

The Great Sabbath

Beatrice Bruteau

'... for that was a Great Sabbath.' —John 19:31

The Sabbath that immediately precedes Pesah (Passover) is called Shabbat ha-Gadol, the Great Sabbath. It is this day that is commemorated in the Christian calendar as Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is a day whose mystical significance has not, perhaps, been sufficiently drawn to our attention.

Holy Saturday is in every way a Nothing Day. There is no liturgical celebration. The churches are empty. The altars are stripped. The tabernacles have been vacated and their doors stand ajar. Nothing whatever is happening. What does this mean?

It is the Great Sabbath—the Great Silence, the Great Nothing that precedes the Feast of Redemption, of liberation from slavery, of entry into the New Life of freedom.

To begin to appreciate it, to experience and savour it, we need to study the significance of the Sabbath in general. It is, no doubt, an endless study, for not only have scholars thought about it for thousands of years, but worshippers commit themselves to live it and experience it deeper and deeper throughout their lives.

'Sabbath' comes from the Hebrew *shavat* = 'to rest'. It recalls the Creation and God's rest when it was completed. It is characterised by cessation of creative physical activity.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And the seventh day God finished his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. —Gen. 2: 2—3.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. —Ex. 20:8—11.

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your

God commanded you. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work. ... You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day. —Deut. 5:12—15.

Notice that the Sabbath observance is not just a practical and sensible and compassionate practice, but it is a way of relating to the holiness of God and of entering into the secret of the divine life.

I want to develop three thoughts on this subject. One has to do with not labouring, another with holiness and wholeness. The third has to do with formlessness and nothingness, and with this I will come back to the notion of the Great Sabbath and the meaning of Holy Saturday.

In Jewish practice, the Sabbath is observed not only by freedom from goal-seeking labour, but by rejoicing in life, singing, praising God, feasting, love-making, study of the Torah and discourse on holy things, family fellowship—all the highest human activities that are done for their own sakes out of delight and in harmony with companions and environment.

Not labouring means release from the tasks of everyday, often experienced as onerous, oppressive, and frustrating. We 'labour for the bread that perishes' (John 6:27), and for all our efforts to push and pull the natural environment into favourable dispositions toward us, how frequently it 'brings forth thorns and thistles' to us (Gen. 3:18). Erich Fromm says that the Sabbath presents us with a contrast to this work of 'interference by man, be it constructive or destructive, with the physical world.' The Sabbath is a time of 'peace between man and nature'.¹ Our consciousness can rest from the conflicts that arise when we struggle to change the course of nature.

By 'consciousness' I mean our interior sense of ourselves and of the whole of whatever we know as reality. It is the basic and generic act of awareness which is the condition for the exercise of particular interior activities which result in patterning that awareness. The patterns include our general orientation or 'mind-set', our beliefs, attitudes, feelings, conceptual systems, ways of thinking and judging, our desires and volitions. I am developing a contrast between two fundamental paterings and positionings of our intentional life: ordinary consciousness, by which I mean the beliefs, thoughts and feelings that orientate us to the world of finite and relative things and to our work toward achievements; and what I am calling 'sabbath consciousness', an interior orientation based on insight into the reality of the Infinite and the realisation of our deeprootedness in It.

In sabbath consciousness we do not have to rush or accomplish or produce. In sabbath consciousness we are not to labour. Labour is what is done on the six days, that is, in the finite and temporal world. It

consists of moving things in relation to one another with a view to producing something, accomplishing something by our efforts. We exercise our natural talents and abilities and energies on the things of this world. And in terms of the spiritual life, we exercise our natural spiritual talents of intelligence and good will and affectivity. Labour means trying to get closer to God by *doing things*, both exteriorly and interiorly.

