what “lighting a fire” truly is, is to what extent the evolution of technology should affect our interpretation of this passage.

The Rabbis of the Talmud say that cooking or baking food on the Sabbath day is prohibited. Obviously, this is why on the day before *Shabbat* Jewish homes over the centuries would be a center of cooking and baking—so food for the Sabbath would be ready. But the Rabbis did not anticipate the day of microwaves and packaged foods that one could easily just put into an oven and have prepared for a person. Cooking and baking in the context before our modern age involved much, much more than just unzipping something from a package. It involved a great amount of pre-preparation time, i.e., giving bread the time to rise, peeling potatoes and onions, letting vegetables and meat soak, and other things which modern technology has almost eliminated. Furthermore, the Rabbis of ancient times did not anticipate the creation of what may be mankind’s ultimate culinary creation: the sandwich.

If there is anything that the Messianic community does not want, it is to interpret this passage in a very strict sense so as to be left cold and in the dark on *Shabbat*. The quotation above is particularly directed against the Karaites, a rebellious Jewish sect that rejects all of the Oral Torah and adheres to a very narrow minded and fundamentalist interpretation of the Tanach text only. Karaite theology is sadly prevalent in some areas of the Messianic movement today. But I do not think that most Messianics want to sit in the dark eating cold bread on the Sabbath. Likewise, I do not think that most Messianics want to be worried about what it means to “light a fire,” either. Is the modern Orthodox perspective equally wanting? Is it really work to flip on a light, or even heat something up in a microwave or toaster oven? These are all personal value judgments that we have to make ourselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Scherman, 517.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Clarke’s *Commentary on the Bible*. E-Sword 7.6.1. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2005.

My personal opinion regarding this commandment is that in ancient times, it was major work to get a fire started. It was major work to keep a fire from going out. God did not want His people taking His Sabbath day going through all the motions of lighting a fire when they should be spending that same time with Him and with others in the community of faith. But today we do live in a modern age where the technological level has changed our ability to manipulate “fire.” The ancients did not have the ability to strike a match and ignite a gas fireplace with the ease that we have today. The ancients did not have electricity or microwave ovens. The ancients, if they took any “vehicle” to their synagogues, had to ride donkeys (and possibly horses)—animals that would require rest—they could not just turn the ignition to their cars. Any proper Messianic interpretation of this commandment will take into consideration the evolution of technology. I will say that I do not consider it a sin to drive on the Sabbath, or even microwave leftovers from the *Shabbat* meal the night before. But if I am engaging in strenuous work on the Sabbath, which involves fire, electricity, or my car, that is probably something else. We each have the responsibility to go to the Lord and see how this commandment is to be applied in our modern world.

## 6. On the Sabbath, we are to remember that the Ancient Israelites were once slaves in Egypt.

One of the most unique commandments concerning *Shabbat* appears in the repetition of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:15: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.” Presumably, the admonition to remember the slavery in Egypt is connected to the wonderful rest that the Sabbath offers. The Ancient Israelites in bondage did not receive a Sabbath day of rest. The only “rest” any of them experienced would have been going to sleep every night with the anticipation of having to go out and work the next day for the Egyptians. Finally as Israel was constituted as a nation, people could sleep one evening out of the week and know that a laborious day of work was not ahead.

Jeffrey H. Tigay does indicate that there is some variance of opinion as to what Deuteronomy 5:15 fully means, which is worth noting. He remarks, “Commentators are divided over what this motive emphasizes. Some believe that it is the memory of the servitude, to create empathy for the servant’s need to rest. Others believe it is God’s redeeming them from Egypt, to remind the people of His kindness and of His authority to establish such a command.”<sup>18</sup>

For us as Messianic Believers, how do we apply the commandment to remember that the Ancient Israelites were slaves in Egypt? Not all of us are physical descendants of the Patriarchs, and our ancestors were not all in Egypt. Through faith in Messiah Yeshua, however, we are all part of the Commonwealth of Israel, and whether we are Jewish or non-Jewish, of natural Israel, wild Israel, or truly from the nations, we all partake of the same Biblical heritage. This is why the Apostle Paul could write the Corinthians with confidence, “For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers<sup>19</sup> were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea.” For Paul to write a mixed group of Jews and non-Jews and say that “all our fathers” (KJV) went through the Red Sea crossing is to assert that the same spiritual heritage that a First Century Jewish Believer had, knowing that his ancestors were slaves in Egypt, is the same spiritual heritage any Believer in Yeshua has. Furthermore on an individual level, unless we have the blood atonement of Yeshua the Messiah covering our lives, we cannot be considered “free from Egypt.” Before each one of us came to faith in Yeshua, we were in spiritual bondage and slavery to sin. Yeshua has freed us from these things as our Passover Lamb and atoning sacrifice.

