



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 11, 2014
Shabbat Chol HaMoed

**Do You Know the Book
or the Author?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5775 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why are we prohibited from doing so many material actions on God’s holy days? Shouldn’t these days be completely free and liberating?

And today we come upon a convergence of three of them – Shabbat, Sukkot and Shemitah. But there are significant differences in the type of work forbidden on each of these days. What distinguishes them?

The secret power of these holy days is that they allow us to link to the Source itself and not just to the details. Think of it like a machine and its engineer, a book and its author.

On regular days, we connect to the Author of the Universe indirectly, through the letters and words of His creation, which make up the Book of the World, so to speak. On God’s holy days we connect with the Author directly, and we have three special ways to do that: the Shabbat way, the Sukkot way and the Shemitah way.

When we connect with the Author of the Universe directly then everything in the world has the potential of being transformed into spiritual light. Everything – even the weapons of war.

Today’s Haftorah prophesies about a time when all the weapons of the world will be used as fuel for Israel’s spiritual bonfire. And it says that this blazing flame of soul will crackle for seven years. After that there will be no more bloodshed and no more war, and the burning weapons shall warm and illuminate instead of causing destruction.

The convergence of Shabbat, Sukkot, and Shemitah (the seventh year) – and their intriguing differences – shows us how we can make it happen now!

DO YOU KNOW THE BOOK OR THE AUTHOR? WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE CONVERGENCE OF SHABBAT, SUKKOT AND SHEMITAH?

1. Original or Imitation? (Joke)

Rabbi Michal served as the Chief Rabbi of Krinkischock at the scanty salary of three rubles a week. With a wife and six children to feed, he struggled to make ends meet. He was, therefore, obliged to appeal to the heads of the community for an increase in salary.

These dignitaries summoned the Rabbi and showed him in the official record of the community that he'd had many predecessors who had not received even as much as he.

"Rabbi," they said, "are you greater than all these rabbis who served before you? They were never paid more than two rubles, while you are receiving three."

"Just because I am not as great as they were proves nothing," he replied. "In fact, it proves that I should be paid more."

"What?!"

"I'll explain it to you in a very simple way," said he. "You all know that in the market you can buy a fat chicken for a ruble; however, if you desire to purchase a good painting of one such fat chicken, which is only a likeness and imitation of the real chicken, it will cost you a hundred rubles!"

2. Convergence

The convergence of three holy occasions teaches us a profound and personal lesson about connecting with the original versus the imitation. For today, three unique calendar occurrences converge:

- Today is Shabbat
- Today is Sukkot, or more specifically, Chol HaMoed Sukkot – the intermediate time between the two holy ends of the Sukkot festival
- And today – indeed, the whole year of 5775 – is also the sabbatical year known as Shemitah

These three junctures are all sacred, but they are all sacred in different ways. The laws of Shabbat differ from those of holidays, which differ from those of Chol HaMoed, which differ from Shemitah.

On Shabbat, we have many prohibitions – among them lighting a fire and cooking. On holidays, we have many of the same prohibitions, but we can cook. Why? What is the difference? And, to make it more complex (as we Jews love to do), let's throw Chol HaMoed into the mix, when many actions that are prohibited on the first or last days of the festival are permitted, such as using electricity or driving.

So we see several levels of observance:

- That of Shabbat
- That of the festival (in our case Sukkot)
- That of the intermediate days or Chol HaMoed
- And this year comes yet another, Shemitah

What's it all about?

In good Jewish tradition, we shall answer this question with another question, one that surely burns in the heart of every Jew: Why are we prohibited from doing so many things on holidays and even more on Shabbat?

Don't we all sometimes think:

“Wouldn't it be more restful and peaceful for me to drive to synagogue than walk? Wouldn't it be more relaxing for me to eat in my comfortable dining room than my drafty sukkah? Wouldn't it be more serene for me to turn on the lights in my living room or text my friend to ask him if he is coming for Shabbat lunch? So why so many prohibitions? Shouldn't God's holy days be completely free and liberating?”

