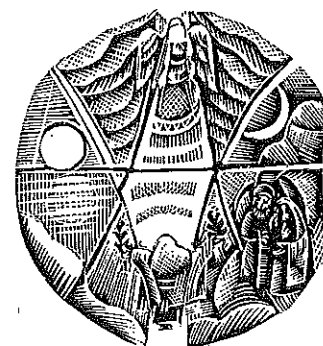


the S A B B A T H

its meaning for modern man



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THE NOONDAY PRESS

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, NEW YORK

A Palace in Time

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.

When the Romans met the Jews and noticed their strict adherence to the law of abstaining from labor on the Sabbath, their only reaction was contempt. The Sabbath is a sign of Jewish indolence, was the opinion held by Juvenal, Seneca and others.

In defense of the Sabbath, Philo, the spokesman of the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria, says: "On this day we are commanded to abstain from all work, not because the law inculcates slackness. . . . Its object is rather to give man relaxation from continuous and unending toil and by refreshing their bodies with a regularly calculated system of remissions to send

them out renewed to their old activities. For a breathing spell enables not merely ordinary people but athletes also to collect their strength with a stronger force behind them to undertake promptly and patiently each of the tasks set before them."¹

Here the Sabbath is represented not in the spirit of the Bible but in the spirit of Aristotle. According to the Stagirite, "we need relaxation, because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end"; it is "for the sake of activity," for the sake of gaining strength for new efforts.² To the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. "Last in creation, first in intention,"³ the Sabbath is "the end of the creation of heaven and earth."⁴

The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath.⁵ It is not an interlude but the climax of living.

Three acts of God denoted the seventh day: He rested, He blessed and He hallowed the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3). To the prohibition of labor is, therefore, added the blessing of delight and the accent of sanctity. Not only the hands of man celebrate the day, the tongue and the soul keep the Sabbath. One does not talk on it in the same manner in which one talks on weekdays. Even thinking of business or labor should be avoided.

Labor is a craft, but perfect rest is an art. It is the result of an accord of body, mind and imagination. To attain a degree of excellence in art, one must accept its discipline, one must adjure slothfulness. The seventh

day is a *palace in time* which we build. It is made of soul, of joy and reticence. In its atmosphere, a discipline is a reminder of adjacency to eternity. Indeed, the splendor of the day is expressed in terms of *abstentions*, just as the mystery of God is more adequately conveyed *via negationis*, in the categories of *negative theology* which claims that we can never say what He is, we can only say what He is not. We often feel how poor the edifice would be were it built exclusively of our rituals and deeds which are so awkward and often so obtrusive. How else express glory in the presence of eternity, if not by the silence of abstaining from noisy acts? These restrictions utter songs to those who know how to stay at a palace with a queen.

There is a word that is seldom said, a word for an emotion almost too deep to be expressed: the love of the Sabbath. The word is rarely found in our literature, yet for more than two thousand years the emotion filled our songs and moods. It was as if a whole people were in love with the seventh day. Much of its spirit can only be understood as an example of love carried to the extreme. As in the chivalric poetry of the Middle Ages, the "underlying principle was that love should always be absolute, and that the lover's every thought and act should on all occasions correspond with the most extreme feelings or sentiments or fancies possible for a lover."

"Love, with the troubadours and their ladies, was a source of joy. Its commands and exigencies made life's supreme law. Love was knighthood's service; it was loyalty and devotion; it was the noblest human giving. It was also the spring of excellence, the inspiration of high deeds."⁶ Chivalric culture created a romantic conception of adoration and love that to this day dominates in its combination of myth and passion the lit-

erature and mind of Western man. The Jewish contribution to the idea of love is the conception of love of the Sabbath, the love of a day, of spirit in the form of time.

What is so luminous about a day? What is so precious to captivate the hearts? It is because the seventh day is a mine where spirit's precious metal can be found with which to construct the palace in time, a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine; a dimension in which man aspires to approach the likeness of the divine.

For where shall the likeness of God be found? There is no quality that space has in common with the essence of God. There is not enough freedom on the top of the mountain; there is not enough glory in the silence of the sea. Yet the likeness of God can be found in time, which is eternity in disguise.

The art of keeping the seventh day is the art of painting on the canvas of time the mysterious grandeur of the climax of creation: as He sanctified the seventh day, so shall we. The love of the Sabbath is the love of man for what he and God have in common. Our keeping the Sabbath day is a paraphrase of His sanctification of the seventh day.

What would be a world without Sabbath? It would be a world that knew only itself or God distorted as a thing or the abyss separating Him from the world; a world without the vision of a window in eternity that opens into time.

For all the idealization, there is no danger of the idea of the Sabbath becoming a fairy-tale. With all the romantic idealization, the Sabbath remains a concrete fact, a legal institution and a social order. There is no danger of its becoming a disembodied spirit, for the spirit of the Sabbath must always be in accord with

actual deeds, with definite actions and abstentions. The real and the spiritual are one, like body and soul in a living man. It is for the law to clear the path; it is for the soul to sense the spirit.

