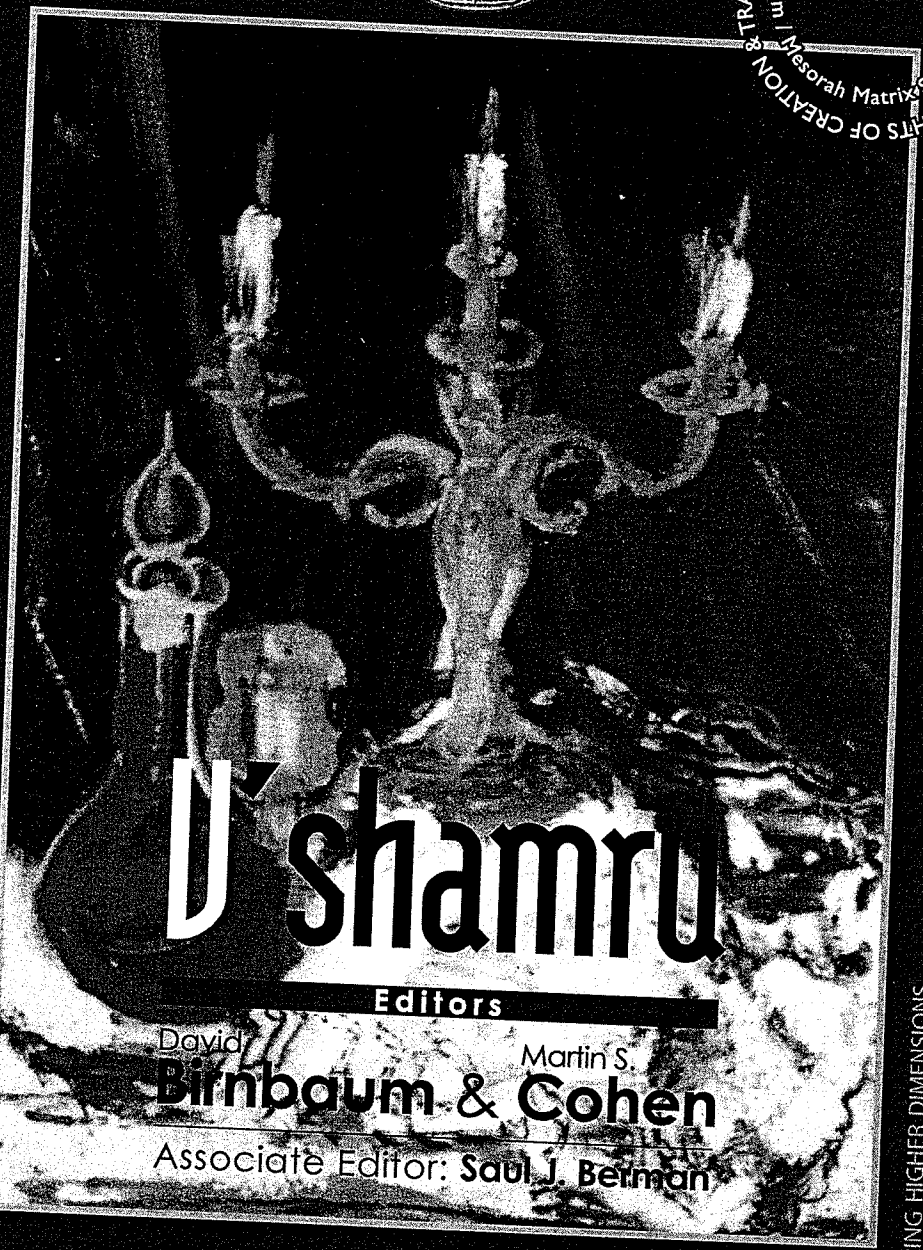
MESORAH MATRIX

www.MesorahMatrix.com

MESORAH MATRIX
VOLUME 10

TRANSCENDENCE & LIGHTS OF CREATION
David Birnbaum | Mesorah Matrix Series



D'shamu

Editors

David Birnbaum & Martin S. Cohen

Associate Editor: Saul J. Berman

New Paradigm Matrix™

EXPLORING HIGHER DIMENSIONS

Published by NEW PARADIGM MATRIX

COPYRIGHT © 2019
NEW PARADIGM MATRIX FOUNDATION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Birnbaum, David.

V'shamru / David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen.

