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# THE SABBATH



By  
The CHIEF RABBI, PROF. J. I. LANDAU.

To The  
WELTVERBAND der SCHOMRE SCHABBOS.



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# The Sabbath

By The CHIEF RABBI, PROF. J. L. LANDAU



**S**HULAMMITE in the "Song of Songs" exclaimed:

"Look not upon me that I am swarthy, for the sun has tanned me."

Those words rose to my mind when I decided to write the following essay on "The Sabbath." This first and most sacred Institution of the Jewish nation has, in the course of history, passed through so many transmigrations, and has received so many misinterpretations both by religious fanatics and heretics, that its true meaning and merits are no longer appreciated, and the people can no longer derive from this glorious and ancient Institution the benefits and blessings it was supposed to confer upon them.

I therefore cherish the hope that the following sketch will serve some useful purpose, will at least induce some of its readers to devote to this subject a few moments of serious thought.

It is gratifying to state that there are at the present moment two strong movements, which strive to restore to the Sabbath its ancient, its original, dignity and influence. One is known by the name of "Oneg Sabbath," with its headquarters in Tel-Aviv, the other is spreading rapidly with the slogan of "Shomre Sabbath," it is controlled by a strong and influential Committee in Berlin under the presidentship of a well-known scholar, Dozent Dr. Samuel Grünberg. A great and imposing Mass Meeting in favour of the "Shomre Sabbath," which took place in Berlin on the 16th of February, was addressed by a number of leading Rabbis and scholars.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

# The Sabbath.

## I.

THE teleological doctrine is the basis of the Jewish religion. God created the world for a definite purpose. The final cause of Creation is the ultimate destiny of man, whom Providence has endowed with a free-will to enable him to fulfil his great mission in history. In his hard and desperate struggle for his existence, exposed to the hostile elements of nature, and more especially to the brutal rivalry of his fellow-men, his will is often curbed and repressed and diverted from its natural bent. The Sabbath was, therefore, instituted as a day of perfect rest and freedom, on which he should be in a position to allow all his faculties—physical, mental and moral—full play without any interference from without. The Bible, therefore, connects the Sabbath both with the creation of the world and with the redemption from Egypt. In the Ten Commandments it occupies the next place to the proclamation of the oneness of God, whose name must not be taken in vain and applied to false idols. It reads: "Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord thy God commanded thee. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord: in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maid-servant. . . . And thou shalt remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God brought thee out thence by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the Sabbath day." (Deut. v. 12-15.)

It was for this reason that the period of service of any Hebrew who sold himself because of dire distress was limited to six years. The seventh year was his Sabbatical year, on which he regained his liberty. It was, moreover, the duty of his relatives, and, if sold to a Gentile, the duty of the whole Jewish community, to ransom him. If he himself, for any private reason, preferred to continue his servile work in spite of his Sabbatical year, he was publicly disgraced and branded as a slave. And even he was set free *par force* in the year of Jubilee, the seven times hallowed Sabbatical year. "For," says the Lord, "unto Me the children of Israel are servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. xxv. 55); not the servants of servants, explain the Rabbis.

## II.

IT is thus clear that the main object of the Sabbath and of the Sabbatical year was to impress every Jew with the idea of personal freedom, of his higher mission as a member of the human race, and thus also with the idea of the equality of all men. From the story that Moses had a man stoned to death because he was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath day (Num. xv. 32-36) we can see how strictly it was observed in ancient times. Jeremiah, who witnessed the decay and fall of Judæa, rebuked the kings of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem for their disregard of that sacred injunction. "Take heed for the sake of your souls," he exclaimed, "and bear no burden on the Sabbath day . . . neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers." (Jer. xvii. 20-22.) In Isaiah (Chap. lvi.) we read: "Happy is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that holdeth fast by it; that keepeth the Sabbath day from profaning it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil. . . . Also the aliens that join themselves to the Lord, to be His servants. Everyone that keepeth the

