

## Sabbatical Consciousness: The Jewish Leisure Ethic and the Spirit of the Sabbath

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Leisure—what is it good for? Well, based upon the astounding record of human accomplishments during non-working hours, the answer is absolutely everything: the most important works of Jewish and secular scholarship were not written during work hours, but during leisure time. Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah*—the foundational text of modern Jewish law—and *Moreh Nevuchim* [*The Guide for the Perplexed*], perhaps the foundational text of modern Jewish philosophy—during his non-working hours.<sup>1</sup> Isaac Newton wrote *Principia Mathematica*, the foundational work for all modern math and science, during his leisure time. According to legend, the Greek mathematician Archimedes had his famous “Eureka!” moment while taking a bath, and Einstein conceived of the Theory of Relativity while riding a bike.<sup>2</sup>

The Greeks said that leisure was necessary for the soul.<sup>3</sup> In explaining how civilization was created during leisure hours—the wheel, the arts, and everything that we cherish was created when our minds were free to be preoccupied with things other than the drudgery of what it took to survive—Bertrand Russell stated that “[l]eisure is essential to civilization.”<sup>4</sup> But before Bertrand Russell recognized the critical importance of leisure hours in which our minds—and not only our bodies—would be free to engage in the non-work pursuits that we cherish, *machshavah* [Jewish thought], *mussar* [Jewish ethical and devotional literature], and even the *Tanakh* all advocated freedom of the mind as an ethical and religious imperative. *Mussar* emphasizes that freedom of the mind is an ethical and religious imperative by equating mental drudgery with the Jewish slavery in Egypt and by associating mental freedom with *Yetziyat Mitzrayim* [the Exodus from Egypt]. And before the Greeks recognized the necessity of leisure, the Torah, in commanding Jews to observe the Sabbath once a week and to observe a Sabbatical year once every seven years, *mandated* leisure as a religious precept.

Jewish thought and *mussar* literature later expounded upon the Jewish ethic of necessary leisure by illuminating the ways in which this ethic is embedded in the mitzvot of

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Avraham Danzig (1748-1820), a businessman by trade, also wrote two important books of Jewish law—the *Chayei Adam* and *Chochmat Adam*—during his non-working hours. Legend has it that the Vilna Gaon used the scant amount of time per day in which he was not involved with his occupation—intensive Torah study—to write a treatise on mathematics.

<sup>2</sup> See Dennis Overbye, “Brace Yourself! Here Comes Einstein’s Year,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/01/25/science/25eins.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/25/science/25eins.html). Cited in Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* (New York: Sarah Crichton, 2014), 331.

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, “Leisure and Play in Plato’s Teaching and Philosophy of Learning,” *Leisure Sciences* 12 (1990): 211-27, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: George Allen & Unwin, 1935; republished by Routledge Classics, 2004); the essay is available as an online PDF at <https://libcom.org/files/Bertrand%20Russell%20-%20In%20Praise%20of%20Idleness.pdf>

Shabbat and *Shemita*. This paper will explore the nature of the Jewish ethic of leisure, and will examine how the classic works of *mussar* and Jewish thought articulated the Jewish ethic of necessary leisure. Additionally, this paper will seek to address the following questions: What are the ethical implications of a Jewish ethic of leisure? What other sources can we turn to for an articulation of this ethic? And, finally, is there a theology undergirding this ethic, and if so, what is it?

## I. The Jewish Ethic of Necessary Leisure

If the value in human beings lies in the work they do and in the things they produce, why would the Torah ever command that we rest? Why not work as much as possible—why ever take time off? Long before contemporary sociologists, journalists, and Bertrand Russell noted the importance of leisure—and even before the Greeks stated that leisure was necessary for the soul—the Torah recognized that leisure is just as integral to what it means to be human as is work.

The Torah not only indicates that leisure is desirable, but goes so far as to say that it is mandatory: we are commanded to observe one day of rest every seven days—the Shabbat—and one year of rest every seven years—the *Shemita*. It has long been recognized that it is necessary for human beings to have times of leisure; according to a midrash, when Moses first came before Pharaoh, Moses requested that the Jewish slaves be given the Shabbat as a day of rest. This conceptual association between Sabbath and freedom from slavery is made explicit by the liturgical refrain that refers to Shabbat as a day that recalls the liberation from Egypt [*“zekher litziyat mitzrayim”*]. In a society in which the weekend is an integral part of the week, we are accustomed to thinking about necessary leisure times in terms of days; what is radical, if not downright revolutionary, about the institution of the *Shemita* is its explicit message that necessary leisure must also encompass certain years.

That the Torah goes so far as to mandate an entire year of necessary leisure strongly suggests that we ponder the importance of leisure: why we need it, how to achieve it, and what society would look like if the ethic of necessary leisure were widely respected.

## II. The Necessity of an Ethic of Necessary Leisure

One of the essential components of what it means to be human is complete conscientiousness.\* The human being is the one creature capable of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and introspective reflection.<sup>5</sup> What makes a human being a “human being”—

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<sup>5</sup> *Mussar*'s emphasis upon self-awareness, conscientiousness, and introspective reflection has talmudic roots; see *b. Rosh Hashanah* 28b: “[the performance of] commandments require intent” (*“mitzvot tz’rikhot kavanah”*), cited by Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pakudah in *Hovot HaLevavot*, “Gate of Accounting of the Soul,” ch. 3, discussing the concepts of “wholeness of heart” (*“yihud haLev”/“lev shalem”*). (Citations from *Hovot Halevavot* are from the two-volume Lieberman, Jerusalem edition, 1990; translations from the Hebrew are my own.) According to Luzzatto, any lapse in conscious awareness (*“hesah hada’at”*) can result in unanalyzed actions, and unanalyzed actions detract from the fear of God. *Mesillat Yesharim*, ch. 25, 125.

Cf. Alan Morinis, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: One Man’s Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition* (Trumpeter: Boston, 2007), 123, discussing how the type of conscientious awareness of all thought and action urged by *mussar* can make life more meaningful.

\*N.B.: the terms “conscientiousness,” “conscientious,” and “conscientious awareness” here and throughout this essay refer not merely to a quality of thoughtfulness but to a mental state of

what makes us distinctive, says the Torah, is that we are created in the image of God. According to Rashi, being created *b'tzelem Elokim* [in the image of God] means that man was created 'to understand and to be intellectually creative.' Rashi thus interprets *tzelem Elokim* as a descriptive term that connotes heightened intellectual capacity.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, according to Rabbi Irving Greenberg's expansion upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's interpretation of "*tzelem Elokim*," being in the image of God means that that we possess some of the capacities of God. One of these primary capacities is heightened consciousness: just as God is the universe's omniscient Supreme Consciousness, so too, human beings are endowed with the capacity for self-awareness and self-consciousness.<sup>7</sup> When we engage in and develop our reflective, introspective, and conscientious capacities, we imitate God; when we leave our reflective, introspective, and conscientious capacities fallow for too long, we distance ourselves from our inner Godliness.