Alan Watts says somewhere that all these spiritual exercises have to be done in order to convince us that they are both impotent and unnecessary. They will not 'produce' union with God, and they do not have to, because our being united with God is something God does, not something we do—or, if you prefer, because we are always united with God and cannot not be. We must labour all these six days in order to break out of the consciousness that believes in the necessity and efficacy of such labour. 'But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.'

St Teresa of Avila speaks of this under the image of watering a garden. The gardener labours in various ways to carry water to the garden, but in the end God waters the garden without any labour on the gardener's part by sending rain. This is the ultimate truth about our spiritual life, about our prayer life. It is not our labours, represented by the six days of work, that produce real prayer. Real prayer is present in God's Sabbath.

A certain part of our consciousness already knows this and can rest in this knowledge, even while we continue with our secular and spiritual labours. The *attitude* of Sabbath-rest is the attitude of confidence that trusts in the commandment to keep the Sabbath and to rest in it, and therefore not to identify one's deepest reality with the works and labours in which one engages.

What we call the 'commandments'—*mitzvot*, sacred obligations—are really statements of revelation and empowerment. They tell us what we need to do to fulfil ourselves, and they promise that we are able to do what they indicate. This one says that we can keep the Sabbath of the Lord's rest without labour and without break, that is, in wholeness or holiness.

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath whole, without break? It means to rest our central consciousness steadily, without wavering, on God, the Wholeness, the Holy One, the Eternal. 'Thou dost keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee' (Isa. 26:3). This is the contemplative state. This is the same as 'praying without ceasing'. This is coming into realisation of the truth that is the transcendent Wholeness, the ultimate Unity.

Too often our experience of our life is a fragmented experience. Yet we know, if we have any acquaintance with the spiritual life, even if only by hearsay (i.e. by the traditional teachings), that the underlying Reality is a continuous Wholeness, a Unity beyond any possibility of division. This is part of the insight of monotheism in the Abrahamic

religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and is the foundation also of Hindu and Buddhist spiritual systems. Both the East and the West have expressed this Wholeness, and the transcendence of time which is one aspect of Wholeness, by speaking of the Ultimate as unchangeable.

In the personalist context of Judaism this is represented dramatically as God's loyalty. God's will does not change. Once having plighted his troth, God is steadfast in love. God's love, God's will, God's personal selfhood is one Wholeness, unfragmented. A fragmented will can be loyal one day and defect the next. A fragmented will can change over time. But God's will is integral, utterly reliable, immovable, eternal. It means that God will never forsake us. 'His great love is without end ... and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever' (Ps. 117—118).

We are called to realise ourselves as children of God. Our will is to be the match and image of God's will: steadfast, without fluctuation, loyal, committed. If the will is focused in unity, then the rest of our life will be less fragmented. We will gradually draw all back into original Unity, we will experience what some Jewish mystics have called *reintegration*. It is part of the redemption, the restoration of the world to the wholeness that images the Wholeness of God.

The perception of our lives as fragmented is related to our perception of our lives in time. In the first place, there is never enough time, it seems, to accommodate all the tasks we undertake. And in the second place, we make ourselves miserable over this because we value ourselves by what we accomplish. If we suffer in this way, probably our descriptions of ourselves consist of what we have achieved or what we aspire to achieve. This means that we identify ourselves to a great extent with our past or our future, but not with the present. There is not any achievement, or even any description, in the present; it is just being alive, here, now. Whenever we can escape from the past and the future and live in the present, we find that we are not fragmented. Everything comes together in wholeness, because we are not thinking about and evaluating ourselves, but just being ourselves.

You can test this by actual experience. By keeping your consciousness quietly and simply on the present moment, you will see that memory and anticipation, guilt and anxiety will disappear. Neither is there any fantasy in a consciousness stayed on the present moment. It has to be perfectly realistic. It is living in the past or in the future that is fantasy, that is unrealistic—we are not in fact living in the past or the future—and our consciousness therefore finds no peace that way. The present moment is the intersection of time with eternity, and when our consciousness is stayed on this, it rests and finds peace, because it is released from guilts, anxieties and fantasies and in touch with reality.