## ----- THE SABBATH -----

Sabbath from profaning it, and holdeth fast by My covenant, even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer." Nehemiah regarded it as one of his most meritorious deeds, for which he deserved the blessings of God, for having instructed the Levites to keep the gates of Jerusalem closed to sanctify the Sabbath day. When Antiochus Epiphanes tried to force on the Jewish people the profanation of the day of rest, many of the faithful fled to the caves of the mountains of Judah and to hiding-places in the wilderness to find shelter and to resist the commands of the tyrant. When the king's officers "ran after them and set the battle in array against them on the Sabbath day," calling upon them to surrender to the will of the king, the besieged would not profane the sacred day even by blocking up their hiding-places, but said: "Let us die in our innocency." And they all perished, they and their wives and their children. (1 Macc. ii. 29-38). It was Mattathias and his friends who first determined to defend their lives if attacked on the Sabbath. For, they argued, "if we all do as our brethren have done . . . we shall soon be destroyed from off the earth." That decision was later vindicated by the school of Shammai. Yet, when Pompey (63 B.C.E.) stormed the fortress of the Temple, the besieged did not defend the walls against the attack of the invaders on the Sabbath days., "and it thus happened that upon one Sabbath, in the month of Sivan, a breach was effected by which the Romans forced a way into the sanctuary." (Josephus, "Wars," I. vii. 3.)

Maimonides (1135-1204 c.E.), the greatest codifier of Jewish law, concludes his chapter on the importance and observance of the Sabbath with the following remark: "The injunctions regarding the Sabbath are just as binding as those framed against idolatry; they surpass in importance all other laws. The desecration of the Sabbath is therefore tantamount to idolatry." (xxx. 15.) These words fully

## ----- THE SABBATH -----

and forcibly endorse the definition of the Sabbath as a day intended to restore to man his freedom of will and human dignity, and thus to enable him to realise his position and mission as a member of the human race.

Heinrich Heine embodied this idea in his famous poem "Princess Sabbath," in which he describes a man, whom God created in His own image, suddenly changed by "a witch's art to the figure of a dog. As a dog with doggish notions, all the week his time he muddles through life's filthiness and sweepings, to the scavengers' derision. But upon each Friday evening, just at twilight, the enchantment ceases suddenly—the dog once more is a human being. As a man with human feelings, with his head and breast raised proudly, dressed in festival attire, his paternal halls he enters." (Heine's poems, translated by Bowring.)

### III.

**N**EEDESS to say that the Sabbath was instituted for all men alike, that the law makes no distinction between the rich and poor, but it cannot be denied that it mainly benefits the working man. To the rich every day is a festive day. He often finds the day too long, and tries to kill time by various amusements. But the labourer whose hand has to raise the heaving hammer for many hours, or to lead the plough and to swing the pruning-knife in the burning sun, or to expose his face to the irritating glow of the furnace, he who sits bent over his work for hours and hours, and for days and days, so that his bent back aches, and his sore eyes burn with pain; all those poor men and women who return to their desolate homes and hard couches worn and weary, unable to turn their thoughts to any subject that demands a clear and rested mind; all those wretched human beings who sink gradually but surely deeper and deeper into the morass of sensualism, and whose brutalised feelings can only be gratified by mere

## ===== THE SABBATH =====

physical pleasures; they alone are able to appreciate a whole day devoted to rest, rest of body and mind. They are thus enabled, at least once in seven days, to give some thought to the nobler duties and ambitions of man.

This idea, which has revolutionised modern society, was so strange even to the ablest thinkers of the ancient world that it became the subject of scorn and ridicule. In a world where the needy and destitute were treated as slaves, as outlaws, as soulless beings, the demand for a day of rest on such a day and the claim for equal rights and privileges seemed preposterous and outrageous. Apion spread the slanderous story that "the Jews celebrated the Sabbath because, travelling from Egypt for six days, they had buboes in their groins, but on the seventh day they rested and called that day Sabbath, for that malady of buboes was called Sabbatosis by the Egyptians." ("Contra Apionem.") Juvenal maintained that the Jew was lazy and slothful, wasting a seventh part of his life in perfect inactivity. (Sat., xvi. 105-106: "*Sed pater in causa, cui septima quæque fruit lux ignava et partem vite non attingit ullam.*") And Seneca sarcastically remarked, that "to remain idle every seventh day is to lose a seventh part of life." (Quoted by Augustine, "De Civ. Dei.," vi.) Tacitus and other leaders of Roman thought whose knowledge of Jewish rites was mainly drawn from wrong and misleading sources, joined in that chorus of slander. Yet, even in those days, in spite of all those venomous calumnies, the idea of the Sabbath gained many admirers and strong adherents, even among the Greeks and Romans. Josephus ("Contra Apionem," ii. 40) could boast, without fear of contradiction, that there was in his time no city of the Greeks, nor any barbarian city, where the Sabbath was not reverently celebrated by the non-Jewish inhabitants, by kindling the Sabbath lamps and by observing it as a day of rest. That statement was fully endorsed by similar remarks of Seneca and Dio Cassius. According to the Acts