It is important as we keep *Shabbat* to remember that in Egypt the Ancient Israelites were not able to partake of this great blessing. In many of the Sabbath liturgies that are canted in the Jewish synagogue, as well as in many Messianic congregations, the command to remember the bondage of Egypt and the mighty deliverance of God is repeated. If we hear such liturgies, it is important to praise the Lord for His miraculous acts those many centuries ago, and the much more recent deliverance from

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Deuteronomy,” in *Etz Hayim*, 1020.

<sup>19</sup> Grk. *hoi pateres heimown* (οι πατερες ημων).

sin that each one of us has experienced, enabling us to *truly rest*, both physically and spiritually, on *Shabbat*.

## 7. We are not to be concerned about our own carnal pleasures.

The Torah is not the only part of Scripture that gives us admonitions concerning the Sabbath. The Prophet Isaiah explains that we are not supposed to be concerned about ourselves on *Shabbat*. He proclaims,

“If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable, and honor it, desisting from your *own* ways, from seeking your *own* pleasure and speaking *your own* word, then you will take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 58:13-14).

What this text means and how it should be applied is subject to a large amount of subjective debate. The Hebrew word *chefetz* (חֶפֶץ) largely means, “**delight, pleasure,**” perhaps more specifically “*that in which one takes delight, his business (late), or matter (very late, cf. Mish. = thing)*” (BDB).<sup>20</sup> The English translations of this word reflect a variance of interpretations, including: “your own needs” (ATS), “your affairs” (NJPS), and “your own interests” (NRSV). When we see these things in the Biblical text, we can only wonder, “What does God mean by *my pleasures*? Is this not open to a wide variance of subjective applications?”

The most obvious application of the text here pertains to a prohibition on anything that would contradict the Sabbath commandments of not working, not lighting a fire, or doing anything that would clearly violate the admonition to rest. If, for example, one is a gourmet cook and takes great pleasure in cooking, then one should not cook on *Shabbat*. This would cause a person to work, often light some kind of fire well beyond a “minimum” usage of microwaving something or heating something up, and would take a person away from the Sabbath rest that God intended. The intent of *Shabbat* is for us as God’s people to focus on Him, His Word, and what He has done for us. Things that very clearly take us away from the Lord, and cause us to focus on ourselves and what we are doing, seem to be implied by Isaiah’s words.

Questions that often have to be fielded frequently come from those who are often stuck at home on *Shabbat*. As many Messianic congregations have *Erev Shabbat* services, many do not go anywhere on Saturday. What are these Messianic Believers to do? Are they required to either sleep all day, or only read the Scriptures and/or religious literature? Are they permitted to watch television and sports games, walk in their neighborhood, read books, talk to friends or loved ones on the phone, and generally take a day off? Some in the Messianic movement would say “no” to these things. They would say that these sorts of things would clearly violate the commandment not to partake in personal pleasures. Others in the Messianic movement would say “yes” to these things, provided that they do not take one’s attention off the Lord, as God wants us to enjoy ourselves in Him. The truth of the matter is that what a man or woman does in his or her home is that person’s personal business. Our Heavenly Father is gracious to each one of us, and we each have to realize that we are individually responsible for what we do on the Sabbath. May God bless each one of us for our desire to obey Him to the best of our ability.

## 8. Conducting in business is prohibited on the Sabbath.

The last of the Biblical prohibitions regarding *Shabbat* is derived from Nehemiah 10:31: “As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.” This text records how the Southern Kingdom exiles returned from Babylon and adapted to the new environment of trying to rebuild the Temple and largely be retrained in the commandments of the Torah. Just as there were many who taunted Nehemiah, saying that the Temple or walls surrounding Jerusalem could not be rebuilt, so where there were those who had occupied the Land of Israel during

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<sup>20</sup> BDB, 343.

the Jews' exile who did not follow the Torah. They were the *ammei ha'aretz* (עַמֵּי הָאֶרֶץ), "the peoples of the land." These were not Israelites, but pagans who had occupied the Land of Israel during the exile.

These people did not know the command to rest from one's labors on the Sabbath day, and as the foundation of what would evolve into Second Temple Judaism was being laid, and as the city of Jerusalem was being reconstructed and reconstituted, these people still had access to the city and could bring in their wares to sell on *Shabbat*. Civil order and police had not been established to the point of preventing this. Jews living in Jerusalem had to consciously make the choice whether to abstain from buying on *Shabbat* or not. As selling a product was considered to be a form of work, the Judaisms of the First Century largely regarded conducting in business to be a prohibited practice on the Sabbath. While work, business, trade, and industry could be practiced the previous six days of the week, and history bears the testimony of many able Jewish businessmen and merchants, the command to separate the Sabbath day likewise is to be observed.