Indeed, some Jewish thinkers have gone so far as to suggest, a la Socrates, that reflection is part in parcel of being human:

Behavioral sciences have enriched our knowledge of psychological, biological, and sociological facts and patterns of behavior by observation and description. However, *we must not forget that in contrast to animals, man is a being who not only behaves but also*

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alertness that is akin to a higher (or more complex) form of consciousness in which one is acutely cognizant of one's actions, sensations, and thoughts.

On introspection, see *Hovot HaLevavot*, "Gate of Accounting of the Soul" ("*Heshbon hanefesh*"); the entire concept of *heshbon hanefesh* is premised upon the imperative to develop conscientious awareness in every sphere of life. Ibn Pakudah's prooftext for the principle that one must always analyze one's actions and render an 'accounting for his soul' is Psalms 32:9 ("one should not be like a horse or mule that does not understand"), *ibid.*, ch. 1. The concept of *heshboh hanefesh* is also discussed in Rabbi Israel Salanter's *Iggeret HaMussar*, and an entire work of *mussar* is devoted to an exploration of the concept: *Heshbon ha'Nefesh*, by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin (1809).

For general treatments of the *Mussar* movement, see Zalman F. Ury, *The Musar Movement* (New York, 1970), and Lester S. Eckman, *The History of the Musar Movement* (New York, 1975).

On conscientiousness and self-awareness as essential aspects of the human being, cf. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). In creating, Hamlet, Falstaff, and other characters who, in their capacity for self-reflection—"overhearing themselves"—seem "more real than living men and women" (*ibid.*, 314), Shakespeare "invented the human," or "at least changed our ways of presenting human nature" (*ibid.*, 418).

<sup>6</sup> Rashi, commentary on Gen. 1:26.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 10, 147; and *idem*, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (ed. Eva Fleischner; New York: Ktav, 1977), 7-55, 441-446, repr. in *Wrestling With God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (ed. Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, Gershon Greenberg; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 499-523, at 500 (citations according to the 2007 pagination).

For Rabbi Soloveitchik's interpretation of *tzelem Elokim*, see R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Agency [*Sh'liḥut*]," in *Yemei Zikaron* (Aliner Library; WZO, Dept. of Torah Education & Culture; Jerusalem: Orot, 1986), 9-28. I am indebted to Rabbi Greenberg for this citation.

The literary critic Harold Bloom likewise relates the human intellectual and creative capacities to godliness itself; Bloom posits that someone endowed with creative genius possesses aspects of God's own genius. Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (Warner Books, New York: 2002), xii. Cf. *ibid.*, 11 (for Ralph Waldo Emerson, "genius was the God within").

*reflects upon how he behaves.* Sensitivity to one's own behavior...is an essential quality of being human.<sup>8</sup>

The animal being acts and reacts; the human being acts, reacts, and *reflects*; without reflection—and without mandated times of necessary leisure during which our reflective capacities can be cultivated—we forfeit an essential component of our humanity. And when we do not exercise all of our distinctive human capacities, we fail to reach our potential as individuals created in the image of God.

In a perfect, messianic world, we would all have the means and the ability to engage in reflective, introspective, and conscientious activities all day long. But in our not-yet perfect world, we must perform many tasks that may diminish our self-awareness and that prevent us from engaging in introspection. The Shabbat—one day a week in which we model a perfect, messianic world<sup>9</sup>—and the *Shemittah*—one year every seven years in which we model a perfect, liberated world—provide us with the opportunities to engage in the type of reflective, introspective, and conscientious activities we would be able to constantly engage in were the world to be perfected. In the island of holiness in time that is created during the Shabbat, “the human being shifts from unexamined life to examined life, from the instinctual existence to conscious being.”<sup>10</sup> The Shabbat is that one day per week—and *Shemittah* is the ideal one-year per seven-year-cycle—when we can be fully human:<sup>11</sup>

Just as Shabbat is a day of being, so is the sabbatical a year of being. Self-development and relationship are placed at the center of life. The messianic fantasy is acted out for a whole year. ... Coming every seven years, the sabbatical allows the compromising ways of the world to function but prevents them from becoming entrenched.<sup>12</sup>

The Sabbath day and the Sabbatical year are the Torah's mandatory days and years of necessary leisure. The fact that the Torah prescribes these obligatory cessations from productivity conveys the unmistakable message that leisure is an indispensable component of life: we need leisure, because without leisure we cannot properly reflect. As Judith

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 9 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.*, 53 (“Disregard of the ultimate dimension of human existence is a possible state of mind as long as man finds tranquility in his dedication to partial objectives. But strange things happen at times to disturb his favorite unawareness”—the Sabbath day, and the Sabbatical year, are precisely those ‘strange happenings’ which the Torah has instituted in order to ‘disturb our unawareness’), 62 (on the importance of “surveying one’s inner life”), and 81 (“[t]hinking is living”).

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 127, and 128: “The Shabbat day is Judaism’s central attempt to inject the dream [of a perfect world] into life while preventing its negative side effects,” 129, “Stepping outside the here and now, the community creates a world of perfection. Through total immersion in the Shabbat experience, Jews live the dream *now*...The Shabbat is the foretaste of the messianic redemption...” (emphasis in original), 132, “on every Shabbat, Jews preenact the coming of messianic restoration,” and 133: “someday, when we make the earth a paradise, all will be on a permanent sabbatical so they can spend their lives creating rather than earning.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 148. See also *ibid.*, at 178.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, at 138: “Shabbat...is a proclamation, ‘I am, not I do.’ If I could do nothing, I would still be me, a person of value. Thus, the individual reasserts the primacy of human value and the principle of the intrinsic worth of human existence, ‘unjustified’ by productivity.” See also *ibid.*, at 162. Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 3: “To have more does not mean to be more. ... There is happiness in the love of labor, there is misery in the love of gain.”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, at 153.