This is what the ancient rabbis felt: the Sabbath demands all of man's attention, the service and single-minded devotion of total love. The logic of such a conception compelled them to enlarge constantly the system of laws and rules of observance. They sought to ennoble human nature and make it worthy of being in the presence of the royal day.

Yet law and love, discipline and delight, were not always fused. In their illustrious fear of desecrating the spirit of the day, the ancient rabbis established a level of observance which is within the reach of exalted souls but not infrequently beyond the grasp of ordinary men.

The glorification of the day, the insistence upon strict observance, did not, however, lead the rabbis to a deification of the law. "The Sabbath is given unto you, not you unto the Sabbath."⁷ The ancient rabbis knew that excessive piety may endanger the fulfilment of the essence of the law.⁸ "There is nothing more important, according to the Torah, than to preserve human life . . . Even when there is the slightest possibility that a life may be at stake one may disregard every prohibition of the law."⁹ One must sacrifice mitzvot *for the sake of man* rather than sacrifice man "*for the sake of mitzvot.*" The purpose of the Torah is "to bring life to Israel, in this world and in the world to come."¹⁰

Continuous austerity may severely dampen, yet levity would certainly obliterate the spirit of the day. One cannot modify a precious filigree with a spear or operate on a brain with a plowshare. It must always be remembered that the Sabbath is not an occasion for

diversion or frivolity; not a day to shoot fireworks or to turn somersaults, but an opportunity to mend our tattered lives; to collect rather than to dissipate time. Labor without dignity is the cause of misery; rest without spirit the source of depravity. Indeed, the prohibitions have succeeded in preventing the vulgarization of the grandeur of the day.

Two things the people of Rome anxiously desired—bread and circus games.¹¹ But man does not live by bread and circus games alone. Who will teach him how to desire anxiously the spirit of a sacred day?

The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God. All week we think: The spirit is too far away, and we succumb to spiritual absenteeism, or at best we pray: Send us a little of Thy spirit. On the Sabbath the spirit stands and pleads: Accept all excellence from me. . .

Yet what the spirit offers is often too august for our trivial minds. We accept the ease and relief and miss the inspirations of the day, where it comes from and what it stands for. This is why we pray for understanding:

May Thy children realize and understand that their rest comes from Thee, and that to rest means to sanctify Thy name.¹²

To observe the Sabbath is to celebrate the coronation of a day in the spiritual wonderland of time, the air of which we inhale when we "call it a delight."

Call the Sabbath a delight:¹³ a delight to the soul and a delight to the body. Since there are so many acts which one must abstain from doing on the seventh day, "you might think I have given you the Sabbath for your displeasure; I have surely given you the Sabbath for your pleasure." To sanctify the seventh day does

not mean: Thou shalt mortify thyself, but, on the contrary: Thou shalt sanctify it with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy senses. "Sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, by beautiful garments; delight your soul with pleasure and I will reward you for this very pleasure."¹⁴

Unlike the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath is not dedicated exclusively to spiritual goals. It is a day of the soul as well as of the body; comfort and pleasure are an integral part of the Sabbath observance. Man in his entirety, all his faculties must share its blessing.

A prince was once sent into captivity and compelled to live anonymously among rude and illiterate people. Years passed by, and he languished with longing for his royal father, for his native land. One day a secret communication reached him in which his father promised to bring him back to the palace, urging him not to unlearn his princely manner. Great was the joy of the prince, and he was eager to celebrate the day. But no one is able to celebrate alone. So he invited the people to the local tavern and ordered ample food and drinks for all of them. It was a sumptuous feast, and they were all full of rejoicing; the people because of the drinks and the prince in anticipation of his return to the palace.¹⁵—The soul cannot celebrate alone, so the body must be invited to partake in the rejoicing of the Sabbath.

"The Sabbath is a reminder of the two worlds—this world and the world to come; it is an example of both worlds. For the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest; joy is part of this world; holiness and rest are something of the world to come."¹⁶

To observe the seventh day does not mean merely to obey or to conform to the strictness of a divine command. To observe is to celebrate the creation of the

world and to create the seventh day all over again, the majesty of holiness in time, "a day of rest, a day of freedom," a day which is like "a lord and king of all other days,"¹⁷ a lord and king in the commonwealth of time.

How should we weigh the difference between the Sabbath and the other days of the week? When a day like Wednesday arrives, the hours are blank, and unless we lend significance to them, they remain without character. The hours of the seventh day are significant in themselves; their significance and beauty do not depend on any work, profit or progress we may achieve. They have the beauty of grandeur.

Beauty of grandeur, a crown of victory, a day of rest and holiness . . . a rest in love and generosity, a true and genuine rest, a rest that yields peace and serenity, tranquility and security, a perfect rest *with which Thou art pleased*.¹⁸

Time is like a wasteland. It has grandeur but no beauty. Its strange, frightful power is always feared but rarely cheered. Then we arrive at the seventh day, and the Sabbath is endowed with a felicity which enraptures the soul, which glides into our thoughts with a healing sympathy. It is a day on which hours do not oust one another. It is a day that can soothe all sadness away.