ISBN 978-0-9843619-8-4

1. V'shamru. 2. Jewish Spirituality. I. Title.

21st CENTURY PUBLISHING

New Paradigm Matrix att: David Birnbaum
Tower 49, Twelve E. 49th St., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10017

www.MesorahMatrix.com

Distributed by J Levine / MILLENNIUM

Danny Levine, Managing Director

DLevineNY@gmail.com

Direct contact to Editor-in-Chief

David.Birnbaum.NY@gmail.com

MESORAH MATRIX

V'shamru: The Bible's "Poetic Story" About Shabbat

Dan Ornstein

If you love it, do not photograph
the woods as it now is, the leaves
in sunlight and shadow hardly stirring
in the air of the hot afternoon.
Do not try to remember it, stopping
the flutters of leaves and wings,
the dead leaf slowly spinning
on an invisible thread. Do not ask
the trees to linger even to be named.
You must live in the day as it passes,
willing to let it go. You must set it
free. You must forget this poem.
Then, into its own time forever
gone, it is forever here.[1]

Wendell Berry (b. 1934, United States) is a Kentucky farmer and social activist whose poems about the cycles and mysteries of nature have established him as an outstanding American writer. The poem above, from his extensive collection of Sabbath poems, challenges us to take a more "in the moment" walk through the woods than we might be used to taking. Can we embrace the majestic beauty of leaves and trees just as they are, as they inevitably pass through time—changing from second to second, onward toward decay—without trying to freeze them in time? Berry discourages us from

committing nature to human or photographic memory, so that we can give up our illusory quest to control it. Paradoxically, it is only through our fleeting experiences of the woods, not our attempts to imprint them in our minds, that we truly make them "forever here." Giving ourselves totally to these experiences in wonder, we can return to them repeatedly. Similarly, we only appreciate the preciousness of time—"each day's passing"—when we humbly accept that, once it has passed, time is forever gone; our task is to just live in it, letting it be. Trying to capture the world forever on our iPhones weakens our ability to let the world captivate us. Even focusing our "in-the-moment" experience of the forest through the poem's words is *itself* a way of weakening the immediacy of that experience. We must therefore even forget the poet's words, immediately after having taken them to heart.

I am struck by how Berry's tribute to being fully present with nature and time is punctuated by terms that are legal in tone. Three times the poet prohibits us, "Do not"; three times he commands us, "You must." To free the reader from turning her encounter with nature into a huge, crass selfie, he plays the role of a contemplative nature guide who is also a law-giver. We are not used to this mixing of law and literature, prohibitions and poetry. Certainly, a command or prohibition here and there in the mouth of a fictional character intensifies dialogue and develops narrative tension, but these are exceptions in Western literature. For the most part, we expect that dry law will remain in the law books; we look to fiction and poetry to entertain and inspire us without constraints on the characters' behavior, on our imaginations, or on the writer's self-expression. Remarkably, John Berry crosses the artificial line between law and literature by combining both in this poem, howbeit with gentle, tender, non-punitive indirection. His poem brings us into those woods: we are not merely watching those dead and living leaves, that sunlight and shadow, those trees, that

glorious, passing day. We are living with and in them, as notes and beats in their magnificent song of transient beauty. As he is doing this, directing us away from losing our immediate connection with nature, Berry lays down "the law" by weaving expertly "no, do not do that" and "you must do this" into the artistry of the poem.

The interweaving of law and literature, often by infusing legal material into stories and by using elements of poetry, is a unique feature of the Bible, a book that seeks to integrate all aspects of human life and to infuse them with God's presence. It shuns what Chaya Halberstam calls "the compartmentalization of [literary] genres."[2] Jason Gaines has made the intriguing suggestion that many laws found in the Torah—the Five Books of Moses—can be read poetically in ways that deepen, clarify, and even modify their historically accepted meanings.[3] Assnat Bartor argues that the narrative reading of biblical laws—a method developed by the Law and Literature School of Bible scholarship—allows the reader to discern the human element found in law as an instrument for pursuing justice: "Narrative reading...treats legal material in a manner that also confers value and meaning upon it. It underscores the human and subjective aspects of the law and illustrates how law is an instrument for responding to the human condition and is not only an instrument for subordination and control."[4] Similarly, Chaya Halberstam writes: "I would suggest that in the Hebrew Bible, narrative may have overtly legal aims, while law may utilize the devices of narrative...Both narrative and law may offer us models of vision and praxis intertwined."[5]

In this essay, I suggest that Exodus 31:16–17, what Jewish liturgy refers to as V'shamru, can be read as a "mini-story" that uses poetic techniques to convey the religious and moral meaning underlying the laws of Shabbat. It is significant that V'shamru follows Exodus 31:12–15, which is a harsh, punitive *legal* expression of the Torah's

prohibition against *m'lakhah*, creative work, on Shabbat. Though at first glance it appears to be a mere repetition of the previous passage's themes, V'shamru can, in fact, be reasonably read as a poetic and narrative response to this statement about Shabbat law. By re-telling the story of Shabbat, V'shamru inspires us to remember that Shabbat encompasses, yet ultimately transcends, its myriad laws and restrictions.