This is not, of course, to say that we should never think of past or future, nor learn from history nor make plans for days ahead. Those are obviously appropriate and important things to do, and our ability to do them is one of the marvels of our consciousness. But when we think of

our own deepest being, our sense of who we really are, and of where all reality is ultimately rooted, then the present moment, integrating our whole reality, becomes the revelation of the Eternal.

To help human beings realise this revelation, they were given the commandment, 'Keep holy the Sabbath day'. The Sabbath is the sacramental representative of God's eternity: it reveals it, and it enables one to enter into it. All the sacraments enable human beings to contact a Reality that is *always present*, although the sacrament itself always stands apart from everyday experience in order to call attention to itself and to the Reality which it mediates. The Sabbath is not really one time among other times, but the underlying eternity, which *is*, 'all the time'.

Thus the weekly celebration of the Sabbath is the symbolic representation of—even sacramental experience of—that aspect of human beings' reality which transcends time. Erich Fromm points out that human beings are like God in being gifted with 'soul, with reason, love, freedom,' and in these respects are 'not subject to time or death'. But insofar as we live through biological bodies in the context of cosmic nature, we are subject to time and death. Many ancient peoples offered sacrifices to the divinities of death and of time, hoping to appease them and hold off their voracious appetites for human flesh. The Bible, says Fromm, in its revelation of the Sabbath, takes a completely different approach. It goes to the root of the threat and 'eliminates time' by stopping all work that interferes with nature. Where there is no attempt to move things out of their natural courses, to transform the environment by the exercise of human will—that is, to bring about *change*—there is (by definition, so to speak) *no time*. The symbolic meaning is that for that day, the Sabbath, time is suspended, and we live in eternity.² It reminds us that although in our temporal embodiment we are subject to change and dissolution, yet through our tie to God, to the Eternal One, we also live beyond time.

This knowledge that we are fundamentally victorious over time (cf. John 16:33, 'In me you ... have peace. ... Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world') gives a sense of release and freedom, even while we continue to be faithful and persevering in our temporal responsibilities. The deepest part of our consciousness knows that we live in eternity, that sabbath consciousness is the underlying consciousness on which the six working days develop their finite and relative forms.

The Sabbath, in Jewish mysticism, is not a finite and relative form. It is the image and the consort of the invisible, the formless, God. The formlessness of God is a very important truth. God is the Infinite, the Absolute, Being, having no name but I AM. The Sabbath, in Jewish sacred lore, is personified—in the view of Raphael Patai deified³—as the Bride of God and Queen. She is welcomed at sundown on Friday with the happy strains of the *Lekha Dodi*, a song composed by a sixteenth century member of the Safed group of Kabbalists and sung to this day in every synagogue:

Beloved, come, the bride to meet,
The Sabbath Princess let us greet.
Arouse thyself, awake and shine,
Thy light has come, the light divine;
Awake and sing, and over thee
The glory of the Lord shall be.
Crown of thy husband, come in peace;
Let joy and gladsome song increase
Among his faithful, sorrow-trying,
His chosen people, —come, O bride.⁴

The union of God with His Bride, the Sabbath (or the Shekhina, the Divine Presence), is the Jewish mystic's way of pointing to the Wholeness of the Absolute.⁵ All the polarities of life are resolved into unity; whatever had been separated is reconciled.

Sabbath consciousness in us means the conjunction of opposites, the balancing and harmonisation of our polarised qualities, the integration of our erstwhile fragmented selves, the realisation of our profound unity. But this profound unity, in which we image the Unity of God, must be a unity beyond form. Only the Infinite, the Formless, can ground all forms. Sabbath consciousness is formless, like the God to whom it is united. This is why it is characterised by the cessation of works, of change.

