



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Acharei

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May 7, 2016

Acharei

**Live or Die: What Observing  
Shabbat Really Means**



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

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Shabbat Really Means

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## ABSTRACT

Perhaps nowhere in Judaism are the restrictions more pronounced than when it comes to the mitzvah of Shabbat. From the prohibition of smoking, turning on a switch or lighting any fire to working, gardening or carrying, Shabbat seems to be centered on the don'ts versus the do's.

What is the purpose of all these limits and controls? Honestly speaking, does the inner skeptic, living within us, ever wonder why we need these rules, and is it not tempted to throw off this burdensome yoke and all the Shabbat restrictions along with it?

What do we tell our inner skeptic: Why should we live a life with so many prohibitions? How can we explain what these restrictions mean, and how they make us better, freer and more connected to an infinite G-d?

The Torah states *you ... shall live by them* (by the mitzvot), implying that you shall not die by them. Thus, in a life-threatening situation, one can violate all Shabbat restrictions in order to save a life. What does this teach us?

Did G-d give us these mitzvot because G-d loves us? Or does G-d love us because we do mitzvot? Rephrased in metaphorical terms: Do you give your wife flowers because you love your wife, or do you give your wife flowers so that she will love you?

Answer carefully. The definition of a Jew's relationship with G-d hangs in the balance.

## LIVE OR DIE: WHAT OBSERVING SHABBAT REALLY MEANS

### 1. I Forgot (Joke)

Many Jews today have sadly rejected some of the restrictions of Shabbat because they don't relate to them.

Take this joke:

Three yeshiva students are in the middle of smoking cigarettes on Shabbat - an activity highly verboten - when the head of the yeshiva walks into the dorm and catches them red-handed.

The first student says, "Forgive me, rabbi; I forgot today was Shabbat."

The second student says, "Forgive me, rabbi; I too forgot - I forgot that it's forbidden to smoke on Shabbat."

The third student says, "Forgive me, rabbi; believe it or not, I also forgot - I forgot to lock the door."

### 2. Shabbat Restrictions

Much is made of the restrictions associated with Shabbat.

There are actually 49 different types of work forbidden on Shabbat, including: to carry, to conduct business, and yes, to smoke.

Generally speaking, we could say that Judaism as a whole is associated with a multitude of restrictions: keeping kosher restricts how we may eat; observing family purity restricts when we may be intimate; obeying Jewish law restricts how we conduct business, dress and even bathe.

Yet, nowhere in Judaism are the restrictions more pronounced than when it comes to Shabbat. From the prohibition of smoking - or lighting any fire - to the barring of working, gardening, cooking, building, Shabbat is centered on what we may not do.

What is the purpose of all these limits and controls? Honestly speaking, does the inner skeptic, living within us, ever wonder why we need these rules, and is it not tempted to throw off this burdensome yoke and all the Shabbat restrictions along with it?

What do we tell our inner skeptic: Why should we live a life with so many prohibitions? Isn't life meant to be lived to the fullest? Why then should we be bound by so many restrictions?

How can we explain what these restrictions mean, and how they make us better, freer and more connected to an infinite G-d?

Well, sometimes we discover the deepest truth about something when we are challenged. As Winston Churchill supposedly quipped: "A woman is like a teabag: you don't know how strong she really is until you put her into hot water."

So, what may we learn about Shabbat – and ourselves – when placed into the proverbial hot water?

Let's begin by considering when it's a mitzvah not to do a mitzvah.

### 3. When It's a Mitzvah Not To Do a Mitzvah

There is a fundamental Jewish principle that every single mitzvah in the Torah is suspended when a life is in danger, except for the crucial three enumerated by the Talmud: murder, incest and idolatry<sup>1</sup>

This essential Jewish teaching – that saving a life preempts all mitzvot – is derived<sup>2</sup> from this week's Torah reading, where we find the following verse:

*You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances, which [if] a man obeys he shall live by them. I am the Lord.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yuma 82a. Ketubot 19a.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 74a.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 18:5.

In other words *live by them* and “don’t die by them.”

The reason for this is relatively simple as the commentaries explain: Performance of mitzvot are contingent on being alive. In order for a human being to do mitzvot he or she has to live, so if one lives, one gets to do many more mitzvot.

But if we look more closely at the Talmud, we find that after the discussion concerning the three cardinal mitzvot which require us to sacrifice our lives, there is a peculiar – seemingly redundant – statement. The Talmud asks how do we know that we should also suspend the laws of Shabbat in order to save a threatened life?<sup>4</sup> In answer, the Talmud quotes various scriptural proofs ultimately settling on the verse from our Torah reading – *live by them* – as the only scriptural proof beyond reproach.<sup>5</sup>

This begets an obvious question: Why?

The Talmud has already unequivocally stated that “nothing stands in the way of saving a life except idolatry, incest and murder.” Why then does the Talmud endeavor to find additional scriptural proof that life transcends Shabbat observance as well? Isn’t it clear that life transcends the observance of *every* mitzvah, including Shabbat?