No one, even the unlearned, the crude man, can remain insensitive to its beauty. "Even the unlearned is in awe of the day."¹⁹ It is virtually impossible, the ancient rabbis believed, to tell a lie on the sacred Sabbath day.

What does the word "Sabbath" mean? According to some it is the name of the Holy One.²⁰ Since the word *Shabbat* is a name of God, one should not men-

tion it in unclean places, where words of Torah should not be spoken. Some people were careful not to take it in vain.²¹

The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere.

It is not a different state of consciousness but a different climate; it is as if the appearance of all things somehow changed. The primary awareness is one of our being *within* the Sabbath rather than of the Sabbath being within us. We may not know whether our understanding is correct, or whether our sentiments are noble, but the air of the day surrounds us like spring which spreads over the land without our aid or notice.

"How precious is the Feast of Booths! Dwelling in the Booth, even our body is surrounded by the sanctity of the Mitzvah," said once a rabbi to his friend. Whereupon the latter remarked: "The Sabbath Day is even more than that. On the Feast you may leave the Booth for a while, whereas the Sabbath surrounds you wherever you go."

The difference between the Sabbath and all other days is not to be noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear.

It is a day that ennobles the soul and makes the body wise. A tale may illustrate this point.

Once a rabbi was immured by his persecutors in a cave, where not a ray of light could reach him, so that he knew not when it was day or when it was night. Nothing tormented him so much as the thought that he

was now hindered from celebrating the Sabbath with song and prayer, as he had been wont to do from his youth. Beside this an almost unconquerable desire to smoke caused him much pain. He worried and reproached himself that he could not conquer this passion. All at once, he perceived that it suddenly vanished; a voice said within him: "Now it is Friday evening! for this was always the hour when my longing for that which is forbidden on the Sabbath regularly left me." Joyfully he rose up and with loud voice thanked God and blessed the Sabbath day. So it went on from week to week; his tormenting desire for tobacco regularly vanished at the incoming of each Sabbath.²²

It is one of life's highest rewards, a source of strength and inspiration to endure tribulation, to live nobly. The work on weekdays and the rest on the seventh day are correlated. The Sabbath is the inspirer, the other days the inspired.

The words: "On the *seventh* day God *finished* His work" (Genesis 2:2), seem to be a puzzle. Is it not said: "He *rested* on the *seventh* day"? "In *six* days the Lord made heaven and earth" (Exodus 20:11)? We would surely expect the Bible to tell us that on the sixth day God finished His work. Obviously, the ancient rabbis concluded, there was an act of creation on the seventh day. Just as heaven and earth were created in six days, *menuha* was created on the Sabbath.

"After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha*. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete."²³

Menuha which we usually render with "rest" means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind. *Menuha* is not a negative concept but some-

thing real and intrinsically positive. This must have been the view of the ancient rabbis if they believed that it took a special act of creation to bring it into being, that the universe would be incomplete without it.

"What was created on the seventh day? *Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose.*"²⁴

To the biblical mind *menuha* is the same as happiness²⁵ and stillness, as peace and harmony. The word with which Job described the state after life he was longing for is derived from the same root as *menuha*. It is the state wherein man lies still, wherein the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.²⁶ It is the state in which there is no strife and no fighting, no fear and no distrust. The essence of good life is *menuha*. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters" (the waters of *menuhot*).²⁷ In later times *menuha* became a synonym for the life in the world to come, for eternal life.²⁸

Six evenings a week we pray: "Guard our going out and our coming in"; on the Sabbath evening we pray instead: "Embrace us with a tent of Thy peace." Upon returning home from synagogue we intone the song:

Peace be to you,
Angels of Peace²⁹

The seventh day sings. An old allegory asserts: "When Adam saw the majesty of the Sabbath, its greatness and glory, and the joy it conferred upon all beings, he intoned a song of praise for the Sabbath day as if to give thanks to the Sabbath day.³ Then God said to him: Thou singest a song of praise to the Sabbath day, and singest none to Me, the God of the Sabbath?

Thereupon the Sabbath rose from its seat, and prostrated herself before God, saying: It is a good thing *to give thanks unto the Lord*. And the whole of creation added: And to sing praise unto Thy Name, O Most High.”³⁰

“Angels have six wings, one for each day of the week, with which they chant their song; but they remain silent on the Sabbath, for it is the Sabbath which then chants a hymn to God.”³¹ It is the Sabbath that inspires all the creatures to sing praise to the Lord. In the language of the Sabbath morning liturgy:

To God who rested from all action on the seventh day
and ascended upon His throne of glory.
He vested the day of rest with beauty;
He called the Sabbath a delight.
This is the song and the praise of the seventh day,
on which God rested from His work.
The seventh day itself is uttering praise.
A song of the Sabbath day:
“It is good to give thanks unto the Lord!”
Therefore, all the creatures of God bless Him.

The Sabbath teaches all beings whom to praise.