Biblical Poetry: What Is It? How Is It?

Before we examine V'shamru as a poetic "mini-story," we need to understand a little about biblical poetry.[6] The British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) once wrote: "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose—words in their best order; poetry—the best words in their best order."[7] Certainly, such a brief summation of something as complex as poetry is too tidy, but Coleridge nonetheless made an excellent point: a great poem contains words carefully and succinctly chosen for their beauty and impact, which have been arranged in profoundly creative, meaningful ways. This is certainly true of biblical poetry, which is distinguished (although not exclusively) by its use of a literary technique called parallelism: expressing an idea or image within a poetic line in two parallel ways. Below is an excellent example of parallelism from Psalm 23, the renowned poem of consolation that is held in highest esteem by Jews and Christians alike:

> God makes me lie down in green pastures;
> God leads me beside still waters.[8]

If the poet had wanted to express this idea in simple prose, he could

3

have written, "God leads and guides me to safety." However, this is a poem, as is made clear by its simple, yet vibrant first line: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Rather than merely state that God protects him, the poet almost shocks us with the provocative yet soothing identification of God with the shepherd—the implication being, of course, that the poet is a sheep. None of this imagery needs to be taken literally: humans and God, after all, are not actually sheep and Shepherd. However, the psalm provokes us to take the imagery quite seriously. What better metaphor could the faithful poet use to describe concretely his sense of utter dependence upon God to protect him from harm?

Notice how both lines expand and lend color to this image of God: God is not a shepherd in name only, but a shepherd who lives up to the title through action. Consider how the two parallel lines relate to each other. A casual reading reveals what appears to be needless repetition: we know that God is a great shepherd who brings us to rest in green pastures, so why repeat this idea with the image of God leading us beside still waters—which seems to add nothing to the image already drawn? Conversely, we might casually assume that the parallel images, in fact, have no similarity and are therefore meaningless. Yet these casual readings miss an important dimension of parallelism: the poet presents an idea twice, often (though not always) in a different way, so as to intensify the idea from one line to the next. This develops the idea in ways that a single mention alone would not achieve. God the shepherd is great at the job! We can find God faithfully resting with the flock in those green pastures. Yet this passive image of God resting then gives way to a far more active one: God also successfully leading the flock, among it our "poet-sheep," to still waters where the flock can drink and live, all the while sheltering it from implied predators along the way to the water. We are thus confronted with a magnificent development: rest leads to activity,

while passive oversight leads to active protection. Thus, we could read our two parallel lines in this way:

> God makes me lie down in green pastures;
> [And even more so] God leads me beside still waters.

Many other examples of biblical parallelism exist, placing the best words in a variety of best orders. For example, returning to the theme of trees, we find the following verse in Psalm 92, formally designated in its opening line as the psalm for Shabbat:

> The righteous man shall bloom like the palm tree;
> Like the Lebanon cedar [the righteous man] shall grow mightily. (92:13)

The righteous man is compared to the palm tree (most likely the date palm, which is common to the Middle East) and to the cedar tree, two very tall, slow-growing trees that take a long time to bear fruit after initial planting.[9] These parallel images are an illustrative response of faith to what the psalmist writes earlier in the psalm about evil people:

> The wicked may spring up like grass;
> The evildoers might blossom forth,
> But they will be destroyed forever. (92:8)

Using simple images culled from nature (grass, blossoming shoots, tall trees), the psalmist makes a profound poetic statement of hope about the fortunes of good and evil people. Like grass and shoots that seem to grow and spread with ease, unimpeded, the wicked appear to pop up and proliferate unstoppably. But soon, like quick-growing but lowly grass scorched by the sun, evildoers will die out. Good people

may appear unable to grow and flourish, so powerful is the force of evil behavior. But a faithful person needs to be patient. Ultimately, like the Lebanon cedar and the date palm, good people will bloom, flourish, and overshadow the evildoers.

We should return for a moment to our verse comparing good people to trees to consider it more closely, this time labeling its different parts based upon their literal order in Hebrew:

A	*B*	*C*
The righteous man	like the palm tree	shall bloom

B'	*A'*	*C'*
Like the Lebanon cedar	[the righteous man]	shall grow mightily.