Shulevitz has observed, “the Sabbath...implies that time has an ethical dimension.”<sup>13</sup> And, as Rabbi Irving Greenberg explains, without reflection, we cannot create, we cannot relate to others in meaningful ways, and we cannot be ourselves. In short, without reflection—and without mandatory, set-aside times of necessary leisure that provide time and space for such reflection—we cannot be fully human:

Shabbat [provides] the *necessary leisure* to be one’s self and to enter into deeper relationships.<sup>14</sup>

Rest is more than leisure from work, it is a state of inner discovery, tranquility, and unfolding.... The Sabbath commandment is not just to stop working, it is actively to achieve *menuchah* (rest) through self-expression, transformation, and renewal. On this day humans are freed to explore themselves and their relationships until they attain the fullness of being.<sup>15</sup>

[The Shabbat’s] focus remains the enrichment of personal life. In passing over from weekday to Shabbat, the individual enters a different world. The burdens of the world roll off one’s back. In the phrase of the *zemirah* (Sabbath table song): “Anxiety and sighing flee.” In the absence of business and work pressure, parents suddenly can listen better to children. In the absence of school and extra-curricular pressures, children can hear their parents. *Being is itself transformed. The state of inner well-being expands.* As the Sabbath eve service text states: “The Lord...blesses the seventh day and [thereby] bestows holy serenity on a people satiated with delight.” *The ability to reflect is set free.* Creative thoughts long forgotten come back to mind. One’s patience with life increases. The individual’s capacity to cope is renewed.<sup>16</sup>

A society in which the ethic of necessary leisure—in the terminology of the *siddur* [prayer-book], ‘holy serenity,’ or, in Judith Shulevitz’s term, the recognition of the “social morality” of time, or “sacred time”<sup>17</sup>—is not respected is a society that degrades the human being and, consequently, mitigates the image of God. This is why the Torah, and the *ba’alei mussar* [authors of ethical-devotional literature (lit., ‘masters of ethics’)] in tow, fiercely advocated for the absolute, inviolable necessity for periods of leisure during which we would once again be able to be self-reflective and thereby rejuvenate our inner image of God.

In addition to the horrors of physical pain, among slavery’s great evils are the spiritual, intellectual, and psychological pains it wreaks upon the person. The spiritual indignities inflicted by slavery are portrayed in great works of literary fiction. In Edward P. Jones’s novel *The Known World*, a powerful slave narrative and the recipient of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, we are given a glimpse of what it means to live with a “slavery mentality.” Not only is a slave’s freedom of physical movement stymied, but at a certain point during servitude, even a slave’s mental freedom to think, feel, and desire is stifled as well. This acknowledgment of what slavery takes away from an individual is articulated when Augustus seeks to explain the meaning of freedom to the recently liberated Henry:

“You feelin any different?”

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010), 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 125 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, xx, xxviii-xxix.

"Bout what?" Henry said. He was holding the reins to the mules.

"Bout bein free? Bout bein nobody's slave?"

"No, sir, I don't reckon I do." He wanted to know if he was supposed to, but he did not know how to ask that. ....

"Not that you need to feel any different. You can just feel whatever you want to feel. .... You don't have to ask anybody how to feel. You can just go on and do whatever it is you want to feel. Feel sad, go on and feel sad. Feel happy, you go on and feel happy."

"I reckon," Henry said.

"Oh, yes," Augustus said. "I know so. I've had a little experience with this freedom situation. It's big and little, yes and no, up and down, all at the same time."<sup>18</sup>

Slavery, be it mental or physical slavery, prevents us from feeling freely and thinking independently. When we are freed from physical slavery, and when we are freed from mental slavery during Sabbath days and sabbatical years, we once again become free to think, feel, and desire what we want: we regain complete freedom. That the Torah mandates an institution of freedom as radical as the *Shemithah* implies that there is an ethic of leisure—that leisure is desirable for the freedom that necessary times of rest give us to once again become free to think and feel independently—and that cultivating a sabbatical consciousness (defined here as the cognizance that full physical *and* psychological freedom is a desideratum) is an ethical ideal.

*The Torah's ethic of leisure thus entails a striving for psychological, intellectual, and emotional freedom: not only freedom from externally imposed physical labor, but freedom from externally imposed emotions as well. Shemithah consciousness implies an acknowledgment that human beings need freedom to feel; as the newly freed slaves in The Known World recognize, full freedom entails not only "doing what they want to do," but the freedom to feel how they want to feel, when they want to feel, and what they want to feel.*

Where does the Torah first articulate the ethic of necessary leisure? Where do we first learn about the imperative of cultivating a sabbatical consciousness? In *Mesillat Yesharim* [Path of the Just], perhaps the foremost work of *mussar* in the Jewish canon, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto points to a passage in the beginning of the book of Exodus. At the end of Parshat Shemot, Pharaoh becomes incensed at Moses for providing the Jewish slaves with an inkling of hope that they would be freed; in order to stamp out any possible thoughts of impending freedom that they may be entertaining, Pharaoh decrees that their workload be doubled:

תַּכְבֵּד הָעֲבֹדָה עַל הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בָהּ וְאֵל יִשְׁעוּ בְּדַבְרֵי שָׁקֶר.

Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein; and let them not regard vain words.<sup>19</sup>

Once their workload has been multiplied to this extent, Pharaoh understands, their ability to concentrate upon and be aware of anything other than what they need to do to

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<sup>18</sup> Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 49.

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 5:9 KJV. Compare the *God's Word* translation, which almost perfectly captures the *Mesillat Yesharim's* reading of this verse: "Make the work harder for these people *so that they will be too busy to listen to lies*" (emphasis added). Cf. Rashi, *loc. cit.*, s.v. "v'al yish'u b'divrei shaker": Pharaoh increased their [physical] workload in order that 'they not contemplate and speak of *spiritual* matters' (translation mine; emphasis added). Viz., the physical affects the spiritual: too much *physical* work, and a lack of necessary *physical* leisure, can lead to too little *spiritual* reflection, and a lack of *mental*, intellectual, and emotional conscientiousness: too much *physical* work has a deleterious effect upon *spiritual* wellbeing.

meet their daily quota of bricks will have been reduced to next to nil. Outside of certain extraordinary people, the human capacity for conscientiousness cannot bear such great burdens; overload it, and it crushes under the weight of other thoughts, stresses, and obligations.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto calls attention to this very passage during his discussion of the trait of *zehirut* [awareness]. This biblical passage, writes Rabbi Luzzatto, presents a perfect articulation of what it means for a person to have the means for conscientiousness and awareness coopted:

Pharaoh intended not only to not leave [the Hebrew slaves] any opportunity to conceive of plotting against him, but by placing a relentless, never-ending workload upon them, he also was attempting to distract their hearts from any introspection.<sup>20</sup>

This verse thus serves as a stark admonition against physical slavery, for without freedom, we are deprived of the mental liberty that is necessary for constant self-awareness and full consciousness—and without being fully conscious, we cannot maximize our inner image of God.