(xiii. 16, 34), Paul addressed in a synagogue in Antioch, in Pisidia, on a Sabbath day, a number of Gentiles or Prose-lytes who attended divine service. "And on the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God." (Ibid., 44.) A purer conception of human life, and of the divine as manifested in human life, gradually penetrated the befogged minds of the idolatrous multitude which had come under the religious influence of their Jewish neighbours, or of individual Jews who endeavoured to spread a better and purer knowledge of their religious ideas and institutions. Josephus and the Talmud mention even the conversion of a whole royal family, of Queen Helene of Adiabene with her sons.

#### IV.

**T**HE first serious objections to the strict observance of the Sabbath were raised, according to the Gospels, by the founder of Christianity and his disciples. This is not the place for a discussion of the authenticity of the various versions referring to this fact; the fact itself can hardly be disputed. "The Sabbath, with its many restrictions and regulations," which, even in the opinion of a modern Jewish scholar and admirer of Jesus, "was upon the whole a joy and blessing to the immense majority of Jews throughout the Rabbinic period," was suddenly regarded and renounced as a legal burden, the violation of which was justifiable, as the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. As an indirect refutation of that objection may be quoted Jehudah Halevi's verses in Mrs. R. N. Salaman's translation ("Songs of Exile," 1901):—

*" Servants of time, lo! these be slaves of slaves;  
But the Lord's servant hath his freedom whole.  
Therefore, when every man his portion craves,  
' The Lord God is my portion,' saith my soul."*

## ----- THE SABBATH -----

The late Dr. Schechter showed the fallacy of that anti-Sabbath argument in the following eloquent and telling sentences: "On the one side we hear . . . that the law was a most terrific burden, and the life under it the most unbearable slavery, deadening body and soul. On the other side we have the testimony of a literature extending over about twenty-five centuries, including . . . scholars, poets, mystics, lawyers . . . tradesmen, workmen, women simpletons, who all . . . give unanimous evidence in favour of the law, and of the bliss and happiness of living under it. And this the testimony of people who were actually living under the law, not merely theorising upon it, and who experienced it in all its difficulties and inconveniences. The Sabbath will give a fair example. This day is described . . . in the most gloomy colours. . . . But, on the other hand, the Sabbath is celebrated by the very people who did observe it, in hundreds of hymns which would fill volumes, as a day of rest and joy, of pleasure and delight; a day in which man enjoys some presentiment of the pure bliss and happiness stored up for the righteous in the world to come." (Jew. Quart. Review, vol. iii., pp. 762-763.)

While Peter and his adherents among the Judeo-Christians continued to respect and to observe the religious customs and institutions of their people, Paul, either inspired by hostile feelings against his national traditions, or anxious to facilitate the conversion of the heathers to Christianity, advocated the abrogation of all those laws which he characterised as mere "shadows of the things to come." "Let no man judge you in meat," he impressed upon his audiences, "or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days." (Col. ii. 16.) The spirit of the Sabbath, however, had taken such hold of the new converts that they, notwithstanding their master's rebuke, turned again and again towards the observance of those religious rites which he ridiculed as "weak beggarly elements." (Gal. vi. 9.) It seems that it was mainly during the second century, when the observance

## ----- THE SABBATH -----

of the Sabbath was severely punished by the Roman authorities, that the neo-Christians introduced the Sunday to take the place of the Sabbath, and, according to the "Epistle of Barnabas," the Resurrection, which was believed to have taken place on the first day, was sufficient reason for such a change. There was, however, yet another reason which is not frankly admitted. The change was thought imperative in order to preclude the weak members of the young Christian community from attending divine services in the Synagogues, from listening to sermons delivered by Rabbis, and thus, from "turning to bondage," that the "labour bestowed upon them" might not be frustrated.