As we saw above in our discussion of Psalm 23, the image of the righteous man gradually growing mightily intensifies the image of the same man gradually blooming. Palm trees can reach a mature height of about seventy-five feet. Cedars can reach an even greater mature height of about 130 feet.[10] The image of the good person as a cedar intensifies the image of that same person as a palm tree. Rendered in prose, the psalmist's faith in the face of evil is essentially this: "If you think that good people do not have a chance to succeed, wait patiently. They will gradually bloom like palm trees—and with God's help, they will gradually get even bigger and stronger than palms, becoming like cedars."

Looking again at our verse, this time with its different parts labeled, we realize that we could draw an imaginary X between the two lines by connecting **A** with **A'**, and **B** with **B'**. The word-order of the palm and the cedar literally criss-crosses with references to the righteous man, as it were, surrounding the reader or worshipper with images of tall, mighty trees that protect him from evil. (Bible

scholars call this kind of criss-crossing parallelism a chiastic structure, from *chi*, the Greek letter written as χ.) Further, while the righteous man is referred to explicitly (**A**) in line 1, in line 2 (**A'**) he seems to go missing, referred to elliptically by the verb "to grow mightily."[11] The poet seems almost to inject an element of doubt into his seemingly solid statement of faith: waiting patiently for justice to be served so gradually on the evildoer, might the righteous man be in danger of disappearing, out of despair? Recall that psalms are complex religious statements. Faith and hope interact dynamically with the anxiety of doubt, because that is the true nature of mature faith. Yet psalms are not just religious texts; they are poems, beautiful ones in fact. Their authors use these kinds of poetic techniques (such as parallelism and chiastic structure) to catch the careful reader's attention and deepen his or her engagement with the poem.

V'shamru, the Bible's Poetic "Shabbat "Story," from within

I could listen to Bruce Springsteen's songs, Bach's partitas, or Kreisler's Praeludium repeatedly, all day long. I know nothing about music theory, I cannot play an instrument, and I do not read music; but their music, nonetheless, moves me, literally, beyond words. Similarly, poetry is music in words, whose sounds and syllables can make you sing and dance even if you do not speak the language of the poet fluently, or even at all. Before we translate and examine its words as poetry, read—and listen to!—V'shamru in the original Hebrew, using my transliteration. Note the repeated sound that I have bolded:

*V'**sh**amru v'nei yisrael et ha-**sh**abbat,*
*la·asot et ha-**sh**abbat l'dorotam b'rit olam.*
Beini u-vein b'nei yisrael ot hi l'olam,
*ki **sh**eishet yamim asah Adonai et ha-**sh**amayim v'et ha-aretz,*

*u-va-yom ha-**sh**'vi·i **sh**avat va-yinafa**sh**.*

Even if you are not a Hebrew reader or speaker, if you are reading this essay you likely know the Hebrew word "Shabbat," meaning the Sabbath. The *sh* sound in Hebrew is produced by a consonant, the letter *shin*. The word "Shabbat" derives grammatically from the Hebrew verb root *shin-bet-tav*, meaning "to cease from work or movement." It seems to me no surprise that a word denoting a day for being at peaceful rest should begin with *shin*, whose sound is a near-universal onomatopoeia used to gently quiet someone down.[12] Yet also listen to the music of the *shin* letter as it dances through these two verses, Exodus 31:16–17: it occurs in this thirty-one-word passage eight times, three of these in the last half-verse alone. "Shhh…" these verses seem to be saying to the Israelites and to us: "Quiet down, stop working and building and producing. Be like John Berry's leaves in sunlight and shadow, hardly stirring in the air of the hot afternoon." The author of V'shamru has deployed a simple yet striking repetition of a mere consonant to convey poetically the rest and peace that define Shabbat at its best.

The poetry of this biblical passage is made even more manifest when we look at its structure. Below is my English translation of V'shamru (Exodus 31:16–17), retaining the word order and redundancies peculiar to the Biblical Hebrew:

(A) They shall observe—the children of Israel—Shabbat
(B) To make Shabbat throughout their generations, an eternal covenant.
(C) Between Me and between the children of Israel, a sign-is-She, eternally
(D) For in six days made Adonai the heaven and the earth
(E) And on the seventh day, (Adonai) ceased from creating and "re-souled."[13]

When we analyze this passage, what do we find? Once again, we will label the different parts of the first two lines, revealing interesting parallels:

A	*B*	*C*
They shall observe—	*the children of Israel—*	*Shabbat.*

A'	*C'*	*B'*
To make	*Shabbat*	*throughout their generations, an eternal covenant.*