Why would we require a special reason just for Shabbat?

#### 4. A Cryptic Talmud

Shabbat is unique in that it captures the essence of the connection between G-d and Israel, as stated in the Torah:

*Speak to the children of Israel and say: “Only keep My Sabbaths! For it is a sign between Me and you for all your generations, to know that I, the Lord, make you holy.”*

<sup>4</sup> Yuma 85a.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 85b.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 31:13.

With Shabbat reflecting the integral bond between G-d and the Jewish people, the Talmud's special focus on Shabbat when it comes to saving a life is teaching us about the essence of our relationship with G-d, and what it means to actually keep Shabbat. Yes, we commit to honor all the restrictions – all of which have a very good reason. But, more than that, we uphold the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people every time we save a Jewish life. If we would do the opposite and not help another Jew in dire need on Shabbat, we would be effectively desecrating this holy day.

From all the other mitzvot we learn that we suspend a mitzvah when a life is at stake. But from Shabbat we learn that by saving a life we are in fact *fulfilling* a mitzvah!<sup>7</sup>

In the words of Rabbi Chaim ben Attar,<sup>8</sup> the Ohr HaChaim (1696-1743): Saving a life on Shabbat is “not a desecration, but on the contrary: a consecration of Shabbat.”

## 5. Mitzvah and Life

That brings us to another question:

Why, indeed, do we suspend a mitzvah when a life is (even only possibly) in danger? Is not a mitzvah more important than life?

No.

The reason is that by suspending the one mitzvah to save a life we get to do many more mitzvot as a result. Thus, the end sum is greater and the investment is worth it.

But from Shabbat – a sign between G-d and us – we learn something much more essential. Shabbat is a sign between G-d and us. As the Torah states, *For it is a sign between Me and you for all your generations.*

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<sup>7</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 27, pp. 133-140 and sources there at length.

<sup>8</sup> WExodus 31:13.

If *you* (a Jew) are missing from the equation then this affects Me (G-d) on a personal level. If you falter because of a sign whose very purpose is to uphold the bond between you and G-d, then there's something fundamentally wrong.

Says the Torah: *Live by them* meaning "don't die by them." Shabbat and every mitzvah is given so that you may live to bring holiness into this world. In normal and healthy circumstance, this is achieved by keeping the conventional laws of Shabbat. In unnatural and life-threatening circumstances, this is achieved by saving the life by whatever means necessary.

Normally, the so called "restrictions" of Shabbat are the very ways we have to live - to *live by them*. These are the ways we connect to our deepest selves. For example, turning off your cell phone isn't a restriction; it is freedom. (Just think about it!) Refraining from work forces you - yes, sometimes you have to be forced - to spend undistracted time with your family.

Thus, restrictions in Torah - including on Shabbat - are actually methods to free ourselves of the bonds of materialism, to untether ourselves from the pressures and impositions of the outer world, to create space, in order that we be able to access our inner selves - our souls.

Unfortunately many Jews today are not taught this message. Many therefore think that Shabbat is a day to do... nothing. To refrain from this and that, and basically avoid all activities we are so accustomed to. Judaism is too often presented as a set of "dons" and "do not's" - "don't do this," "don't do that." Who wants to be constantly told what not to do?! "I want to know what to do, not just what not to do!"

The fact is, however, that Judaism offers us a forward thinking, spiritual vision of living the best possible life. It's all about life - *live by them* - about living life to its fullest. But due to so many distractions, Torah teaches us what to avoid and refrain from so that we can focus on what we should be doing.

In normal circumstances, the end result of the restrictions of Shabbat is very positive and not restrictive at all – it's about refraining from distractions so that you can discover your soul amidst the clutter and turbulence of a seductive material existence; to unfetter yourself from the tight and oppressive tentacles of the superficial and the temporary.

That's in a normal situation, when no life is threatened.

However, abnormally, in a life-threatening scenario, we learn that to ensure life and freedom and holiness, we *observe* Shabbat by desecrating Shabbat and doing what is normally not done in order to save a life.

There's a beautiful tale that illustrates this point.

## 6. Saving a Life (Story)

It was the night of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year.

As all the Jews were gathering in *shul* anxiously awaiting their rabbi's arrival to begin the prayer services, the Alter Rebbe – Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement – mysteriously left the small village.

Some of his devoted and admiring Chassidim speculated that their beloved leader ascended into the heavenly spheres in preparation for this holy time. But others wondered: where was he?

As the Rebbe's Chassidim worried and waited for him to arrive, he was actually climbing deep into the woods, with a sack on his back, to chop down wood.

They later learned that he then proceeded to bring this wood to the lonely little house of an impoverished widow who, having just lost her husband and given birth, was incapable of feeding her five hungry children. Saving a life is so important that chopping wood and creating fire – normally forbidden on Shabbat and certainly on Yom Kippur – are permitted to save a life.