The thing is that God's holy days *are* completely free and liberating – but in a different way than we think. To help change our mind set, let us look into today's Haftorah.

3. Haftorah

Today's Haftorah speaks of a massive war that will ensue at the start of the Messianic Era – the War of Gog and Magog.

During that war, the enemies of Israel will be vanquished, and their weaponry will be thrown by the wayside. In the words of the Prophet Ezekiel:

Then the inhabitants of the cities of Israel will go forth and make fires and heat up the weapons, the bucklers, and the encompassing shields, the bows and the arrows and the hand staves and the spears, and they will burn them as fires for seven years. They will not have to carry wood from the fields nor cut down any from the forests, for they shall make fires from the weapons. Thus will they spoil those who spoiled them and plunder those who plundered them, says the Lord God.¹

This is similar to the prophecy of Isaiah, famously emblazoned on a wall opposite the United Nations (where world leaders converged last week):

And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation. They shall never again know war.²

Like Isaiah – who predicts that weapons of war will be made into farming implements – Ezekiel states that the weapons of the great final war will serve as fuel to warm Israel. Thus the cold steel of destruction will be transformed into warmth, and darkness into light.

Note that Ezekiel gives a timeframe for how long this fuel will last. He says (speaking of the weapons) *and they will burn them as fires for seven years.*

¹ Ezekiel 39:9-10.

² Isaiah 2:4

Why this specific number? Why “seven years”?

Once we understand that, we will be able to answer our original question.

4. Shemithah, a Sabbatical

Every seven years, a tenured professor may go on sabbatical to another university, to rest and be tranquil and study, away from his or her normal routine. We are all familiar with this custom of Western Civilization, but we may be less familiar with the biblical commandment that introduced the concept.

Every seven years, the Torah mandates that the holy land of Israel be given a sabbatical, a year of tranquility and rest.

Just as every seventh day is a Shabbat (a day of rest when we refrain from material work), so too every seventh year in Israel is a Shemithah year (a year when we refrain from working and cultivating the land).

This year, 5775, is such a sabbatical year. The Shemithah laws apply *only* to the Land of Israel and, if you travel there this year, you will see that all the kosher agricultural produce is labeled with a special certification, testifying that its producers followed the laws of Shemithah.

But there is a major difference between Shabbat, the seventh day, and Shemithah, the seventh year. During Shabbat one is prohibited from *all* physical labor and any material action that is deemed work, but during Shemithah one is only prohibited from *one* specific physical labor – that of working the land – and that’s it. Everything else that is normally permitted is also permitted during the Shemithah year.

On Shabbat one must rest from *all*. During Shemithah one must rest only from working the land.

So we see that there are several different levels of rest:

- On Shabbat, we rest from *all* work of any kind
- On the holidays, we rest from *most* work

- On Chol HaMoed, the intermediate festival days, we can do lots more but not everything
- On Shemitah, the sabbatical year, everything is permitted save the cultivation of the land – that is, only the land rests

Why are these all different? And why are they all different from a regular weekday?

5. Analogy: Author and Book

The Chassidic masters,³ basing themselves on Kabbalistic secrets, apply an analogy to help us understand what happens at times of rest and tranquility, such as Shabbat, Yom Tov, or Shemitah, and how these holy times differ from regular mundane days.

This is the analogy:

An author writes a book. In this book the author creates a reality, a world, a universe. Through the letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters of this book the author conveys complex characters, profound imagery, deep ideas, emotional feelings, spiritual realities and soulful experiences.

The author is a very deep guy and the reader must be a pretty smart cookie to get *all* of the author's nuances and understand all of the mysteries and innuendos hidden in and revealed by the words and between the lines.

What happens if a four-year-old child, who just learned how to read, picks up this book and begins to read? Will the child understand the message? Will the child get the picture? Of course not. Though the child may be able to read every single letter, and even pronounce every single word, the child only sees the ink and not the essence of what this ink conveys.

³ See Derech Mitzvotecha, Sheviis (p. 35a-36b).

It is like luggage on a conveyer belt. The child only sees the conveyer belt, but doesn't understand the treasures that are contained within the luggage.