What we do as the Messianic community today needs to be tempered by the fact that we are not to conduct in trade on the Sabbath. We need to try as best as humanly possible to make sure that during the previous six days that we have purchased everything that we need prior to *Shabbat*, that we do not have to do any grocery shopping, and that all of our expenses are taken care of. *Shabbat* is not a time where we are permitted to go to the mall and shop of our own personal desires. *Shabbat* is a time where we are to focus on the Lord and consecrate it as a holy time.

One of the challenges, of course, is that in our society today exceptions to the rule always find themselves into our lives—and these challenges mostly are not by choice. What if somebody gets sick on *Shabbat*? Are we permitted to go to the store or pharmacy to buy medicine? Those who adhere rigidly to this principle would say "no." But the Rabbis of Judaism would all say "yes." If one is ill and needs care, then the commandment can be set aside to preserve life. This is the same reason why doctors in Israel today are allowed to work—and are *not considered to be breaking the Sabbath*. We are always going to find circumstances like somebody getting sick forced upon us that cause us to buy and sell on the Sabbath. But buying medicine to help an ill person is substantially different than going out and purchasing something that is "on sale."

Perhaps the most common form of buying and selling that has worked its way into the Messianic movement, primarily because of how common it is in American Christianity after Sunday Church services, is going out to eat at a restaurant after *Shabbat* services.<sup>21</sup> Is it permitted for Messianics who go to a *Shabbat* service to eat afterwards? If these *Shabbat* services are held late in the afternoon, and by the time they are over it is dark and no longer the Sabbath, then it is certainly permitted for Messianic Believers to engage in any kind of commerce they want to. But most Messianic congregations hold late morning/early afternoon services on *Shabbat*, just like many churches do on Sunday. Is it permitted for Messianic Believers to go to a restaurant to eat on the Sabbath? Perhaps a better alternative would be for Messianic congregations—which are often very small and need cohesive community—to have a pot luck lunch for members of the congregation where pre-prepared food can be heated up for all to partake in.

As with all of the Sabbath prohibitions we see in Scripture, the ordinance to abstain from buying and selling ultimately must be decided by you. You must use your own judgment and discernment when life circumstances are thrust upon you that may require you to buy something on the Sabbath. Ultimately, the responsibility is on you, and is between you and the Lord.

## **Leading By Our Example**

This concludes our analysis of the guidelines that the Bible itself offers regarding how we should celebrate the Sabbath and make it a special time between ourselves and our Heavenly Father. As it should be emphasized, we have only scratched the surface regarding what we should and should not do on *Shabbat*. There have been many debates in ancient Judaism, and there are many debates today in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism regarding how the Sabbath is to be properly kept. These debates have spilled over into the Messianic community. It is doubtful that we will ever have a consensus of

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<sup>21</sup> Note that this article is not intended to discuss the application of the dietary laws in the modern world. There are some fundamentalist Messianic Believers who believe it is wrong to eat at a public restaurant that it is not "approved kosher." Our ministry position is conservative in that we certainly believe that we are to follow the dietary laws and abstain from pork, shellfish, blood, etc., but we do not consider eating at a public restaurant, including fast food, to be wrong.

opinion relating to what we should be doing on *Shabbat*. Each congregation or fellowship of Messianic Believers is different, just like each one of us individually is different. Some will choose to follow a very strict, rigid interpretation of the Sabbath commandments, and others will choose to relatively ignore them. I personally believe that we should strive for a safe position, where we do strive to keep the Sabbath's commandments, but at the same time keep them in a modern context that respects both ancient and modern Jewish opinion.

The major challenge that exists for the Messianic community in relation to Sabbath keeping is going to be avoiding the fundamentalist trap of thinking that there is only one right way to keep the Sabbath and those who are not following this "one right way" are not keeping *Shabbat* at all. We cannot and should not spend our time arguing and debating why "we are right" and why "everyone else is wrong." We should rather be encouraging one another through our obedience, and if an interpretation of a Sabbath commandment is truly correct, then a person should be convicted by the Holy Spirit that this is correct and he or she will adapt it. Force-feeding one's personal *halachah* on someone, however, will only cause problems. There is a substantial amount of subjectivity relating to how the Sabbath is to be properly kept, as well as issues of privacy concerning how much a local congregation or fellowship should intrude itself into the affairs of one's own household. We each have an individual responsibility to obey the Lord, which exceeds the responsibility we have toward each other.

You do not need to feel condemned if you do not keep the Sabbath the way other people do. Your opinions about *Shabbat* will change over time as you keep it more and more. *Shabbat* is to be a time of joy and delight—not a time of burdensome legalism. But even so, *Shabbat* is to be a special time where we abstain from certain things. There are ethical and ideological decisions you have to make concerning the Sabbath day, and hopefully you have a strong relationship with God through Yeshua to help you make the right decision for yourself and your family, which will help the cohesion of the community of Believers at large. And, there are many theological issues that must be discussed as the Messianic movement continues to mature and examine Scripture in a more systematic manner. May we all make the right decisions, and be edifying to one another in everything that we do.

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