Notice how A is intensified by A', its direct parallel. Observance of Shabbat (expressed using the Hebrew root *shin-mem-resh*, "to guard") refers to adherence to the legal restrictions of refraining from creative work; this is certainly an important aspect of Shabbat through which we imitate God, who ceased from creative work at the beginning of time. However, following those prohibitions—an essentially passive endeavor—is only one limited part of the Shabbat experience. The parallel Hebrew word *la-asot*, "to make" or "to create," challenges the faithful Shabbat observer to do something more active and more important: to imitate, weekly, God who made the world and who then created and observed the first Shabbat.[14] Moreover, Shabbat is not observed in isolation by hermits; it is a sacred celebration embraced with joy by an entire community, the children of Israel—and not only the children of Israel of biblical times, but by all Jews, throughout their generations, as an eternal covenant with God. Thus, the "criss-crossing" parallels of B and B', C and C': Shabbat, the eternal day, was given to the people of biblical times, and *even more so*, to all Jews of all times.

If V'shamru had given us only these poetic gifts, it would have been sufficient. Yet the passage offers us even more poetic artistry. Turning to the middle line, the center of the passage, we notice that it not only physically divides both line-pairs, but it also draws them

6

together into a meaningful whole: "Between Me and between the children of Israel, a sign-is-She, eternally." As we saw above, the first line-pair focuses on us, the Jewish people, and our celebration of Shabbat in imitation of God. Below, we will see how the second line-pair focuses on God, who created the universe and celebrated the very first Shabbat. The third line literally (and literarily) brings us, God's people, together with God! Just as no one Jewish person should observe Shabbat alone, so too, the Jewish people's Shabbat celebration is not for us alone. It is for us to enjoy together with God, as an eternal sign of our abiding love for each other: "Between Me and between the children of Israel, a sign-is-She, eternally."

This now brings us to our second set of line pairs. Here too we discover a subtle yet evocative parallelism, howbeit one without chiastic structure:

A	*B*	*C*
For in six days	made Adonai	the heaven and the earth.

A'	*B'*	*C'*
And on the seventh day,	(Adonai)	ceased from creating and re-souled.

Six days of creative work lead up to the majestic seventh day of rest, of ceasing from creation. Over the course of these two brief statements, the Torah takes the entire history of the world's creation found in the first chapter of Genesis and boils it down to a gem of a miniature story. In doing so, it answers some nagging questions raised by the first part of V'shamru: What is Shabbat an eternal sign *of*, between us and God? Why should we human beings "make" Shabbat at all? The answer: because God created all of existence in six days, then ceased from creating (*shavat*[15]) on day seven. We are God's creatures, yet we are also God's co-creators, a direct reflection of God's presence in the world. God worked for six days to create a magnificent world? We do so as well. God ceased from that work on Shabbat to appreciate what

God had done? We do so as well, and we *must* do no less, for God is ultimately the Master in this co-creative relationship.[16]

Six days parallel day seven (***A*** and ***A'***): God creating the world parallels God resting and ceasing (***B*** and ***B'***). Each parallel presents us with a heightening tension, first between ordinary time and sacred time, then between creation and cessation. Yet, what meaningful parallel or tension can we draw between "heaven and earth" (***C***) and "re-souling"? (***C'***) More importantly, what is re-souling?[17] The standard translation of the Hebrew word *va-yinafash* is a figurative one: "God was refreshed." Yet such a rendering makes it difficult to understand what the Torah asserts God actually did. A number of the medieval Bible commentators wrote that God, who neither sleeps nor grows tired, would not *need* to refresh or re-soul; those are human needs based upon human physical and mental limitations. These commentators, many of whom were deeply influenced by the philosophical trends of their day, were quite uncomfortable with anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and would only explain them figuratively and symbolically.[18]

However, the Bible itself—at least in its earliest narratives—seems to possess no such discomfort. Drawing from the earlier account of the first Shabbat (Genesis 2:4), V'shamru seems to assert that even God, Creator of heaven and earth—that is, everything in existence—needed to rest, breathe, refresh, and re-soul after finishing the work of creation. If we follow this anthropomorphic vision of "God at rest" to its full conclusion, its parallel with "heaven and earth" reveals a fascinating spiritual insight. God, the ultimate Creator of all that is, ceased creative work on that first Shabbat. God did this not only as the Artist appreciating the masterwork, but also, as it were, as the first Laborer in need of genuine rest and refreshment. As a comment on our cyclical life of work and rest, six days and Shabbat, in imitation of God, V'shamru is giving us a "warning" on three different levels: (1)

like God, we must work, create, and build the world; (2) like God, we must desist weekly from creation, to leave it alone, especially to remind ourselves that we are not God, that our mastery of the earth is limited; (3) most provocatively, like God, we must desist weekly from creation because no human being can be fully human while constantly working, just as God cannot be fully God while constantly creating. We find, implicit in this last parallelism of V'shamru, the most significant intensification of language and ideas. If God, Creator of heaven and earth, ceased from work and needed to "re-soul" on Shabbat, *how much more so* do we, mere human creatures need to cease and re-soul.[19]