This task was not beneath this great Torah scholar as he created a blazing fire in the fireplace, unpacked the food and clothes from the sack, lovingly fed the children and left the woman with many kind and caring words.

## 7. Lesson from Above Story

This story was related by the Alter Rebbe's descendant, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who added:<sup>9</sup>

When the Alter Rebbe was asked why he did it himself and did not send an emissary, he replied that, in a case of a life-saving situation, the mitzvah is that the greatest Jew should do it....<sup>10</sup>

The lesson we can learn from this:

On Yom Kippur, the Alter Rebbe was on a level comparable to an angel ... even so he went to the edge of the city close to the fields ... [to carry out a mundane task] just to help another Jew [because this meant saving seven lives] ...

This story impresses upon us the necessity to do all we can in order to draw another person near to Torah ... This story also illustrates the necessity for action. Some claim they are too busy engaged in all sorts of beneficial things to extend actual help where help is needed. Go learn from the Alter Rebbe: he was certainly engaged in prayer at the highest level, and yet he interrupted his prayer service in order to help a simple Jew!<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sicha of Iyar 2 5710 (Toras Menachem 5710, vol. 1, p. 44. Proceeding Together, Vol. I, pp. 72, 73). See also sicha of Kislev 19 5723, section 2. Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 4, p. 1255 where the Rebbe also relates the story of how the Alter Rebbe was willing to meet with the famous Jew hater Derzhavin in order to help out one Jewess in a financial matter, even though the Alter Rebbe was disgraced at the meeting.

<sup>10</sup> See Yuma 84b. Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chaim 328:13.

<sup>11</sup> Sicha of Kislev 19 5744.

## 8. Personal Lesson

We often think that connecting with G-d is about doing, but it's really about living...

This week's Torah reading comes in the wake of Aaron's two sons dying for G-d. Jews always knew that dying for G-d can be easier than living for G-d. Dying for G-d, even in the holiest of circumstances, is not the purpose of why we were sent to this world. We were sent here to refine and elevate the universe - to live for G-d. and Living for G-d takes a lifetime and brings an eternity of peace to the world.

Shabbat reminds us of this. We keep Shabbat - not so that we may die for G-d but so that we may live for G-d. We would give up our lives for G-d, and many Jews have, but we would rather live for G-d (and surely G-d would rather that we live for Him).

You can give up your life. Or you can live up to your life. This is what Jews do and every Shabbat reminds us of this holy purpose.

Did G-d give us these mitzvot because G-d loves us? Or does G-d love us because we do these mitzvot? Rephrased in metaphorical terms: Do you give your wife flowers because you love your wife, or do you give your wife flowers so that she will love you?

You don't buy your kids presents so that they should love you; you buy your kids presents - you want to give them everything! - because you love them. The latter is the result of healthiness; the former results in years of therapy.

This is what Shabbat teaches us. In summary:

1. The mitzvot save lives.
2. They are an effect of our intrinsic connection, not its cause.
3. We are meant to live with G-d, not die for G-d.
4. Restrictive mitzvot are actually disciplines meant to free and liberate us.
5. The more you learn the more you discover the emancipating power of Judaism.

## 9. *Nisht Um Shabbat Geredt* (Optional Joke)

We Jews are not only not allowed to conduct business on Shabbat, we are not even supposed to talk about business on Shabbat ... Hence, to squeeze through a loophole, some people preface any fiduciary talk with the Yiddish expression, *nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, “not on Shabbat spoken.”

Yosef and Gideon meet in the synagogue at Friday Night Kabbalat Shabbat prayers:

Yosef: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, I'm selling my Rolls Royce.

Gideon: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, how much are you asking for it?

Yosef: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, \$360,000.

Gideon: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, I'll give you \$180,000

Yosef: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, let me think about it.

They meet again in the synagogue at Shabbat morning prayers.

Gideon: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, did you think about my offer?

Yosef: *Nisht Um Shabbat geredt*, the Rolls is already sold.

It's not about loop holes, it's not about digging holes to get away from Shabbat. It's not about holes but holies.

## 10. Conclusion

On a soulful and metaphorical level, perhaps we may say that even when we are healthy (and may we always be) we must keep Shabbat as if our lives depended on it, for in many ways they do.

We are celebrating Shabbat not so that we may be one with G-d – we are celebrating Shabbat because we are one with G-d. If our children, and our selves, are conscious of this, Shabbat is guaranteed to be the highlight of the week.

Restrictions are like turning off your cell phone on a date, or while playing with your kids, or while standing under the *chuppah* at your child's wedding. We do these things not because there are prohibitions or restrictions, but because we don't want any noise distracting us from the true task at hand – from the true music that is playing.

This is called living with Shabbat.

Now we may truly and consciously say: Shabbat Shalom, a peaceful and sublime Shabbat to all!

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