But this verse, as Rabbi Luzzatto indicates, also inveighs against intellectual, spiritual, intellectual, and psychological slavery: it is very easy to become spiritually and intellectually enslaved to activities which diminish our ability for full self-awareness and complete consciousness. Moreover, merely being in the world and existing in an imperfect society on a day-to-day basis, with all of the routine tasks and dull pursuits that daily existence entails, can psychologically and spiritually “enslave” us, Rabbi Luzzatto writes. This is why we must develop our capacity for *zehirut*, he writes, and this is why we must always be on the watch for those moments when our conscientiousness is being trampled upon by an incessant stampede of routinized behavior and unconscientious actions. We must always be wary and watchful lest we act “as horses riding roughshod into battle without thinking”:<sup>21</sup>

The principal of awareness is that man should be aware of his actions and manners; that is to say, he should analyze and investigate his actions and manners...and should not walk along the path of his habits as a blind person in the dark. For this is a matter that man’s intellect compels: once man has been endowed with an intellectual capacity...how could it be possible for him to wish to close his eyes from conscientiousness? One who acts thusly is lower than the beasts and the animals.<sup>22</sup>

And this, according to this article, is why we need to revivify the ethic of necessary leisure. Without strongly stating that it is an ethical obligation—on the part of individuals, communities, and societies—to provide ourselves and others with certain periods of time in which we do not have to deal with the daily drudgery that can blind us to our behavior, we may not have the opportunity to engage in the uniquely human activity of reflecting upon our actions. And without times of mandated leisure during which we can reengage with our

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<sup>20</sup> Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim* (Amsterdam: 1738; Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1978), 15 (citations follow the 1978 text; translations are my own).

<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 8:6 (translation mine). Cf. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856; New York: Random House, 1957), 11: “How I blindly followed her as if I were a mill-horse treading blindfolded in a circle, utterly unaware of what I was grinding.” Cf. Heschel, *Who is Man?*, 76: “This seems to be the malady of man: *His normal consciousness is a state of oblivion*, a state of suspended sensitivity.... We do not understand what we do; we do not see what we face” (emphasis in original).

<sup>22</sup> Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, 14.

conscientious capacities in order to become more self-aware, we run the risk of living in a society in which we are all “as horses” running roughshod over the image of God in ourselves and in others. Without stating that leisure is ethically normative, we are in danger of existing in perpetual bondage to the mass-culture gods of the economic market, whipped by the merciless taskmasters of commerce, without respite from the midcult cretins of conspicuous consumption.

The later *ba'alei mussar* elaborated upon the concept of “spiritual slavery.” In his book *Be'er Yosef*, Rabbi Yosef Zundel of Salant states that the Egyptian bondage comprised two forms of slavery: a physical slavery [*shi'bud gashmi*], and a spiritual slavery [*shi'bud ruchni*].<sup>23</sup>

As a proof-text for his notion that Egyptian slavery constituted a dual bondage, Rabbi Salant cites the phrase “*pakod yifkod Elokim etchem*” [God shall surely redeem you] (Exodus 13:19, and 3:16 [*pakod pakad'ti etchem*]). The phrase “*pakod yifkod*” [shall surely redeem] seems redundant. Why, asks Rabbi Salant, does the verse employ a “double *lashon*,” an apparently redundant expression? It does so, he answers, because the verse teaches that when the Jews were enslaved in Egypt, they were *doubly* enslaved in the bonds of “*sh'nei shi'budim*” [two enslavements]: the Egyptian bondage comprised a *shibud haguf* (or *shibud gashmi*) [a physical slavery], and a *shi'bud hanefesh* (or *shi'bud ruchni*) [a spiritual slavery].

Rabbi Salant uses the notion of “*sh'nei shi'budim*” to explain Rav and Shmuel's *machloket* [disagreement] in the Talmud (Mishnah, *Pesakhim* 10:2) concerning the collective memories that one should recall during the Passover Seder. The Talmud says that during the Seder, we should “begin with the bad, and end with the good”: “*matchil bignut um'sayem b'shevach*.” What does it mean to tell the Passover story by “beginning with the bad and ending with the good?” Rav and Shmuel disagreed as to whether this refers to the Jews' progression from physical bondage to physical freedom (“*bitchilah avadim hayinu lefar'oh b'mitzrayim*” [Deut. 6:20], “*vayotzi'einu Hashem Elokeinu b'yad chazakah uvizro'ah netuya*”), or whether it refers to the Jews' progression from spiritual bondage to spiritual freedom (“*bitchilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu, v'achshav kirveinu haMakom la'avodato*”). Their disagreement, according to Rabbi Salant, was whether, when commemorating our freedom during the Passover Seder, we should be focusing on our physical freedom—our liberation from the *shi'bud gashmi*—or whether we should be focusing on our spiritual freedom—our liberation from the *shi'bud ruchni*. That we *posken* [hold] like both opinions—that the halakhic decisors rule that we should mention both forms of slavery—is indicative of the fact that there were *two* forms of slavery.

But even acknowledging the two forms of slavery still leaves an important question unanswered: which form of freedom is more significant? Which form of slavery is more serious? Does the fact that we begin the Seder with “*avadim ha'yinu*” [we were slaves]—the *shi'bud gashmi*, the physical slavery—imply that it is the physical form of slavery that is more grave? According to Rabbi Salant, the type of slavery we first commemorate in the Seder does not imply a value judgment concerning which form of slavery is worse; rather, it

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<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Yosef Zundel of Salant, *Be'er Yosef*, “Parshas Va'eira,” 6:6-7. I am indebted to R. Eliakim Koenigsberg for pointing me to this teaching of R. Salant. On the concept of *shi'bud ruchni*—spiritual, intellectual, and psychological slavery, and on the importance of achieving “inner liberty,” cf. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 89, 90: “Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one's own pettiness.... Inner liberty as well depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people.... only a very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem...how to live with things and remain independent.... Outer liberty was given to [man] by God...[but man] himself must achieve his inner freedom.”

conveys a realistic assessment regarding which form of slavery is most apparent to the naked eye. The Passover Seder begins by discussing the *shi'bud haguf* because the *shi'bud haguf* was *nikar* [recognizable], whereas the *shi'bud hanefesh* was *eino nikar* [non-recognizable].

It is clear when we're physically enslaved. It is not as clear when we're spiritually enslaved. This is why insisting upon an ethic of necessary leisure is all the more important in societies without physical slavery. Because of how difficult it is to realize when we are spiritually, intellectually, and psychologically enslaved, we need mandated periods of rest—days of rest during the week, and years of rest during seven-year cycles—in order to repossess the awareness that we need to recognize when we are locked in states of spiritual bondage, and in order to regain our independence from this insidious form of enslavement.