Law and Literature: V'shamru in Context

As I suggested above, V'shamru is a poetic and narrative respon to the Torah's very harsh legal expression of Shabbat prohibitio found in the preceding passage. Modern Bible scholars suggest th Exodus 31:12–15 and Exodus 31:16–17 represent two differe schools of ancient Israelite teachers. Their disparate but overlappi approaches to Shabbat were placed together over the many centu that the Torah was being edited into a final document: the la passage, V'shamru, was possibly intended as a supplement to former passage.[20] By contrast, the very popular traditional Tc commentary of Rabbi Hayyim ben Attar (1696–1743) offe number of moralistic and sermonic reasons for V'shamru, on assumption that the two passages were set down together by M at God's dictation.[21] Whichever approach one follows, I be it is reasonable to assume that V'shamru is commenting or responding to—the passage before it, which reads as follows:

And the Eternal said to Moses: 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 the Eternal have consecrated you.
You 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 his kin.
Six days may work be done,
but on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Eternal;
whoever does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.[22]

We immediately detect three similarities between V'shamru and this preceding passage: (1) the commandment to keep Shabbat, (2) Shabbat as the sign of God's covenant with Israel throughout the generations, and (3) the distinction between the six days of the week and the seventh day. However, in significant ways, the two passages could not be more different. The earlier passage repeats three times the prohibition, *on pain of death*, against profaning Shabbat by performing *m'lakhah* during the holy day. V'shamru mentions the prohibition in only the most implicit terms and without reference to any kind of punishment for violating Shabbat.[23] The reason offered in the first passage for observing Shabbat is to remind the Israelites that God makes them holy, and that they therefore must observe Shabbat as a holy day in imitation of God. Though the concept of holiness might be implicit in V'shamru, the word is never mentioned explicitly. By contrast, V'shamru gives us a basis for God's people to observe Shabbat as a form of direct *creative* imitation: we reenact God's creation of the world and God's first Shabbat, and we remember that we are God's co-creators. Daily and weekly, in our relationship with God, work and rest, we act out and echo the great drama of God's

relationship with the universe.

Through the use of poetic elements and narrating a mini-version of the creation story, V'shamru complements the first passage by conveying to us that Shabbat is about far more than its laws and the threat of punishment for their violation. Shabbat is a dramatic reenactment—a kind of spiritual theater—in which we, together with God, weekly re-live the world's creation and God's covenant of love with us. Similar to Berry's poem, V'shamru recognizes that Shabbat is a weekly miracle, a glorious walk in the woods without your camera—with eyes and heart flung wide open. Every Saturday is a day passing through the week, never to be again. Yet Shabbat is more than merely Saturday; it is a day that eternity utters, reflecting that eternal covenant between the eternal Creator and Israel, the eternal people.[24] Shabbat's holiness is expressed through law that helps us, like God, to rest and be refreshed in body and spirit. Without law to help us create a boundary between work and the holiness of rest, we cannot accomplish this quest for holiness. However, law alone is never enough, for law without love, prohibitions without poetry, behaviorism without meaning, can transform Shabbat from that joyous walk in the woods into a prison sentence. In the true spirit of Judaism, the poetic words of V'shamru stand in balanced tension with the prior expression of the Bible's most inclusive Shabbat prohibition: *m'lakhah*, or creative work.[25] Together, law and love, prohibition and poetry, behavior and purpose, set you and me free from merely existing, by showing us how to truly live, in letter *and* in spirit.

V'shamru is also responding to Exodus 31:12–15 in another significant way. The first passage makes clear that Shabbat is of, by, and for the Jewish people as a holy people, in exclusive relationship with God. It is a particularistic institution. Creation, humanity, the world at large, and our vital role in creation are not given a voice

here, at least not an explicit one. V'shamru does not abandon this particularistic theology: after all, Shabbat *is* an eternal sign between us and God; it is God's gift specifically to us, the Jewish people, one that we celebrate and nurture. But V'shamru also lends a distinctive, universalistic meaning to Shabbat as well. We observe Shabbat not only to treasure our holiness as God's chosen people, but also to reaffirm our task as God's choosing partners: together with God, we must strengthen the ongoing creation, maintenance, and protection of heaven and earth and all living things in between. One day a week, our celebration of Shabbat sets us *apart from the world*; during that time, God and God's Torah ask us to remember our responsibilities to all of humanity and creation, as *a part of the world*.

