

1+1=1: The Mystical Magic of Shabbat

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

Last week, I spoke with you about the inspiring democracy protests in which I had the privilege of participating in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv during my sabbatical in Israel last month.

What I did not tell you is that the demonstrations in Jerusalem differ significantly from those in Tel Aviv. For one thing, they're smaller, more intimate. Tel Aviv is the largest city in Israel—indeed, on the list of the largest cities in the world—its bustling urban center and sprawling suburbs inhabited primarily by secular Israelis. If Tel Aviv were in the U.S., we might call it a “blue state.” Most residents of that sprawling metropolis, even those who voted for the current government, fear that their way of life, not to mention the economic miracle of “Start Up Nation,” will be lost if the judicial overhaul stands.

Jerusalem, by contrast, is quieter and naturally more religious. Still, Jerusalem, too, is diverse. The organization that coordinates the Jerusalem protests calls itself *Shomrim al habayit ha-m'shutaf*, “Guardians of the Shared Home.” While most attendees at Saturday night protests outside the President’s Residence are secular, one does see *kipot* and Orthodox women’s attire. Organizers wish there were more religious Jews and more Israelis Palestinians in the crowd, as they seek to establish a “big tent” that reflects the diversity of Jerusalem.

I had been struck, when I attended a protest for the first time, in February, that Israelis, speaking Hebrew, refer to the demonstrations as taking place “on Shabbat.” In that winter month, the event began after dark, what I knew to call *Motzei Shabbat*, Saturday night, after the end of Shabbat. I asked an Israeli friend, who explained, “Oh, that’s just how secular Israelis talk these days. The word ‘Shabbat’ now just means ‘Saturday’ to most people.”

Not so in Jerusalem. The protest is explicitly on *Motzei Shabbat*, after Shabbat concludes. Throughout the country, the Israeli Reform Movement holds Havdalah services as these demonstrations begin. Even though the Tel Aviv crowds are exponentially larger, more people participate in the Havdalah rituals in Jerusalem. And they scrupulously begin after sunset.

On my first Friday morning in Israel this summer, my teacher Melila Hellner-Eshed explained. “An activist,” she said, “needs Shabbat to stay sane.”ⁱ

What is it that an activist needs and can take from Shabbat? The same might be asked for any of us, whether we are engaged in protest to change the world, recovering from a busy and perhaps overwhelming week of remunerative or volunteer work, need a break from our studies, seek respite in the midst of family responsibilities, desire spiritual solicitude at a time of illness or loss, or need relief from drudgery and boredom.

The answer may be in the mystery of Shabbat. I often ask students, “What is a year.” They usually answer, “365 days,” but I didn’t ask the length of a year; I asked **what** a year is. A year, of course, is a complete revolution of the Earth around the sun; and for the ancients, a full cycle of seasons. Similarly, a month—not in our Gregorian calendar, but in the Jewish one and in more traditional societies—is a revolution of the moon around the Earth or a full moon cycle. And a day is a full rotation of the Earth on its axis, sunset to sunset. But what is a week? No natural phenomenon delineates it. While the seven-day week is virtually universal, and historians of the ancient world have theories about its origins, it is, ultimately, mysterious. For Jews, it is a time period decreed by God, from one Shabbat to the next.

Another mystery is that, in the Ten Commandments, as articulated in Exodus, we are commanded, *zachor*, to remember, Shabbat. In Deuteronomy, the same phrase begins with a different verb, *shamor*, to observe Shabbat. Why two different words? That’s a mystery. And the sages resolve it with a miracle: When we sing *L’cha Dodi*, we include the phrase, *shamor v’zachor b’dibur echad*, expressing the notion that God spoke the words *shamor* and *zachor*, remember and observe, simultaneously, as if in one word, in a way that no human can.

My teacher, Melila Hellner-Eshed, is a widely published scholar of mysticism and Zohar at Hebrew University. I could call her “Dr. Hellner-Eshed,” but she invites us all to refer to her by her first name. I am nobody’s idea of a mystic, and I typically don’t understand Jewish mysticism. Still, I cherish the opportunity to study with Melila, who inspires me with mysticism in a way that I am unbothered by my inability to understand or explain it rationally. I hope you are, too. At least tonight.

In medieval and early modern Europe, the mystics famously did battle with *mitnagdim*, rabbis who opposed mysticism and remained focused on every jot and tittle of Jewish law. Still, the mystics didn’t reject faithful Jewish observance. They cherished the rituals of Shabbat, not merely for their own sake, but primarily for the elevation of the spirit they could bring.

Just as *shamor* and *zachor* are two words, inconceivably uttered in one voice, so, Melila teaches, are God and Shabbat one. Israel, the Jewish people, and God can also be one, but only if we observe Shabbat—and, in the words of Isaiah, only if we “call Shabbat *oneg*, a delight.”

Oneness is a critical concept in Judaism. We know that primarily from the *Sh'ma*, when we proclaim God's oneness. Melila, though, asks us to see the *Sh'ma* as a prayer that God may **become** one. If I understand Melila's teaching—and being no mystic, I may not, but I'm trying—she wants us to embrace the notion that, on Shabbat, the *Sh'chinah*, God's indwelling presence, is eager for unity with Adonai, God's transcendent power. But the *Sh'chinah* needs our help—and Shabbat's help, too. The Jewish people must unite with Shabbat to become one. One Shabbat plus one Jewish people become one holy, united entity. Then, on Shabbat, the transcendent and indwelling aspects of God can unite to become one. The magical mystery of Shabbat enables one *Sh'chinah* and one transcendent Adonai to become one God. $1+1=1$.

On Yom Kippur, we will read words from Isaiah, castigating the people for observing rituals while mistreating the poor and vulnerable in their midst. The prophet continues, “If you refrain from trampling Shabbat, from engaging in your [exploitative] affairs on My holy day, and will call Shabbat *oneg*, a delight, you will sanctify Adonai Who is honored; and if you honor it and not go your [corrupt ways]... Then you will delight yourself in Adonai...”ⁱⁱ

Melila emphasizes that the prophet teaches that, when we call Shabbat a “delight”—a process that involves more than naming, but deriving joy from our observance—then *titaneg*, we delight ourselves, bring ourselves joy, a reflexive verb based on the same root as *oneg*. The Talmud expounds: “One who delights in Shabbat is granted an infinitely expansive heritage, for it is written, “Then you will delight yourself in Adonai. I will place you at the world's greatest heights; and I will feed you with your ancestral tradition.”

One plus one does not, of course, equal one, at least not in math books. But religion is neither math nor science. Our tradition has blessed us with rabbis who have instructed us in the logical benefits of observing Shabbat. We are doubly blessed, though, that we are also the heirs of the mystics, of sages who imagined that God could utter two words as if one. The mysteries of the universe and of our lives do defy rational explanation. Melila is a contemporary teacher whose religious creativity offers us the opportunity to contemplate that we, by uniting with Shabbat, may upend even mathematics. One Shabbat plus one people of Israel, however diverse, come together to make one blessing. And God, called by many names, representing countless attributes, becomes one on this magical,

mystical holy day, delighting our lives, every week. On Shabbat, we **can** make one plus one equal one.

Amen.

ⁱ Throughout this sermon, references to Melila Hellner-Eshed are to her lecture, “Shabbat, Shechinah, and the Liberal Jew,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 7, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 58:13-14.