### V.

**B**UT though they changed time and name, though they decreed: "*Dies Dominicus non Judæis sed Christianis resurrectione Domini declaratus est,*" the Sunday retained the festive character of the Sabbath. Their effort to exclude the idea of any transference of obligation from the Sabbath to Sunday proved futile. Publicly they would not identify the Lord's day with the Jewish Sabbath, but the "Judaical element" gradually increased during the Middle Ages, and especially since Luther and Calvin. It was admitted: "that human nature requires a day of rest from labour, the soul requires leisure for joint worship, therefore a day must be fixed for all."

The Jewish idea of the Sabbath in a different garb.

In the seventeenth century leading English Protestants, Calvinists, and Puritans, aroused by "the scandals of the sixteenth-century Sunday," created a movement to restore to the Jewish Sabbath its ancient meaning, dignity, and importance. Nicholas Bownd with his "*Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti*" (1595), and Heylin with his "*History of the Sabbath,*" created quite a stir throughout the British Isles, and Parliament decided in favour of the Puritan

## ----- THE SABBATH -----

Sabbath (1648-1656). Nicolas Bownd's book, which was translated into many Continental languages, created in Holland, Switzerland, and Bohemia a strong Sabbatarian movement. Francis David, first Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania (*d.* 1597), who won the adherence of over 400 preachers with their churches and professors with their colleges, helped to raise the authority of the Sabbath. Unitarians to-day wield world-wide influence, and the Sabbatarian movement has its branches in the United States, in many countries of the European Continent, and possesses strong congregations even in South Africa.

The prohibition of work on one day of the week, which the Grecian and Roman writers ridiculed as a barbaric practice, is now a law enforced by the Parliaments of all civilised nations, compelling cessation from labour on Sundays. This undoubtedly leads back to the Jewish Sabbath, and has proved a great boon and blessing to the working classes. "Looking at the question from a merely physical and industrial point of view, it cannot be doubted that the average health, strength and power of the race are immensely increased by the fresh air, exercise, and rest which the Sunday holiday secures. The addition it makes to human happiness, the benefits it bestows on those large classes whose whole weekday lives are spent in labour too jading and incessant to leave any margin or disposition for mental culture, can hardly be over-estimated." (Lecky, "Democracy and Liberty," vol. ii.)

And these are not its only advantages.

### VI.

**T**HE Fourth Commandment reads: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." The only way to sanctify the Sabbath is self-sanctification.

"The influence of the Sabbath upon the general spiritual improvement of the human race," says Professor

Lazarus, "and particularly in the way of religious elevation . . . was gradually made clear by successive generations of Rabbis. Granting as it does the possibility of a spiritual life, leisure is regarded as a condition of sanctification. Even in the Torah the Sabbath is presented from this point of view, when it is designated as 'holy convocation.' . . ." ("Ethics of Judaism," § 186.) But though the main object of the Sabbath was devotion to intellectual pursuits, it was at the same time intended to be a day of joy, of pleasure and happiness, on which fasting and mourning are strictly forbidden. The Rabbis, too, maintained that the Sabbath was instituted for the benefit of man, and not man for the benefit of the Sabbath. But the pleasures of a physical nature are raised into the realm of the spiritual.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1088-1167) expressed this idea in the following verse, which orthodox Jews still sing every Sabbath morning at their dinner table :

*" This is indeed, a glorious day,  
It crowns my fervent wishes ;  
I shall indulge in sparkling wine,  
In all the tempting dishes.  
Cheer up, O man, profane it not  
With painful thoughts and sorrow,  
Rejoice in all its blessings  
Before the dawn of morrow."*

At the beginning of this century some Assyriologists, headed by Friedrich Delitzsch, tried to dispute the Jewish origin of the Sabbath. They were impelled not by purely scientific motives, but by the desire to minimise the importance of the Bible by tracing the origin of its laws back to Babylonian influences. But that hypothesis has long since been exploded, and the Jewish claim to indisputable priority has been vindicated beyond any doubt. (Cf. J. Barth, "Babel und israelitisches Religionswesen," Berlin, 1902.)

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