The Mark of Cain and the Sign of Shabbat

Imagine this scene from the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cain stands over the corpse of his brother, whose life he has taken in a fit of brutality and jealous rage. The glorious creation song of God's first Shabbat has long since been muffled by the sins of Adam and Eve and their subsequent expulsion from paradise, and now this bloody end to one quarter of humanity, what Elie Wiesel has called the world's first genocide.[26] Stunned by this human being's propensity for violence and death, the Creator confronts Cain, the son and sibling turned murderer, an arrogant pretender to mastery over life and death (Genesis 4:9–10):

> God said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"
> And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"
> Then God said, "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!

We imagine the last echoes of song of that first Shabbat being drowned out completely by Abel's blood screaming from the earth, demanding justice. This was not what God had planned for humanity. How has everything gone so terribly wrong?

God decrees that Cain's punishment will not be execution: after all, why would God, heavenly Parent of both these boys and the whole first human family, respond to murder by initiating more killing? No, Cain will wander ceaselessly in exile, subject to intimidation by human and animal predators alike. Aware of Cain's distress that whoever finds him might kill him, God performs a mysterious act of compassion: "The Eternal put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15).

What was the mark that God gave Cain? Long ago in an unnamed place in the Land of Israel, a group of rabbinic sages argued fiercely about this. Some of them said it was a fearsome horn on his forehead. Others suggested that it was fearsomeness itself. And still others taught that it was a dog to keep him company and protect him. Then a rabbi who had been listening spoke up:

> "I disagree with all of you. The protective mark that God gave to Cain was Shabbat. It was as if Shabbat shut the door tight in God's face when God came to take Cain's life for his crime against his brother."
>
> "Shabbat? That is absurd!"
>
> "No it is not. The Torah tells us that God gave Cain a protective mark, in Hebrew *ot*. The Torah also calls Shabbat an *ot*, a sign of God's eternal covenant with us.[27] The use of this same word in both passages is hinting something important to us: God gave Cain, the world's first murderer, Shabbat, the world's first and greatest day of peace and love,

as His sign of protection. So too, God gives it to us, Cain's descendants.[28]

V'shamru, like all poems, presents the best words in their best order. It calls to us: "When you celebrate Shabbat, it will remind you that humanity, descendants of Cain's legacy of brutality, is never beyond redemption." No matter how cruel humanity becomes, V'shamru calls to us, the Jewish people, but by extension all people: "Let Shabbat be your release from despair, let it be your blessing of respite, 'forever here,' that holds you through the violence, the hatred in the world, all week long. You, God's living poem, God's partners in creation, must be that living sign to all people, reminding them that death and destruction are not the only answers. People can—they must—choose life."

[1] Wendell Berry, "If You Love It," in *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Publishing, 2013), p. 352.

[2] Chaya Halberstam, "The Art of Biblical Law," *Prooftexts* 27:2 (2007), p. 346. Chaya Halberstam is an associate professor of Religious Studies at Kings University College at Western University in Canada.

[3] Jason M. H. Gaines, "Poetic Laws," published online at https://thetorah.com/poetic-laws/. Jason Gaines is an instructor in Religious and Judaic Studies at Smith College.

[4] Assnat Bartor, "Reading Biblical Law As Narrative," *Prooftexts* 32:3 (Fall 2012), pp. 292–311. Assnat Bartor is Professor of Jewish Studies at Tel Aviv University.

[5] Chaya Halberstam, "The Art of Biblical Law," pp. 345–364.

[6] One of the best books on biblical poetry is by Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, Basic Books, 2011), especially chap. 1.

[7] *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: J. Grant, 1905), p. 48.

[8] Psalm 23:2. Translated literally from the Hebrew, the verse reads: "In green pastures God makes me lie down / By still waters God leads me."

[9] The date palm only begins to bear fruit four to eight years after being planted. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Date_palm.

[10] See the following Wikipedia articles: "Cedrus Libani," at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cedrus_libani; see also the article, "Date Palm," at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Date_palm.

[11] These two techniques are known respectively as chiastic parallelism (as noted, from the Greek letter χ) and elliptical parallelism.

[12] See the Wikipedia article on cross-linguistic onomatopoeia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross-linguistic_onomatopoeias#Hushing.