And this, Rabbi Salant explains, is the difference between the two mentions of “*sivlot*” [travails, or slavery-bonds] in the following two verses (Exodus 6:6-7): “*v'hotzeiti etchem mitachat sivlot mitzrayim....vidaytem ki ani Hashem hamotzi etchem mitachat sivlot mitzraym*” [and I shall take you out from under the bonds of Egypt...and you shall know that I am the Lord who takes you out from under the bonds of Egypt]. Why, Rabbi Salant asks, is the verse's first mention of “*sivlot*” [bonds] spelled *chaser*—written without the letter ‘vav’—while the second mention of “*sivlot*” is spelled *maleh*—spelled *with* the letter ‘vav’? The answer, he writes, is that the verse is referring to the two forms of slavery, the *sh'nei shi'budim*: first, God promises to redeem the Jews from the *sh'ibud haguf*, the obvious, recognizable, physical bondage—God first promises the Jews that they will no longer have to serve the Egyptian taskmasters. Then, God promises the Jews “*v'ga'alti etchem*” [I shall redeem you]: God promises to redeem the Jews from *shi'bud hanefesh* [spiritual slavery] by giving them the Torah and by making them a spiritual people. Then, and *only* then—only when they gain *spiritual* freedom—will they be able to recognize that they had in fact been spiritually enslaved. Embedded in this verse in the Torah is a profound psychological insight: we don't even *recognize* when we've been spiritually, intellectually, and psychologically enslaved until we've been redeemed from this invisible form of slavery. And this, Rabbi Salant explains, is why the *ba'al haHagadah* [the one who narrates the story of the Exodus during the Passover Seder] starts with “*avadim hayinu lephar'oh*” [we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt]. The *ikar shi'bud* [the principal form of slavery] is the one that is *nikar* [recognizable]: physical bondage is obvious. But ultimately, it is the *ge'ulah ruchnit* [the spiritual redemption] that we eventually focus on; we don't initially perceive spiritual, intellectual, and psychological slavery, but as soon as we do, we realize that true, complete freedom entails redemption from this less obvious, but equally pernicious, state of suppression. If total freedom is the goal, then a total redemption—an all-encompassing, physical *and* spiritual redemption—must be achieved.

The notion that we can be spiritually, intellectually, and psychologically enslaved is highly resonant in the American age of marginalized leisure. Those of us fortunate enough to be living in societies in which we do not face the depredations of sexual slavery—a scourge which still afflicts various parts of our world and which lurks as an ever-present stain upon the human race—no longer have to endure physical slavery. Jews who are fortunate to be living in this moment of history are by and large no longer subject to the more historically familiar form of bondage—the various *shi'budei haguf* [physical persecutions] which our people have had to endure. But even those of us fortunate enough to not have to endure physical threats must still endure spiritual, psychological, and intellectual threats; we do live in a world in which the concept of *shi'bud hanefesh* [spiritual slavery] is very real and very strong. Yet it is this second form of slavery—spiritual slavery—that is all the more dangerous precisely because of how difficult it is to diagnose a *state* of spiritual slavery.

In many respects, the worst fears of Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* and Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* have come to life. The soma of *Brave New World*—the government-mandated drugs which remove New World State citizens' abilities to think and feel deeply—and the “wall-screens” of *Fahrenheit 451*—the wall-to-wall television screens in homes which replaced books in Bradbury's stultifyingly nightmarish world—have their contemporary correlatives in the (largely) vast wasteland of modern television, the internet, the infotainment industry, and in the never-ending data-streams to which our ubiquitous electronic devices subject us.<sup>24</sup> The entertainment, infotainment, and data-consumption culture constitute the soma and wall-screens of our time, and they cohere into mental chains that bind us to their will. When we are under their sway, we forfeit our capacity for independent thought and freedom of feeling; with too much “box-watching,”<sup>25</sup> we fall under the weight of extraneous intellectual and psychological forces, and we lose the capacity for full self-awareness and complete consciousness that is constitutive of a *tzelem Elokim*—a human being created in the image of God.

The *Shemittah*, with its embedded ethic of leisure and its call to cultivate a sabbatical consciousness, beckons us to shape ourselves and our societies in ways wherein we will regain the ability to think independently, to feel freely, and to cogitate conscientiously. We *do* realize when we're *physically* enslaved, but most of us cannot realize when we're *spiritually* enslaved; oftentimes, we don't realize that we've been missing something—in this case, that we've been missing a crucial, non-negotiable component of freedom—until we actually regain it.

This is what we regain when we recognize the ethic of necessary leisure, and this is what we repossess when we cultivate a sabbatical consciousness.<sup>26</sup> The pauses we take

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Cohen, “Do You Obsessively Check Your Smartphone?” CNN, July 28, 2011, [www.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/07/28/ep.smartphone.obsessed.cohen/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/07/28/ep.smartphone.obsessed.cohen/index.html), and Jennifer Soong, “When Technology Addiction Takes Over Your Life,” WebMD, June 6, 2008, [www.webmd.com/mental-health/features/when-technology-addiction-takes-over-your-life](http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/features/when-technology-addiction-takes-over-your-life). Cited in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, 294-5.

<sup>25</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989), 406.

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Moses Pava, Professor of Business Ethics and Dean of the Sy Syms School of Business at Yeshiva University, for introducing me to the concept of “Sabbath consciousness.” Sabbath consciousness is, among other things, the awareness that there are other, equally valuable ways of being in the world other than ways that are economically productive—e.g., the way of being that Heschel termed “*appreciation*.” Observing the Shabbat and the *Shemittah* should ideally lead us to realize the inherent value of non-economically productive, non-utilitarian (or, in Heschel's term, non-“*manipulative*”) ways of relating to the world. See Heschel, *Who is Man?*, 82. And cultivating Sabbath and Sabbatical consciousness means cultivating non-utilitarian attitudes toward nature, toward other people, and toward ourselves: the Shabbat and the *Shemittah* teach us that we are inherently valuable even when we are *not* productive in a quantifiable way. The ethic of necessary leisure that is embedded in the mitzvot of Shabbat and *Shemittah* stand for the principle that leisure can be just as—if not more—valuable than work.

It is beyond the scope of this article to adjudicate the philosophical question of whether leisure is inherently valuable; for an argument that leisure is valuable only insofar as it provides the mental renewal that allows for a refreshed intellect—and that a refreshed intellect is valuable insofar as it enables a reinvigorated study of Torah—see Rabbi David Stav, *Bein Hazemanim* [Heb.] (Yediot Aharonot, 2012); for a critique of Stav's book, see Dr. Roni Shweka's review, “*Pilpul Lish'at Hap'nai*,” published in *Makor Rishon*, 8/10/2012 (rejecting Stav's premise), available in Hebrew at <http://musaf-shabbat.com/2012/08/10/שויקה-רוני-הפנאי-לשעת-פלפול/>. I am grateful to Rabbi Ysoscher Katz for bringing this book and this article to my attention.