Then, one day the child meets the author of the book himself, and suddenly the entire story makes sense and all the letters are understood. Moreover, knowing the author allows the child to see the bigger picture – the author's personality and intentions, not just his words. Now that the child knows the author, the book becomes but an afterthought. When the child is in the author's house, it would be foolish for the child to read the words of the book when he has the opportunity to talk to the author of these words directly.

6. God is the Author, Creation is the Book

The same is true with our universe. God is the Author and creation is the book. Every aspect of creation is a composite of letters. Every molecule is another word. Every person is a character in the divine drama (or comedy). Whenever we do a physical act, another part of the world-book's narrative is written.

And thus, six days a week we work, to enhance the narrative, to understand and implement the words of the Author's book.

But we are like children; we don't really understand the mysteries and the big picture that the book conveys. We cannot fully appreciate the intimate intentions and objectives of the Author in writing His book.

All week long, we communicate indirectly with the Author by reading His book, but then comes Shabbat and we meet the Author face-to-face, so to speak. And then we see the Source itself – the personality and intentions of the Author.

Wouldn't it be foolish to work with the letters and words of the book when we can converse and connect with the Author directly?

7. The Three Ways of Meeting the Author

Now, sometimes we may meet the author at a book signing, sometimes we may see the author on TV, and sometimes we may find ourselves guests in the author's home.

These three ways of meeting the author are, by way of analogy, the differences between Shabbat, Chol HaMoed, and Shemitah.

- On Shabbat, all of the Author's construct and "language" is suspended and we are one-on-one with Him (that's like being in the author's private home)
- During Chol HaMoed, it's as if the Author is writing us a personal note (that's like the book signing)
- During the Shemitah year, the Author is revealed in the Holy Land but concealed by the letters of His book in all else (that's like seeing the author on TV)

In this material world we cannot really "meet the Author" face-to-face without "filters." Once a week, on Shabbat, we get a taste of what it may be like, but after the spiritual immersion of Shabbat is over we return back to work. In the future, the world will reach a level of *yom shekulo shabbos u'menucha l'chai ha'olomim*, total Shabbat all the time, when, as Isaiah proclaims, "your Teacher [i.e. the Author] will no longer hide from you, He will no longer conceal Himself from you with the edge of a robe or garment, and your eyes will behold Him."⁴

Generally, the more materially focused we are, the more we relate only to the letters and words of the "book," and the more we connect to the "Author" through His written word. But when we suspend our physical and material labor, then we begin to connect to the Author directly, transcending the medium of physical creation's letters and words, and we can relate to the Author's deeper intentions in writing these words.

On Shabbat, when we refrain from all work, we achieve this with the least amount of filters – we focus not on our jobs, but on the purpose of our lives. On the festivals and especially on the intermediate days of the festivals, there are more filters between Author and book – we are semi-involved in the material, with our eyes on the Author and His plans.

⁴ Isaiah 30:20. See Tanya ch. 36.

And during Shemitah, we connect directly with the Author primarily through the land and only in Israel. After six years, when “you plant your fields, prune your vineyards, and harvest your crops,” “the land shall rest, a Sabbath to God”⁵ – we focus on the purpose of our work: transforming the world into a divine home.

Indeed, the great 16th century Biblical commentator, Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1550) writes,⁶ that Shemitah is a time when we material beings (usually immersed in the letters of the book of a material universe) acclimate ourselves to seek out transcendence by resting the fields and immersing ourselves in increased awareness of the divine and Torah study.

Today we do so only once every seven years. But one day, very soon, this seventh year will be reality – and not only in the Land of Israel but everywhere and in everything.

8. Story: Psalm or Shepherd?

This is illustrated beautifully by the following story:

A great opera singer, who was known for his readings and recitations from the classics, always ended his performance with a dramatic recital of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the tenor began – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” – the crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the singer’s ability to bring this famous psalm to life.

One night, right after the great tenor offered his customary recital of Psalm 23, an old *yiddel* in the mezzanine spoke up. “Sir, would you mind, if I too recite Psalm 23?”

