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THE SACRED SHABBAT

THE BEGINNING OF THE SEDRA¹, WHICH IS THE BEGINNING OF THE WHOLE TORAH, tells of the various stages of Creation. The final achievement, the completion and the climax, is Shabbat, the seventh day. Shabbat is a recurring holiday in our lives, a point when we leave the cycle of ordinary existence and re-connect with something different.

What is a vacation? Sometimes one feels like taking a holiday in a bustling city far away from home. There are new sights and new experiences, and one is active from early morning till late at night. The vacation is stimulating and useful.

Another kind of holiday is to go to a quiet country district, a peaceful village. This might not be so far away. In that calm atmosphere, the things that seem important are family, friendship, a meal together, a conversation, a quiet walk.

It is a return to simplicity, in which one reaches a special thoughtful area of one's own self.

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When one comes back from this kind of holiday one is refreshed, with new power to tackle the busy daily world of work and active life.

There are different ways of celebrating Shabbat. For many people, it is rather like that second kind of holiday, a day of Peace. The special Shabbat laws, beginning with lighting the candles before sunset, give it this quality. Shabbat takes one far away from the ordinary world. It is intriguing how it has the power to do this even though one is usually in one's own home. You have not taken a plane or a train anywhere new, but somehow everything is different.

How is this achieved? The laws of Shabbat have the effect of creating a special kind of journey: not to another place, but to another dimension. This journey is achieved through the lighting of candles on Friday afternoon before sunset, Kiddush on wine, the meals together with one's family, discussion of Torah, enjoyment of shared company, prayer.

Women and girls² light candles at least 15 minutes before sunset in order to inaugurate the Shabbat. This expresses the positive power of womanhood. The Sedra describes Eve, having been tempted by the Serpent, persuading Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The Zohar tells us that when a woman or girl lights candles for Shabbat she uses her innate and pure spiritual power to bring peace to the world³. Before Kiddush there is a widespread custom to recite 'A Woman of Valour' about the glory of womanhood from the end of the Book of Proverbs.

Shabbat expresses the positive delight which is inherent in simple physical activities like eating. This delight itself becomes a means of connecting with the Divine, a Mitzvah. On Shabbat our earthly, human activities become sublime. In a remarkable way, the enjoyment of physicality becomes part of the spiritual dimension of life⁴. Then when one returns to ordinary life at nightfall on Saturday, making Havdalah with a plaited candle⁵, spices and wine, there is a new feeling of balance and strength in facing the active days ahead.

Shabbat Shalom!

1. Genesis 1:1-6:8. 2. The Lubavitcher Rebbe recommended that unmarried girls, including young children, should light one Shabbat candle, saying the blessing, and then their mother should light her own candles. 3. Zohar I 48b. 4. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 4 p.1037. 5. Or two candle-wicks (or even matches) held together.

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SEDRA BEREISHIT

RESISTING THE EVIL INCLINATION

Rafi was in trouble. He had got into a fight with his little brother, Yoni, which had ended with him throwing Yoni's favourite toy fire engine over the garden wall, where it landed in a clump of vicious stinging nettles in a neighbour's garden. Yoni was inconsolable, and Rafi's mother had NOT been pleased.

In fact, the truth was, Rafi himself wasn't feeling very happy with himself. He wasn't feeling proud of his behaviour at all. How had he done such a horrible thing? At the time, though, it seemed he had not been able to help himself doing what he had done.

Why was it, he wondered, that people always ended up doing bad things, even though they knew it was wrong. He knew it was wrong to hit and take away his brother's toys, yet he had still done it. Maybe his father would know.

The next day, Shabbat, when walking to the Synagogue, Rafi posed his question.

"Daddy, why do people often seem to do bad things, even though they know it is wrong? Why don't we just want to do good?"

"You chose a good day to ask that question," answered his father. "Do you know what Sedra they are going to read today?"

“Ummm, Bereishit?”

“And do you remember what events happen in Bereishit?”

“The world was created... and Adam and Eve ate the fruit and had to leave the Garden of Eden, and they had two sons, and one son killed the other.”

“Quite right. You see, Adam and Eve were pure and innocent. They did not want to do bad things - only to serve G-d. But then the snake came and persuaded them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, which was the one thing they were forbidden to do.

“The snake is like the Evil Inclination - called the Yetzer Hara. This tries to persuade us to do bad. Everyone has this Yetzer Hara. That is why Cain killed Abel: his Evil Inclination got the better of him. Our job is to resist it, and through this, we make the world into a better place. The Torah shows us what G-d wants us to do. The Yetzer Hara tries to persuade us to disobey - but we have to fight back against it by doing good!”

Now Rafi understood why he had thrown the fire-engine over the wall. He had given in to that nasty snake, the Yetzer Hara. Ughhh!

“In future I am going to be in charge of what I do,” he thought to himself. “I’m not going to let that snake run my life!”

At that point they reached the Synagogue, and entered.

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