On the possibility of an independent, inherent value in leisure—or rest, “*menuha*”—itself, see the countervailing position of Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 14: “The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man

from our regularly scheduled programming during Shabbat and *Shemithah* allow us to recognize whether we've been living in states of spiritual slavery. And if we do find ourselves in such an unfortunate condition, Sabbath days and Sabbatical years enable us to free ourselves not only from physical bondage but from spiritual, intellectual, and psychological bondage as well:

*The inability to stop work is not always imposed by an outside oppressor; it may reflect a psychological enslavement of the individual. Workaholics abound who cannot ever relinquish work .... The ability to stop working is, therefore, an assertion of an inner freedom. In turn, the capacity for distancing enables one to resist absolute demands, even at work.*<sup>27</sup>

The Shabbat and the *Shemithah* are those days and years of necessary leisure—the days and years of rest mandated by Torah—during which, by freeing ourselves from the bonds of the modern mass-market mentality, we can recognize the extent to which we daily, weekly, and yearly toil under the bondage of the entertainment, infotainment, and commercial culture. In our day and age, we not only need a Sabbath and a sabbatical; we need a supplementary sabbatical consciousness as well.

Yet, at the same time, we must be wary of the distractions that just as easily stem from an excess of leisure. We are living in age of distractions, and we need shabbatot [Sabbaths] and *sh'mittot* from the distracting idle pursuits in which our phones and mobile devices engulf us. Just as we need *sh'mittot* because of a *lack* of leisure, we need mandated rest-days and rest-years to remedy the problem of an *excess* of leisure: an excess of entertainment, pleasure, and fun is just as distracting from serious self-reflection, genuine self-awareness, and complete conscientiousness as is an excess of work, sweat, and toil. The distractions of entertainment and infotainment can lead us to neglect the contemplation of “higher things,” much as Pharaoh’s slavery (“*tichbad ha'avodah al ha'anashim*”) was designed to prevent the Jews from contemplating God’s promise of freedom. Later powerful rulers and kings similarly distracted their people—if not with forced labor, then with insidious forms of distracting entertainment—in order to keep their populace and their challengers in check. King Louis XIV of France cleverly employed the pleasurable distractions of entertainment in order to distract the French nobility and *parlement* (the powerful Paris law court) from challenging his power. He created a lavish court culture at his palace in Versailles in order to allow the nobility to wallow in the court’s idle pleasures

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is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work.... The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living”; and 22-23: “*Menuha* is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive. This must have been the view of the ancient rabbis if they believed that it took a special act of creation to bring it into being, that the universe would be incomplete without it.... The essence of good life is *menuha*. ... In later times *menuha* became a synonym for the life in the world to come, for eternal life.”

According to other *sifrei mussar*, the purpose of Sabbath leisure is to provide opportunities for individuals to develop a greater recognition of and enhanced closeness with God. See, e.g., R. Shimshon Dovid Pincus, *Shabbat Malk'ta* (Hebrew) (2000), 21. In traditional rabbinic thought, as R. Pincus observes, the purpose of Shabbat is also to provide rest times in which people who are normally preoccupied with work during the week can engage in Torah study; *ibid.*, 22 (quoting the midrash that states, “*lo nit'nah haShabbat ela l'talmud torah* [the Sabbath was given for nothing else other than for Torah study]”).

<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 138.

so much that they would never wish to risk forfeiting their ostentatious lifestyles by challenging the Sun King's absolute monarchy.<sup>28</sup>

Wading through the massive detritus that the modern infotainment industry has heaped upon us—the vast vacuous wasteland of television, the torturous tawdriness of interminable Internet infotainment, malaise-inducing mass-market books, crude cookie-cutter music, meretricious movies that pander to the lowest common denominator, and the mordant monotony of mobile phone games and addling applications—has created a virtual Versailles court of dull, insipid, and dangerously distracting indolent leisure. The doldrums that we sink into when we wallow in these forms of distraction without self-awareness and without mandated respites from this menagerie of distractions is just as mentally taxing in its coopting of our conscientiousness as the endless laying of bricks is physically taxing—both of these forms of “anesthesia of the everyday”<sup>29</sup> numb our senses, make us less capable of contemplating higher things (such as the ways in which “[t]he universe” is “a place of wonders”<sup>30</sup>), and distract us from our task of improving the world. Our mass media of mindless infotainment has animated the menacing monsters of *Fahrenheit 451*'s wall-screens and *Brave New World*'s soma and has made these nascent nightmares a terrifying reality.

A *Shemitah* ethic, and a *Shemitah*—or Sabbatical—consciousness, dictates that we need consistent respites from such “soma.” If we are constantly distracted by mindless TV, how can we develop a capacity—and when will we have the *time*—to protest against the inequities of our society and to take positive measures to ameliorate our society's (and our own) faults? Cultivating a Sabbatical consciousness entails recognizing when we are suffering from a *surfeit* of unnecessary leisure as much as it entails recognizing when we are suffering from a lack of necessary leisure.

### III. The Ethical Implications of a Jewish Ethic of Leisure

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<sup>28</sup> John Stanley, *Classical Music* (Hong Kong: Reed International, 1994), 73. But see Vincent Cronin, *Louis XIV* (London: Harvill, 1996), 220.

<sup>29</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989), 302.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Cf. John Updike, *Couples* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), 107: “We all rather live under wraps, don't we? We hardly ever really open ourselves to the loveliness around us. Yet there it is, every day, going on and on, whether we look at it or not.”

As Neil DeGrasse Tyson wondered in the recent revival of the “Cosmos” (2014) television series (originally created and narrated by Carl Sagan), why is it that so few people in our society know of the accomplishments of Giordano Bruno and Edwin Hubble, but so many people know the names of “reality-TV” celebrities and the names of mass-murderers? As Salman Rushdie answered 25 years ago, “[m]odern mass-murderers, lacking this heroic dimension, are no more than sick, damaged beings...driven, perhaps, by the nonentity's longing to be noticed, to rise out of the ruck and become, for a moment, a star.” (*The Satanic Verses*, 456) Unfortunately, our crassly commercial infotainment culture continues to fulfill the attention-seeking longings of these malicious miscreants at the expense of informing the populace about science, public policy, and other matters of vital interest that a citizenry needs to be kept abreast of in order for it to function as a well-informed self-governing society. As Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen writes, “[t]here has been a serious failure in communicating the results of scientific analysis and in involving the general public in informed ethical reasoning, especially the United States.... Better communication and a more active and a better informed media can enhance our awareness of the need for environment-oriented thinking.” Sen, “Energy, Environment, and Freedom: Why we must think about more than climate change,” *The New Republic*, August 25, 2014, 35-39, at 37, 38.

Judaism believes in the vision of universal redemption. Judaism envisions a world in which the Exodus paradigm of freedom that began with the Jews will eventually encompass all peoples.<sup>31</sup> In striving to work towards a world of maximal freedom, the Jewish ethic of necessary leisure carries profound ethical implications. What is implied by a Jewish leisure ethic is an ethical imperative to strive to shape a society in which the necessary leisure ethic is recognized, valued, and upheld.

