



Returning to Shabbat

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

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It's only in the moment when Moshe once again commands the Jewish people to keep Shabbat that we know they are truly forgiven.

It's a reprise of sorts: Shabbat, in the Torah as it is written, is the last command God gives Moshe before *heit ha-egel* (the sin of the Golden Calf), before everything shatters. In that final beautiful moment of before, God promises Moshe that Shabbat will be an eternal sign between God and the Jewish people:

שמות לא:יב-יח

¹²וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹³וְאַתָּה דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אַךְ אֵת שַׁבָּתִתִּי תִשְׁמְרוּ כִּי אוֹת הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם: ¹⁴וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֵת הַשַּׁבָּת כִּי קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לָכֶם מִחֻלְיָה מוֹת יוֹמָת כִּי כָל הָעֹשֶׂה בָּהּ מְלָאכָה וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב עַמִּיהָ: ¹⁵שִׁשַּׁת יָמִים יַעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת שַׁבָּתוֹן קֹדֶשׁ לַה' כֹּל הָעֹשֶׂה מְלָאכָה בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת מוֹת יוֹמָת: ¹⁶וְשִׁמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת הַשַּׁבָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרֹתֶם בְּרִית עוֹלָם: ¹⁷בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹת הוּא לָעֹלָם כִּי שִׁשַּׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה ה' אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיְנַפֵּשׁ: ¹⁸וַיִּתֵּן אֶל מֹשֶׁה כָּכֵלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ בְּהַר סִינִי שְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת לַחַת אֶבֶן כְּתוּבִים בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹקִים:



Shemot 31:12-18

¹²God said to Moshe, ¹³“Speak to the Israelite people and say: Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I God have consecrated you. ¹⁴You shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy for you. One who profanes it shall be put to death: whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among kin. ¹⁵Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath of complete rest, holy to God; whoever does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time ¹⁷between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day [God] ceased from work and was refreshed.

¹⁸Upon finishing speaking with him on Mount Sinai, [God] gave Moses the two tablets (*luhot*), stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God.

Immediately following that promise, things collapse with the construction of the *egol*, and the Jewish people enter a period of uncertainty: is their bond with God still present? Will God forgive them, or have they been rejected?

The answer comes in an echo of the moment of shattering, when Shabbat reenters the story. In a mirrored image of the last time God commanded Shabbat before the *egol*, in which the command was issued immediately before Moshe descended the mountain with the *luhot*, this time it is given immediately after:

שמות לד:כט, לה:א-ב

^{34:29}וַיְהִי בְרִדַּת מֹשֶׁה מֵהָר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדָּתוֹ מִן הָהָר...
^{35:1}וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל עַדַּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֱלֹהֵם הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת: ²שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שְׁבֻתוֹן לַה' כָּל הָעֹשֶׂה בּוֹ מְלָאכָה יוּמָת: ³לֹא תַבְעֲרוּ אִשׁ בְּכָל מְשֻׁבְתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

Shemot 34:29, 35:1-2

^{34:29} So Moshe came down from Mount Sinai, and the two *luhot* were in Moshe's hands as he came down the mountain...

^{35:1} Moshe gathered the people and spoke to them the things that God had commanded them to do. ² On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to God; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

³ You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day.

This mirroring of the first Shabbat command is a veiled promise: the Jewish people are reminded to keep Shabbat because of what Shabbat symbolizes: the irrevocable covenant between God and the Jewish people. In reminding the Jewish people to observe Shabbat, Moshe is reassuring them: that bond is still present, and you are still God's people. We are brought back to that last moment before the shattering, and given the opportunity to play out the story in a different way: not by building a replacement for God, but by building God a home among us in the form of the *mishkan* (tabernacle).¹ Shabbat itself becomes a mark of forgiveness, an opportunity to begin again. It is symbolically linked to the gift of the possibility of *teshuvah*, literally, to the possibility of return: return to God, return to ourselves, and, appropriately for a day that reminds us of creation itself, return to the possibility of new beginnings.

While that possibility might seem obvious to readers of the Torah who are used to its narratives, a *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah, describing the aftermath of Kayin's conversation with God after Hevel's murder, reminds us that the possibility of *teshuvah* is surprising, perhaps even miraculous:

¹ Rashi reads the construction of the *mishkan* as a response to the Golden Calf, which rearranges the order of the *parashiyot* Terumah, Tetzaveh, and Ki Tissa. See Rashi to Shemot 31:18.