The tenor was surprised by this unusual request. However he invited the frail old man to come onto the stage to recite the psalm, curious to see what would happen.

⁵ Behar 25:2-3.

⁶ Behar 25:2. 4.

Softly the old man began to recite the words of the psalm fluently. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the white-haired gentleman's recitation that no eye was left dry.

Amazed by what he had experienced, the world-renown tenor queried, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training – but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The tiny old man looked at the towering tenor and humbly replied in a Yiddish accent, "Vell my good sir, vayl you may know dem psalm – I know dem Shepherd."

All weekdays, we know the psalms of the world; on Shabbat and holidays, we know the Shepherd.

9. Explaining the Haftorah

Now we can better understand the words of the Haftorah and why for seven years the weapons of war will fuel the fires of soul:

The ultimate battle is to turn the letters and words – the swords and spears – of the material world into tools for revealing the Author of this whole shebang.

Normally, we think certain material items are meant for certain purposes. We think a sword is meant to kill, and a shield is meant to defend. True victory is seeing how all matter in the world is but a metaphor for godliness and soulfulness.

The world works in cycles of seven: every seven days, Shabbat; every seven years, Shemita. When the material tools of war are used to fuel Israel's peaceful spiritual fire for a full seven years, then the war is won and Redemption has truly arrived.⁷

⁷See also Midrash Rabba, Shemini 11:2.

Shabbat of Chol HaMoed Sukkot during a Shemitah year we have all those levels converging. May it be the will of the Author of the world that, this year, His true narrative is revealed for the entire world to see.

10. Rabbi Tiktin (Inspirational Story)

When the famous Gaon Gedalia Tiktin became the Rabbi of Breslau, his attention was called to the fact that on Friday evening the theaters were packed with young Jews.

On Saturday, Rabbi Tiktin said: "If I had known that this community was so full of thieves I should not have come here." This remark caused much comment in the city, and a committee was appointed to interrogate the Rabbi about it. They came to see him and stated that they wished an explanation for his harsh remark, which seemed to them an uncalled-for characterization.

"Well," answered the Rabbi, "is it not a fact that on Friday evenings the theaters are full of Jewish folk who ought to be at home with their families as good Jews are supposed to be?"

"Yes," they replied, "it is true that perhaps we are not as observant and pious as the custom requires, but why should we be called 'thieves'?"

"I will tell you," said the Rabbi. "The Talmud says that on Friday evening two angels accompany every Jew, because it is the eve of Shabbat. Now, if the Jews go to a theater they do not pay for those angels' admission there, and what then should I call them but thieves?"

Perhaps, all year round, when we are distracted by the nitty-gritty of everyday life – earning a living, dealing with overdue bills, educating our children, fighting with our boss – we forget that we are surrounded by angels and we rob ourselves of what is ours, and we sell ourselves short. We forget that we are one with the Author of all creation.

With the chaos of life, this is understandable. When we are busy feeding our children, how can we stop to remember that the Shabbat angels are walking with us? When we are busy getting our books in order, who has time to think about the Author?

But this is why God gifted us times such as these – Shabbat, Festivals, Shemitah – to remind us that the Author is right here, to remind us why the book of creation was authored by God in the first place. And to inspire us to turn the weapons of materialism into fuel for the fire of spirituality, fuel for the bonfire that is our soul.

Today, when all levels of spiritual awareness converge into one heavenly conglomerate, we must take this concentrated amalgam of Godliness to heart and guarantee that no matter which part of the book we may be reading, whether we be in the prologue or epilogue or anywhere in between, we will always remember the Author and have His message permeate our lives.

Let us resolve to use this time – and this year – to speak to ourselves and our children about the Author. Let us help each other see beyond our immediate activities in “toiling the land,” our schooling, our work and all our material activities – the means – and focus on the purpose of our lives – the end – “the land shall rest, a Sabbath to God.”

Then, we can truly and sincerely wish one another a Good Shabbos, a Gut Moed, a *Frelichen Sukkos*, and a restful Shemitah!