In Western societies such as the United States, and in societies in which the Protestant work ethic has been embraced as the predominant socio-economic ethical norm, incorporating the necessary leisure ethic would provide a critical contrapuntal corrective to our tendency to overindulge in productivity. Many of us in the United States are accustomed to believing what Bertrand Russell once believed:

Like most of my generation, I was brought up on the saying: 'Satan finds some mischief for idle hands to do.' Being a highly virtuous child, I believed all that I was told, and acquired a conscience which has kept me working hard down to the present moment....

But new findings about the nature of work, rest, and productivity urge us to consider the non-vacuous virtues of idleness and leisure:

I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.... The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake.... The notion that the desirable activities are those that bring a profit has made everything topsy-turvy.... It is this divorce between the individual and the social purpose of production that makes it so difficult for men to think clearly in a world in which profit-making is the incentive to industry. We think too much of production, and too little of consumption. One result is that we attach too little importance to enjoyment and simple happiness.<sup>32</sup>

But, after reflecting upon the sources that portray leisure as a prime Jewish ethic, we, like Russell, may also be poised to undergo an intellectual and ethical revolution in our orientation towards work and leisure:

But although my conscience has controlled my actions, my opinions have undergone a revolution. I think that there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached. Everyone knows the story of the traveler in Naples who saw twelve beggars lying in the sun (it was before the days of Mussolini), and offered a lira to the laziest of them. Eleven of them jumped up to claim it, so he gave it to the twelfth. This traveler was on the right lines.<sup>33</sup>

Lacking leisure and deprived of necessary idleness—which should not be conflated with indolence—we may become “cut off from many of the best things”: we may not only become cut off from art, literature, music, and culture, but we may also become cut off from spirituality, religion, our fellows, and our own souls. A Jewish ethic of leisure mandates that

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<sup>31</sup> Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 34, 35: “The freeing of the slaves testified that *human beings are meant to be free*. History will not be finished until all are free.” (Emphasis in original)

<sup>32</sup> Russell, “In Praise of Idleness,” *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Untwin, 1935; New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-15; citations according to the unpaginated online PDF: <https://libcom.org/files/Bertrand%20Russell%20-%20In%20Praise%20of%20Idleness.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

we work towards the creation of a society in which “the bulk of the population” no longer suffers “this deprivation; only a foolish asceticism, usually vicarious, makes us continue to insist on work in excessive quantities now that the need no longer exists.”<sup>34</sup>

What would a society in which the leisure ethic is upheld look like? It would perhaps not look too different from the one envisioned by Russell: a society in which “four hours’ work a day should entitle a man to the necessities and elementary comforts of life, and that the rest of his time should be his to use as he might see fit.”<sup>35</sup> We can quibble about the number of hours, but the principle stands: in a society in which the capacity for productivity has been exponentially increased by industrialization, mechanization, and technological advances, the number of hours per day that most people should work should be proportionally decreased. And to those who would say that “if most people are granted this amount of leisure time, they would not know how to use this time,” the appropriate reply is that the reason people don’t know how to use their leisure time is because our social and educational system has not adequately assisted us in cultivating tastes (e.g., art appreciation) “which would enable a man to use leisure intelligently.”<sup>36</sup> Or, as Heschel articulated this dilemma, “we know what to do with space but do not know what to do about time.”<sup>37</sup>

We still live in a society in want of necessary leisure. Quite simply, we work too much, and we do not rest enough. Contemporary journalists continue to document the excessive work-hours logged by most Americans. And social scientists have found that American parents have the longest average workdays of any parents in the industrialized world.<sup>38</sup> In *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*,<sup>39</sup> Brigid Schulte

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. “I am not thinking mainly of the sort of things that would be considered ‘highbrow,’” Russell explains: “Peasant dances have died out except in remote rural areas, but the impulses which caused them to be cultivated must still exist in human nature. The pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio, and so on. This results from the fact that their active energies are fully taken up with work; if they had more leisure, they would again enjoy pleasures in which they took an active part.”

<sup>37</sup> Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 5 (somewhat ironically citing Russell in *ibid.*, n. 2). This dilemma, Heschel says, results from the fact that time, unlike space, has no “thinginess,” and we have great difficulty dealing with dimensions such as “time, which, being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it had no reality.” *Ibid.* Cf. <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/63ite2/the-word---truthiness> and <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/06words.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Australian parents also tend to have very long workdays. See M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Lyn Craig, “Parenthood, Gender and Work-Family Time in the United States, Australia, Italy, France, and Denmark,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72:5 (October 2010): 1344-61, doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00769.x; Almudena Sevilla-Sanz, José Ignacio Giménez-Nadal, and Jonathan Gershuny, “Leisure Inequality in the U.S.: 1965-2003” (working paper, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, 2011), [www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/documents/working-papers/2010/swp101.pdf](http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/documents/working-papers/2010/swp101.pdf); Magali Rheault, “In U.S., 3 in 10 Working Adults Are Strapped for Time,” Gallup, July 20, 2011, [www.gallup.com/poll/148583/poll/Working-Adults-Strapped-Time.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/148583/poll/Working-Adults-Strapped-Time.aspx); “Americans Stressed-Out; 75% Too Busy for Vacation,” Odyssey Media Group, September 14, 2010, [www.odysseymediagroup.com/nan/Editorial-Hotels-And-Resorts.asp?ReportID=418924](http://www.odysseymediagroup.com/nan/Editorial-Hotels-And-Resorts.asp?ReportID=418924). Cited in Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* (New York: Sarah Crichton, 2014), 290-94.

addresses a profoundly “American” dilemma—in a world in which we are overworked, overwhelmed, and overburdened, “*Torah mah t’hei aleihah?*”,<sup>40</sup> so to speak? Where will we find the leisure time that is necessary to engage in Torah study, or in artistic creativity, or in the “difficult pleasures” of literary reading? In short, in a world in which we work too much, will we ever again be able to appreciate the virtues of play?