בראשית רבה כב:יג

פגוע בו אדם הראשון אמר לו: "מה נעשה בדינך?" אמר לו: "עשיתי תשובה ונתפשרתי." התחיל אדם הראשון מטפח על פניו, אמר: "כך היא כחה של תשובה ואני לא הייתי יודע!" מיד עמד אדם הראשון ואמר: "מזמור שיר ליום השבת" וגו' (תהלים צב:א).

Bereishit Rabbah 22:13

Adam met him and asked him, "How did your case go?" "I repented and am reconciled," he replied. Adam began beating his face, crying, "So great is the power of repentance, and I did not know!" Immediately he arose and said, "A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath day: It is a good thing to confess to God" (Tehillim 92:1).

Teshuvah, the possibility of beginning again, is, according to this *midrash*, not obvious. It is something that must be discovered and a gift for which one must praise God. Adam, overwhelmed by the gift of the miracle of *teshuvah*, does exactly that, in the form of psalm 92. Playing on the word "*lehodot*," to give thanks, the *midrash* instead reads the word not as anchored to "*hoda'ah*," thanksgiving, but to *vidui*, confession, a part of the *teshuvah* process.²

Teshuvah's discovery, however, is not a one time event. The *midrash* continues:

אמר רבי לוי המזמור הזה אדם הראשון אמרו ונשתכח מדורו ובא משה וחדשו על שמו: מזמור שיר ליום השבת טוב להודות לה' וגו'.

R. Levi said: Adam said this psalm. It was subsequently forgotten by his generation and Moshe came and rewrote it in his name.

² For more on this link, see my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer's essay on Parashat VaYeishev, "The Meaning Of Judaism: Gratitude and Confession," available here:

<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/meaning-judaism-gratitude-and-confession>.



In stating that Moshe wrote psalm 92, however, R. Levi is not simply answering the question of attribution.³ Instead, he is pointing to a profound moment in Moshe's life: the aftermath of the Golden Calf. It is not obvious that God will forgive the Jewish people. Like Kayin's murder, the people's betrayal is devastating. Like Adam before his discovery, a first time reader of the story might assume that there is no path back from sin. The possibility of God's forgiveness is the shocking innovation at the heart of the story of the Golden Calf, a discovery that will change the Jewish people's relationship with God forever.

While the original layer of the *midrash* which attributes its authorship to Adam relies on the thanksgiving/confession wordplay, R. Levi's attribution to Moshe might focus on another textual point: its introduction, a psalm for Shabbat. R. Levi draws our attention to the link in Moshe's life between *teshuvah* and Shabbat: specifically, Shabbat's reintroduction in the wake of God's forgiveness. The *midrash* implicitly invites us to imagine Moshe, after descending the mountain with the second set of *luhot* and commanding the Jewish people once again to observe Shabbat as an everlasting sign of the renewed covenant, composing psalm 92 as a memorial for that moment of forgiveness and a testament to the power of *teshuvah*. It doesn't change what came in between, the chaos and the pain and the death. It doesn't bring us back to the before, unchanged. But *teshuvah* is a promise: however lost we feel, however much we sin, however far away God feels, we can always find our way back to each other.

This is also how it feels to live in our rhythm of weekday and Shabbat. The moments when we feel closest to God and to one other, the moments of tranquility, of love, of peace, will always be ruptured. They cannot last forever. That is the way the world is. And eventually, maybe sooner than we hope, we find ourselves in the middle of the week, in the middle of the world, feeling further away than ever from that shelter.

³ It seems like R. Levi is motivated to ascribe this psalm to Moshe because Psalm 90, only two psalms before, is explicitly marked as "A prayer of Moshe." R. Levi assumes that this means Moshe is responsible for this series of psalms.



But week after week, Shabbat comes back. And with it, each time we light candles as the sun begins to set, we come back to this moment where the rupture finally begins to heal.

And sometimes, on those Friday nights when you need Shabbat more than ever before, in the twilight, in the stillness, you can almost hear the whispered promise: Always, no matter what happens, always, no matter how far you are, we will find one another again.

