



Who Rests on Shabbat?

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Parashat Mishpatim 5786

Parashat Mishpatim shines a spotlight on human beings and their responsibility for the rest of others on Shabbat. The verse begins by addressing the active individual in the second person:

שמות כג:יב

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי תִּשְׁבֹּת...

Exodus 23:12

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor...

However, when the verse turns to explain the “rest” that follows this cessation, it stops speaking in the second person, to the subject of the command, and shifts to talk about those who will rest in third person:

... לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ שׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וַיִּנָּפֹשׂ בֶּן אֲמָתֶךָ וְהָגֵר:

... in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and that your home-born slave and the stranger may be refreshed.



What is striking about this verse is there is an inherent recognition here: in order for my environment to rest, I must cease. It seems that the central commandment of Shabbat—ceasing from labor—is not intended for the personal rest of the one who stops, but to guarantee the rest of those around us. Shabbat might be addressed to you, but its outcome of “rest” is not about you.

The surrounding context in the verses deepens this understanding: I have a responsibility for the well-being of others, which includes caring for their rest. To achieve this, I must sometimes stop, pause, and take a step back from my labor. The verse in Exodus 23 appears immediately after the commandment of the Sabbatical year, which is described in an almost identical fashion to Shabbat:

וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת אֲרָצְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ: ¹¹וְהַשְׁבִּיעַת תִּשְׁמְטֶנָּה וְנִטְשָׁתָה וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִיבֶי עִמָּךְ

¹⁰Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; ¹¹but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy of your people eat of it.

In both cases, the Torah presents a consistent ethic: our individual withdrawal from labor is the very act that creates the space for the vulnerable—whether human, animal, or the land itself—to find sustenance and peace.

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield;	Six days you shall do your work,
but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow.	but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor,
Let the needy among your people eat of it.	in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and that your home-born slave and the stranger may be refreshed.



The Sabbatical year is the year in which others eat from my field. I release and abandon my hold on the land specifically so that others may eat—just as on Shabbat, I cease my creative labor so that others may rest. Those who are missing from the list of people permitted to eat from the field during the Sabbatical year are the very people addressed by the verse—the ones commanded to release it. Likewise, those absent from the “so that they may rest” list on Shabbat are the recipients of the command to stop their labor. The Torah recognizes that we live in a web of interconnectedness and dependency. Our own cessation is a prerequisite for the rest of others.

I want to suggest that our web of interconnected rest might be larger than we normally think. “Shabbat” appears first in the form of a noun, “Shabbat for God,” during the episode of the manna, the first time the Children of Israel encounter Shabbat.

שמות טז:כג

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' שְׁבֹתוֹן שַׁבַּת קֹדֶשׁ לַה' מִחֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ אִפּוֹ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְשְׁלוּ בִשְׁלוּ
 וְאֶת כָּל הָעֵדָף הַנִּיחִי לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת עַד הַבֹּקֶר:

Exodus 16:23

He said to them, “This is what God meant: Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Shabbat for God. Bake what you would bake and boil what you would boil; and all that is left put aside to be kept until morning.”

A central meaning of Shabbat in these verses is the permission to leave the excess manna for the following day—a special allowance granted only on Friday for the sake of Shabbat. The context for this unique Friday permission is that no manna is found in the field. As the verses describe:



וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲכָלְהוּ הַיּוֹם כִּי שַׁבָּת הַיּוֹם לַה' הַיּוֹם לֹא תִמְצְאוּהוּ בַשָּׂדֶה:²⁵

²⁵Then Moshe said, “Eat it today, **for today is a Shabbat for God; you will not find it today** in the field.”

Shabbat is described here as a “Shabbat for God” and its practical implication is that manna will not be found in the field. Ostensibly, we see here a cessation of labor by God, which in turn leads to a cessation of labor by the people: “So the people remained inactive on the seventh day” (16:30). However, perhaps we should understand the order of events in the opposite way: conditions are created so that the people will not need to glean (they are permitted to save manna from Friday for Shabbat), and thus God is able to cease on the Shabbat.

וַיֵּרְאוּ כִּי ה' נָתַן לָכֶם הַשַּׁבָּת עַל כֵּן הוּא נָתַן לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי לֶחֶם יּוֹמִים שְׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחְתּוֹ אֶל יֵצֵא אִישׁ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי:³⁰ וַיִּשְׁבְּתוּ הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי:

²⁹“Mark that it is God Who, having given you the Shabbat, therefore gives you two days’ food on the sixth day. Let everyone remain in place: let no one leave their vicinity on the seventh day.” ³⁰So the people remained inactive on the seventh day.¹

Effectively, this decree creates a reality in which the One Who gives bread to all flesh enters a state of rest.

¹ This section offers a wealth of definitions for Shabbat based on the narrative: a cessation of food preparation, a cessation of gathering, remaining in one’s place, the focal point of preparation. For more on this, see Devora Steinmetz’ wonderful essay, “Work and Its Purposes,” in *Why Rain Comes From Above: Explorations in Religious Imagination* (Hadar Press, 2024).



Mishpatim teaches that only if I cease on Shabbat can my immediate environment, namely, as the verses point out, slaves and the strangers, rest, and that might be the reason for the command to stop.

When compared with the episode of the manna, another radical suggestion emerges: It seems that God, in a sense, joins the ranks of the slaves and the strangers. God becomes part of the human being's immediate environment—an environment that cannot find true rest unless the individuals themselves cease.

This orientation turns Shabbat into a day of focusing on others. This focus is not theoretical and is not a pondering regarding the future. Rather, it is a responsibility to make sure that **others** rest on Shabbat. Shabbat becomes a day in which I am aware of the work I cause others to do rather than of my own work, an awareness which is both social and theological. Shabbat becomes a day to reflect systematically, socially and theologically, on my environment and the labor that my life requires from my surroundings—in the broadest sense: not only from other people and property, but even from God.