[13] Regarding my translation of the Hebrew words *ot hi l'olam* as "a sign-is-She eternally" on line C, as opposed to the standard translation (as, e.g., in the JPS New Jewish Version: "It shall be a sign for all time"), my translation is an attempt to poeticize how the words are rendered in English. This is in keeping with my contention that the V'Shamru passage should be read as biblical poetry. Though Shabbat is neither male nor female, the biblical Hebrew pronoun, *hi*, is feminine, thus my reference to Shabbat as "She." Further, because rabbinic sources refer metaphorically to Shabbat as both a bride and a queen, capitalizing the word She is a reasonable poetic flourish. On line D, I have attempted to preserve the Hebrew word order in "made Adonai the heavens and the earth," whereas the more normal English word order would be "Adonai made the heavens and the earth."

[14] In fact, this word, *la-asot*, echoes its earlier use in the passage about that first Shabbat found in Genesis 2:3.

[15] The noun "Shabbat" is spelled in Hebrew with the same letters as the verb *shavat*. The Hebrew letter *bet* is at times vocalized with a *dagesh*, a diacritical mark that gives it a "b" sound in pronunciation. When, for grammatical purposes, the mark is absent, the *bet* letter is pronounced like a "v."

[16] This dynamic relationship between us and God is reinforced throughout our passage by the repetition of the Hebrew *asah*, to do or to make: we "make" Shabbat (*la·asot*) to echo when God made the universe (*asah*). Both uses of the verb, as well as the verb *shavat* ("ceased from work"), directly echo Genesis 2:3: "And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had done."

[17] I suggest my neologism, "re-souling," based upon the verb root of *va-yinafash*, which is *nun-pei-shin*, "to be alive" or, more accurately, "to breathe." "To be refreshed" is certainly an adequate figurative rendering of the word, but it fails, in my opinion, to capture the full poetic texture and beauty of the Hebrew.

[18] For instance, see the comments of Rashi and of Abraham Ibn Ezra to this verse.

[19] I also suggest that this "how much more so" inference is hinted at in yet another way in our passage: through ellipsis, leaving out explicit mention of God in the second line, thus creating an intriguing ambiguity. Without explicit reference to God there, the line could also be read as: "And on the seventh day, he (=the human being) ceased from work and re-souled." This is, admittedly, a creative reading engendered by the line's elliptical quality, not the simplest or most logical contextual reading.

[20] Saul Olyan, "The Sabbath According to H or The Sabbath According to P And H?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124:2 (Summer 2005), pp. 201–209.

[21] Ḥayyim ibn Attar, *Or Ha-ḥayyim* (ed. Venice, 1742) to Exodus 31:16–17. For a translation, see *Or Hachayim: Commentary on The Torah By Rabbi Chayim ben Attar*, trans. Eliyahu Munk (Jerusalem: Lambda Publishers, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 839–846.

[22] The translation is from the Jewish Publication Society Torah, changing "Lord" to "Eternal" in keeping with the conventions of this series.

[23] As I wrote above, the Hebrew verb root *shamar* can be translated as "to observe a law or prohibition."

[24] "Day that eternity utters": after Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1951), chap. 7.

[25] *M'lakhah* is not primarily "work" as defined by physicists: the amount of energy expended when force is applied to an object to move it over a certain amount of distance. Rather, it is the act of creating or destroying something, particularly by changing its material state. According to Genesis 2:1–3, when

God reached the seventh day of creation—Shabbat—God ceased from all of God's *m'lakhah*, through which God created the universe. To create the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary which was a sacred space, the Israelites imitated God's performance of *m'lakhah*, as is recorded in Exodus, chaps. 25–38. The talmudic sages possessed an ancient legal tradition that Exodus 31:12–17 interrupts this building narrative (human *m'lakhah*) to once more warn the Israelites that, like God, they are to perform creative work six days a week in order to build the sanctuary; yet on the seventh day, also like God, they are to refrain from this construction of sacred space in order to honor sacred time, Shabbat. The sages derived the list of the thirty-nine archetypal forms of *m'lakhah* forbidden on Shabbat, based upon this juxtaposition of the biblical passages. Whatever forms of creative work were forbidden in the building of the *mishkan* are similarly forbidden during Shabbat. See M. Shabbat 7:2 for a detailed list of *m'lakhah* labors.

[26] Elie Wiesel. *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Touchstone-Simon and Schuster, 1976), pp. 37–64.

[27] Another standard translation of the Hebrew word, *ot*, used above to refer to "mark," is "sign." *Ot*, as we have read, is the word used in our V'shamru passage.

[28] Midrash Tanḥuma, *Parashat B'reishit* §10.