

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

But Rabbi, How Come YOU Can Come to Work on Shabbos?!

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

“Hey Rabbi! I gotta talk to you!”

Steve was upset. A college student trying to make a few dollars, he applied for a job as a waiter in our retirement community. He joined a staff of young people who come to work every day to serve our residents their dinner. While setting up their schedules, the head waitress told Steve, “No Steve. You can’t come in those days.” “Why not?” “Because you’re Jewish.” “So?” “Uh, Steve, I think you better speak to the rabbi.”

Steve argued that he wanted to come in on Friday nights and Saturdays. It wasn’t fair, he argued, to deprive him of the right to work. “I’m not religious!” he said. “I don’t keep Shabbos!” I tried to explain to him that we, as a Jewish company, are not allowed to have Jews work for us on Shabbos.

[Actually, this Shabbos I will not be going to work. I am leaving town Friday afternoon to perform a Bris in Manhattan Saturday morning. (“There you go again, Rabbi, working on Saturday!”)]

Tomorrow morning we will read the Ten Commandments. In the Fourth Commandment we will read the command to “*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.*” (Exodus, 20:8)

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin points out that this Mitzvah is actually a “re-run.” Three days after the splitting of the Red Sea, the Nation was given several Mitzvahs, including the Mitzvah of Shabbos. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 56b, quoted by Rashi on Exodus, 15:25) This acceptance of Shabbos, writes Rabbi Sorotzkin, was a “Shabbos of Rest.” Later, when the Israelites were told that Manna would not fall from Heaven on the Sabbath, was a “Shabbos of Holiness.”

Now, at the base of Mount Sinai, the Israelites were told once again to observe the Sabbath. Why did they need to be told so many times?

Rabbi Sorotzkin explains that rest is much easier than holiness. One does not need much convincing to accept the concept of taking a day off. We were already taking one day off a week in Egypt. Millions of people take Sundays off, whether or not they practice any particular religion. How hard does a boss have to try to convince his employee to take a day off?

Holiness, on the other hand, is a different thing entirely. On Shabbos we are supposed to speak differently than we do during the week. We are not supposed to talk “shop” on Shabbos. Our reading material should be different on Shabbos. (It is highly questionable, for example, as to whether one is permitted to read newspapers on Shabbos.) There are things we are not allowed to touch, and there are dozens of activities, many of them relaxing, that are forbidden. This type of Shabbos, the Shabbos of Holiness, is something that we may be a bit more reluctant to accept.

Therefore, the Torah gave Shabbos a reinforcement in the Ten Commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day TO KEEP IT HOLY. Six days you will work, AND ACCOMPLISH ALL YOUR WORK, but the seventh day is Shabbos for G-d... For in Six days G-d made the Heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the Seventh day. Therefore G-d blessed the seventh day AND MADE IT HOLY. (Ibid, Exodus, 20:8-11)

It is easy to take a day off on Saturday. The hard part, the part that G-d wanted to emphasize, is the need to keep it holy. The six-day work week (including Sunday!) is the time that G-d tells us to “*accomplish all your work.*” After six days at the old grind, we should be happy to kick back and chill out. The Torah therefore reminds us “*but the seventh day is Shabbos for G-d.*”

Shabbos is not a voluntary day off. We don’t have the option of saying, “okay, I appreciate the break, but I’d rather come in and earn time and a half.” Shabbos is the time we are supposed to focus on the fact that G-d created the world for us and gave us a mission. We are supposed to use this time away from “*accomplishing OUR work*” to reflect upon G-d’s Commandments. We are supposed to emulate G-d: *You shall be holy; for I, your G-d, am holy.* (Leviticus, 19:2)

Holiness is not an easy thing to accomplish. For all of us, rabbis or otherwise, it is a full-time job.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz