

In the הגדה של פסח we praise Gd for the fifteen acts of kindness He performed for the Jewish People during and after the Exodus from Egypt. Among the acts we mention is “it would have been sufficient for us had Gd brought us close to Mount Sinai yet not given us the Sabbath”. This is puzzling as the concept of Sabbath was known to the Jews and their ancestors for many generations. As the Talmud says, ערוב תבשילין (יומא כח:) Abraham kept all the laws of the Torah including those of תבשילין that relate to the Sabbath and Festivals. What was special about the Sinai experience that indicated a change in the nature of Sabbath observance in such a way that we need to express thanks for that act of kindness?

In the Amidah for Mincha on Shabbos, we recite an enigmatic paragraph of אתה אחד ואחד ושם אחד. The core of the paragraph discusses how the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob related to the Sabbath. אברהם יגל יצחק ירנן יעקב ובניו ינוחו בו מנוחה. אהבה ונדבה מנוחת אמת ואמונה... מנוחה שלמה שאתה רוצה בה יכירו בניך ידעו כי מאתך היא מנוחתם ועל מנוחתם יקדישו את שמך. Why is it necessary to mention the patriarchs at this point and why mention different activities for each of them?

Prior to מתן תורה, giving the Torah at Sinai, the concept of Shabbos existed in the world. It was well known that Gd created the world in 6 days and ‘rested’ on the seventh. The debate centered around the meaning of ‘rest’ as far as Gd was concerned and how should human beings celebrate and acknowledge that ‘rest’. Each of the patriarchs is identified with a unique attribute, מדה. For Abraham it was חסד, performing acts of kindness that brought people closer to Gd. The Midrash says that Abraham excelled at מצות הכנסת אורחים, welcoming guests. After providing his guests with food, the guests would thank Abraham for his hospitality and the food he provided them. Abraham would counter that they should be giving thanks to the true owner and provider of the food, Gd. In this way, by getting people to recognize the joy they felt called out for recognizing Gd, Abraham spread the name of Gd, creating the environment for עשו בחרן, the thousands that he converted to a Monotheistic faith in the One True Gd. חסד, kindness engenders a sense of joy and thankfulness in a person that forces him to acknowledge his benefactor and offer thanks. Abraham celebrated the Sabbath through the rejoicing associated with acts of חסד, kindness.

Isaac on the other hand is a more enigmatic figure. Isaac's attribute is גבורה which some translate as strength but it also connotes internal hidden strength. The story of Isaac is very abbreviated in the Torah. One section in Genesis, פרשת תולדות, covers almost all of his life. Isaac is identified with the characteristic of prayer. Isaac established the precedent for the daily Mincha prayer. He prays opposite Rebecca when she is unable to have a child. He blesses his child Jacob twice with prayers that Gd should grant him the dew from heaven and Jacob should assume the mantle of tradition passed on from Abraham to Isaac to culminate in the fulfillment of the בְּרִית בּוֹן הַבְּתָרִים, receipt of the Torah and return to the Land promised to Abraham. Isaac, the man of prayer, felt that the appropriate way to celebrate the Sabbath is to dedicate it as a day of prayer, יִצְחָק יְרֵנָּה.

Jacob and his children had yet a different idea of how to celebrate the Sabbath. When Jacob returned from the house of Laban and separated from his brother Esau, the Torah tells us that they purchased land around the city of Shchem and he and his family graced the city, וַיַּחֲזֵק אֶת פְּנֵי הָעִיר. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni פרשת נחל עמ) tells us יקבע תחומין לשבת מבעוד יום הדא אמרה ששמר יעקב (וישלח לג) Jacob and his children established the foundations for ערובי תחומין and the associated limitation of movement on the Sabbath to ensure that one desists from work and other mundane tasks on that holy day. For Jacob and his family, the Sabbath was a day of rest, יַעֲקֹב וּבָנָיו יָנוּחוּ בוּ.

In the הגדה של פסח we acknowledge that even though the Sabbath was known, there was a debate as to how to celebrate it. That debate was settled at Sinai when Gd gave us the Sabbath. In what way did Gd give us the Sabbath? Rashi comments on the verse (שמות לא:יג) כי אות היא ביני וביניכם that Gd gave us a great sign that He chose us in giving the Jewish People His day of rest as our day of rest. Gd agreed with Jacob and his sons that the proper way for the Jew to celebrate the Sabbath is a complete cessation of work. Indeed this gift was given to the Jews uniquely, as a non-Jew that ceases work completely on the Sabbath is punishable with death. We celebrate that at Sinai we alone were given the greatest and most uniquely special gift. In the Amidah to Mincha on Shabbos, we acknowledge that Gd gave us his day of rest and established it as our day of rest in accordance with the way Jacob and his sons celebrated the Sabbath, מְנוּחָה שְׁלֵמָה שְׂאֵתָהּ רֹצֶה בָּהּ יִכְיָרוּ בְּנֵיךָ יָדְעוּ כִּי מֵאַתָּה, הִיא מְנוּחָתָם וְעַל מְנוּחָתָם יְקַדִּישוּ אֶת שְׁמֶךָ.

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