

# Imagine a Sabbath Economy

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

The goal of sabbath teaching and law is to properly orient human desire. While we use creation in order to flourish—we must eat and work so that we can live—the character of our use should be determined by the vision of God’s sabbath delight in the creation. In other words, our daily tasks, from eating a meal to doing our job, should be informed by sabbath reality. The question always is, “Are we promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?”

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*Exodus 23:10-13*

God’s *menuha*, or rest, on the seventh day of creation is something more like tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose. Rather than being a leave-taking from his working days, suggests Abraham Joshua Heschel, God’s *menuha* reflects the divine pleasure in a creation finely made. It suggests God’s attunement to a creation that in the integrity of its own being promotes joy. Indeed, as we later read in the book of Job, God takes obvious delight in creatures that are of marginal or no interest to us. God cares about the calving of deer, watches them crouch as they give birth to their offspring (39:1). In a speech that devastates human pretension and narrowness, God reminds Job of the divine care for and de-

light in the great animal Behemoth, “which I made just as I made you . . .” (40:15). The sense of passages like this is that creation is not primarily for us. It exists for God, and is the occasion for God’s care, pleasure, and delight. It is a sabbath creation in which all the members of creation, including humanity, achieve their true end as they approximate God’s own tranquility and joy.

The goal of sabbath teaching and law is to properly orient human desire. While we and all else must use creation in order to flourish—we must eat and work so that we can live—the character of our use should be determined by the vision of God’s delight in the creation. The setting aside of one day in the week to commemorate and reflect upon the goodness of God’s creative power does not mean that it is only on that one day that the sabbath occurs. Rather, the day serves to correct and inspire us by recalling every day’s action in light of its sabbath goal. To observe the sabbath is not to take flight from the frantic and anxious character of our world. It is rather to acquire the perspective that will then permeate our every thought and action with the vision of God’s peace and joy. In other words, there is no reason why our daily tasks, ranging from the feeding of children to the reading of a book, cannot be informed and driven by sabbath reality. The question always is, “Are we in our thought and action promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?”

The Israelites understood that the *menuha* of God was not restricted only to humans. This is why the Leviticus code expressly prescribes that the land be given the opportunity to rest and lie fallow every seventh year. Not only does this give the land a chance to replenish itself, it also frees the land from the potentially constrictive demands of private ownership that would deprive animals and the poor of the goods of creation. “For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat” (Exodus 23:10-11a). When we understand that creation does not exist primarily for us, but is instead the setting in which God’s love and vitality find their concrete expression, then the right of all creation to livelihood becomes not merely a possibility but a necessity, a necessity that in some cases requires the sanction of law.

When we learn to appreciate sabbath reality as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation, and stop thinking of it primarily as the cessation of or temporary reprieve from our otherwise acceptable striving, the prospect of daily sabbath life becomes a concrete possibility. Rather than being relegated to one part of our schedules, sabbath observance becomes the prism through which all our thought and action receive their focus and direction.

Consider the mundane task of eating a meal. Does our eating reflect or distort the *menuha* of God? In many instances mealtime is an act of desecration, since it is premised on irresponsible and unjust food production

practices. When the integrity of plant species is usurped by biotechnology companies which modify and then patent the genetic code of seed, and when that patent is then used to legally prohibit farmers around the world from freely sharing and growing their own locally-developed crops, the tranquility of God is violated. Rather than enabling farmers to work with the created order and with each other, these biotechnology companies aim to possess and control creation (farmers included) to suit their own profit margins. When swine, poultry, and cattle are raised in massive confinement operations that promote infestation, disease, and animal stress and violence, we disallow these animals' well-being. Rather than appreciating the animal as a creature that might be the occasion for divine joy, we cram them into hostile environments and pump them with antibiotics and "food" so that we can butcher them ever more quickly and efficiently. Our eating, instead of reflecting the profound religious significance of this most intimate engagement with grace, becomes ignorant and ungrateful. We eat without care, and in our inattentiveness we consign other creatures to oblivion or want.

To be sure, our eating will require that plants and animals be killed so that we can live. But must our eating depend on practices that take only the narrow interests of efficiency and profit into account? The increasing control of food production and distribution by large corporations, and their dependence on cheap, often migrant, labor, suggests that we have let the concern of millions of creatures come under hostile and unjust intent. If we understand the creation on which we depend to be a sabbath creation we will not let it needlessly become the pawn of interests antithetical to the purposes of God. We will instead demand that the food we eat be produced under conditions that respect the integrity of creation, which means that we will work to promote those economic and political conditions that serve to insure and protect safe food for all. We will work to insure the long-term viability of the land and life forms it supports. We will, in short, demand that the food we eat be something for which we can be truly thankful rather than something over which we must express horror or sadness.

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In our work, no less than our eating, we have the opportunity to share in the peace of God. To what end do we perform our tasks? Do they serve and reflect the glory of God, and thus take fully into account the goodness of God's creation, or do they foster self-glorification? Sabbath law in the Jewish scriptures no less than the action of Jesus Christ, who proclaimed himself as the Lord of the Sabbath, suggests that the overriding aim of

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our work is to enable the full life of others. Jesus' ministry was at all times attentive to the needs that are prerequisite to life—food, companionship, health—just as it stood in direct opposition to those forces that would maim or disfigure life—demon possession, illness, hostility, and even death itself. So too our work as teachers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, media technicians, parents, and so on, ought to promote those concrete conditions that affirm and rejoice in the creation of which we are a part.

No doubt it will be difficult for many of us to conceive, let alone practice,

the requirements of sabbath life in all the particulars of our experience. In part this stems from the present structures of social and economic life that are predicated on speed, acquisition, and consumption. The assumption of most advertising, now increasingly communicated in fits of screaming and yelling, is that we must have it all and that we cannot have it fast enough. We are made to feel guilty if we do not buy and consume at a ravenous pace, since our failure to buy translates into a failure of the stock market, which translates into a failure of pension plans, and so on and on! Within this aggressive, anxious context it is very difficult to carve out a life that expresses gratitude, delight, or peace. More likely the end result will be a life governed by stress, guilt, and worry. Though the signs of fatigue are everywhere apparent, the practice of rest or tranquility is not.

Because our present economic structures can so dominate us and cause us to live with anxiety, it may well be time for us to envision and invent a new economic order, one that takes seriously the sabbath character of

creation. It may be time, in other words, for us to extend to its practical conclusion the insight of sabbath tranquility.

The challenge before us is to create an economy that casts our possession of things in its true sabbath light. Can we think about possession in a way that is less self-regarding and more other-regarding? If we do, we will be primed to experience and enjoy the integrity and freedom of creation in a way that we have not before. We will learn that as land can belong to us, so too we belong to it and are implicated in its wholeness and health. Through our care for creation we will participate in God's own delight in a world well made.

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