Philo of Alexandria (first century) says of the Sabbath, speaking of it as the Seventh Day:

It is the nature of *seven* alone ... not to beget nor to be begotten. (Of the first ten numbers, seven is the only one which is not formed as a multiple of another in this series and does not give rise to a multiple of itself within this series.) ... The Pythagoreans liken it to the Sovereign of the Universe: for that which neither begets nor is begotten remains motionless. ... There is only one thing that does not cause motion nor experience it, the original Ruler and Sovereign. Of Him, *seven* may be fittingly said to be a symbol.⁶

The Seventh Day, the Sabbath, the emblem of God's motionlessness, or Rest, is reflected in our sabbath consciousness. It is not doing anything; it is not even being any particular kind of thing; it is just Being Itself. The works of motion and manifestation are withdrawn, called back into the abyss of the Godhead, into Invisibility.

Now we come to Holy Saturday, the Great Sabbath. It is the day sacred to the invisibility of God, the day on which there is no motion, no manifestation. It alone in the Christian calendar represents, by its very lack of liturgy, the Unmanifest, the Hidden God.

Truly Thou art a hidden God,
O God of Israel, the Saviour. (Isa. 45:15)
No one has ever seen God; the only Son,
who is in the bosom of the Father,
he has manifested him. (John 1:18)

But from the ninth hour on Good Friday (it is at the ninth hour on Friday, according to the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia, that the Sabbath descends from heaven to remain until Sunday sunrise⁷) until early on the First Day of the week, this manifestation through the Son is withdrawn. These hours characterised by nothingness are sacred to God the Father, the Unseen God.

There are many feasts in the Christian calendar for God the Son, and a great festival, Pentecost, for God the Holy Spirit. But there is no feast of God the Father. Isn't this strange? So perhaps we may regard Holy Saturday, the Day of Sacred Nothingness, as commemorative of God the Father, the Formless, the Infinite.

There is a strong apophatic tradition in Christian theology, especially in the theology of the Eastern Church; less well-known is the apophatic tradition in Judaism. Devotion to the Hidden God and to the Sacred Nothingness appear in Jewish mysticism. The thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalist, Isaac the Blind, for instance, developed a contemplative mysticism leading to communion with God through meditation on the divine attributes (*sefirot*) and the heavenly essences (*havayot*). At the head of the world of divine qualities he put the *thought*, from which emerged the divine utterances, the *words* by which the world was created. But above the *thought* is the Hidden God, the Infinite. The way of the mystic is to ascend from words—all of which ultimately derive from one source, the Divine Name—to be absorbed in the Divine Thought⁸. However, Jewish mystics of the Kabbalistic tradition are all agreed that knowledge of God is limited to God's relation to creation. 'God in Himself, the absolute Essence, lies beyond any speculative or even ecstatic comprehension.' The Infinite in its 'absolute perfection ... is not accessible even to the innermost thought of the contemplative'⁹.

Kabbalistic mystics also point to the 'realm which no created being can intellectually comprehend' by saying that 'God Who is called Ein-Sof (without end, Infinite) in respect of Himself is called Ayin (Nothingness) in respect of His first self-revelation.' Some of them regarded this Absolute Nothingness as the Source from which all things emerged. Certainly it was a full and powerful Nothingness. David b. Abraham (end of the thirteenth century) defined the Ayin as 'having more being than any other being in the world, but since it is simple, and all other simple things are complex when compared with its simplicity, so in comparison it is called "nothing".' And it is further said that 'if all the powers returned to Nothingness, the Primeval One who is the cause of all would remain in unity without distinctions in the depths of nothingness'¹⁰.

Often people who have gone into the wilderness speak of 'hearing the silence'. When I go into the empty church on Holy Saturday (before the ceremonies of the Easter Vigil, which should take place after

sundown, even well into the night) and experience the paradox of the Holy Nothingness reverberating, as it were, on all sides, it seems to me that we have here a powerful experience of the Primeval One, whose Word has been called back into Itself, whose Manifestation is temporarily withdrawn, whose self-revelation is gathered into Its own essential unity for the timeless moment of the Great Sabbath. Should we not direct more attention to this important Day? Should we not experience it as the Day sacred to the Very Source itself, from which all manifestation derives?

Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (James 1:17—18)

This is the coming forth. The Sabbath represents the return and the resting in the bosom of the Source, the original Unity (John 13:1, 3; 3:13; 1:18), the return to the Hidden One.

In the *Zohar*, it is written:

When the hour of the Sabbath afternoon prayer has come, ... joy and satisfaction are everywhere. In this hour of satisfaction and grace, the holy, faithful prophet Moses departed from this world, so that it might be known that he was not taken away through judgment, but that his soul ascended in the hour of grace of the Holy Ancient One, to be hidden in him. ... Thus, as the Holy Ancient One is the All-hidden, unknowable to those above and those below, so also was the soul of Moses hidden, in the revelation, at the Sabbath afternoon prayer, of God's grace.¹¹

In the Christian calendar the Great Sabbath begins when the Manifestation, the Incarnate Word, is withdrawn from the world. And the worshippers are called to participate in this withdrawal from manifestation:

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. (Col. 3:3)

We may well linger in this apex of the mystical journey.

The Sabbath is the messianic moment, as the messianic time is called 'the time of perpetual Sabbath'. As the Talmud says, 'If all of Israel observed two (consecutive) Sabbaths fully only once, the Messiah would be here'¹². The messianic era is the time of peace and harmony, 'a state of union between man and nature and between man and man'¹³. It is a time of liberation from bondage and therefore the Great Sabbath stands before Pesah, the festival of release and freedom.

For the Christian, the Messianic Era opens with the realisation of the Resurrection:

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (Col. 3:4)

The Manifestation comes again, but this time it comes as a continuous Sabbath, a life of unity and love for all peoples. Holy Saturday, then, the Great Sabbath, may in a way be said to stand at the peak of the liturgical year. It is the archetype of all Sabbaths and the prototype of the world to come, the Messianic Era, the perpetual Sabbath. It is not a mere stage wait between two acts of the liturgical drama, but is itself the climax and the crisis, the turning point. It represents on the one hand the withdrawal of the Manifestation and the absolute Hiddenness and Nothingness of God the Source. And on the other hand, or as a consequence of the first, it also represents the new world, the Kingdom of God, in which there is no labour or struggle of beings against one another, no fragmentation and alienation, but rather integration and wholeness, with love and beauty reigning supreme throughout.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel says:

There is a divine dream which the prophets and rabbis have cherished and which fills our prayers, and permeates the acts of true piety. It is the dream of a world, rid of evil by the grace of God as well as by the efforts of man, by his dedication to the task of establishing the kingship of God in the world. God is waiting for us to redeem the world.¹⁴

Holy Saturday is the pinnacle of the mystic's quest for union with God and the beginning of the mystic's task, the redemption of the world. Let us not neglect to honour this Holy Day as it deserves.

- 1 Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*. New York: Grove, 1957. p. 244.
- 2 Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*. Greenwich, CN: Fawcett, 1969. p. 156.
- 3 Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*. New York: Avon, 1978. ch. 8.
- 4 The Union Prayerbook for Jewish Worship, Part I (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis), p. 27.
- 5 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*. New York: New American Library, 1974. pp. 194f.
- 6 *De Opif. Mundi* 100 (Loeb i. p. 79)
- 7 Patai, op. cit. p. 237.
- 8 Scholem, op. cit. p. 46.
- 9 *ibid.* pp 88f.
- 10 *ibid.* pp. 94f.
- 11 Gershom Scholem ed., *Zohar : The Book of Splendor*. New York: Schocken, 1963. p. 85.
- 12 Shabbat 118a.
- 13 Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, p. 155.
- 14 *Man's Quest for God*. New York: Scribner's, 1954. p. 151.