American society tends to place a premium on work and productivity. Yet, as Sophie McBain has written, if we think that by simply working more hours, we will be more productive, we are mistaken:

There's no hard and fast link between working hours and productivity.... Generally, it does seem that reducing the number of hours worked increases productivity: Greeks, for instance, work the longest average hours in Europe, putting in an average of 2,032 hours a year, but they are the 8th least productive workers. After Greece, Poland and Hungary work the second- and third-longest average hours respectively, but Poland's workforce is the least productive in the OECD, followed by Hungary. The five countries that work the fewest hours (Netherlands, Germany, Norway, France and Denmark respectively) are all in the top ten most productive OECD countries.<sup>41</sup>

Even activities like play, which are often regarded as “frivolous” froth, can have surprising benefits. If we have the leisure time to play—or to enjoy the type of art and literature that exhibits the quintessentially Shakespearean *jeux d’esprit*—we may even become *more* productive:

There is a kind of magic in play. What might seem like a frivolous or even childish pursuit is ultimately beneficial. It's paradoxical that a little bit of ‘nonproductive’ activity can make one enormously more productive and invigorated in other aspects of life.<sup>42</sup>

Positing necessary leisure as a normative ethic implies that it is our responsibility, in whatever capacity we possess, to lobby for larger levels of leisure. If we happen to be in politics, or if it is in our capacity to make the case to our Congress persons and

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. John P. Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, *Time for Life; The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> *b. Berakhot* 35b.

<sup>41</sup> “Why We Should All be Working Less, by Sophie McBain, *The New Republic*, April 11, 2014, [http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117334/frances-labor-laws-why-we-should-all-be-working-less?a&utm\\_campaign=tnr-daily-newsletter&utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=12476556](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117334/frances-labor-laws-why-we-should-all-be-working-less?a&utm_campaign=tnr-daily-newsletter&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=12476556)

See also Steven Greenhouse, “Americans’ International Lead in Hours Worked Grew in 90’s, Report Shows,” *New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2001/09/01/us/americans-international-lead-in-hours-worked-grew-in-90-s-report-shows.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/01/us/americans-international-lead-in-hours-worked-grew-in-90-s-report-shows.html), as cited in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, 290: “Greenhouse reports that the International Labor Organization found that Americans worked 137 hours more a year than Japanese workers, 260 hours more than British workers, and nearly 500 hours more than German workers.”

<sup>42</sup> Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Avery, 2009), 11, as cited in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, 327. Cf. Judy Martin, “Employee Brain on Stress Can Quash Creativity and Competitive Edge,” *Forbes*, September 5, 2012, [www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/09/05/employee-brain-on-stress-can-quash-creativity-competitive/edge/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/09/05/employee-brain-on-stress-can-quash-creativity-competitive/edge/); Nicky Phillips, “Taking a Break Is Secret to Success,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 16, 2012, [www.smh.com.au/national/education/taking-a-break-is-secret-to-success-20120815-24951.html](http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/taking-a-break-is-secret-to-success-20120815-24951.html); John Tierney, “Discovering the Virtues of a Wandering Mind,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/06/29/science/29tier.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/29/science/29tier.html?pagewanted=all). Cited in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, 331.

governmental representatives, the ethical value of necessary leisure and the cultivation of Sabbatical consciousness may entail advocating for a policy that is similar to the one which France is poised to adopt: “Labor unions and corporate representatives in France have agreed on an ‘obligation to disconnect from remote communications tools’” for a set amount of time per day. The French Labor Ministry is considering a bill that “would require that employers verify that the 11 hours of daily rest time to which all workers are legally entitled be spent uninterrupted.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, it may entail, as Judith Shulevitz suggests in *The Sabbath World*, adopting “European Union vacation polices (a minimum of four weeks), shorter work-weeks (35 hours, say), paid parental leave, and limits on overtime. We could emulate Germany and the Netherlands and give workers the right to reduce their hours and their pay, unless companies can prove that this would constitute a hardship.”<sup>44</sup>

With their 35 hour work-week and with their generous vacation allotments, the French appear to have shaped a society based (knowingly or not) upon the ethic of leisure; in this regard, France and Sweden currently possess a greater degree of Sabbatical consciousness than does the United States. But, just as the Torah realizes that Shabbat and *Shemittah* have to be enforced—many people will not simply cease being productive unless this cessation from work is enforced through external mechanisms—the French and the Swedish realize that these rest hours have to be enforced. One might think, ‘what need would there be to mandate a rest-period and to enact a measure to enforce it? Wouldn’t people naturally want to rest, relax, and have free time?’ Not necessarily, from what we know of human nature and human history. The human drive to be productive, to work in order to accrue economic rewards, and to create is such a potent corrective to the human proclivity for inertia that both the Torah and, much later, the French and Swedish governments, realized that the work ethic can overpower the leisure ethic if the work ethic is left unregulated. Thus, to correct the tendency to overwork and to provide a space for reflection, the Torah, and later, the French and Swedish governments, concluded that if human beings are not compelled to rest, we may become imprisoned in the perpetual pursuit of profit and may never rest at all. The Sabbath, the Sabbatical, and the 11 hours of daily rest time, all bespeak an ethic of necessary leisure:

To walk away from production and live the Sabbath is to renounce the absoluteness of the profit motive; it is intended to psychologically free the individual to impose moral values on his or her work as well.

There is grave danger in idolatry of wealth.....A society that worships wealth usually degrades the value of the poor or perhaps all humans. Net worth is confused with intrinsic worth.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, as human involvement in work deepens, the labor in itself can become a form of slavery. *The test of stopping short of servitude is the ability to stop working, to assert mastery over the work instead of succumbing to its lures and demands.* This is the central function of

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<sup>43</sup> “Deal Seeks A Respite From Email: French May Limit Contact With Work,” by Scott Sayare, *New York Times*, April 12, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/12/world/europe/in-france-a-move-to-limit-off-the-clock-work-emails.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/12/world/europe/in-france-a-move-to-limit-off-the-clock-work-emails.html?_r=0). See also Derek Thompson, “The Only Advanced Country Without a National Vacation Policy? It’s the U.S.,” *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2012, [www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-only-advanced-country-without-a-national-vacation-policy-its-the-us/2559317](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-only-advanced-country-without-a-national-vacation-policy-its-the-us/2559317). Cited in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, 290.

<sup>44</sup> Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 210.

<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 138 (emphasis added).

Shabbat: “Six days [a week] you work/create; on the seventh day you rest/stop” (Exodus 34:21).<sup>46</sup>

Or, in the inimitable words of Heschel:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. ... Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. ... Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.<sup>47</sup>

[T]he seventh day is a mine where spirit’s precious metal can be found with which to construct the palace of time, a dimension of time in which the human...aspire[s] to approach the likeness of the divine. ... The art of keeping the seventh day is the art of painting on the canvas of time the mysterious grandeur of the climax of creation: as He sanctified the seventh day, so shall we.<sup>48</sup>

As Maimonides writes, the central function of *Shemitah*—a heightened, maximalized Shabbat<sup>49</sup>—is that it allows us to free ourselves from the bonds of work:

The laws of the Sabbatical and the Jubilee are given in compassion for man and provide space [*har’hava* (viz., leisure)] for all of humanity.<sup>50</sup>

*Shemitah* and Shabbat provide us with the leisure that is necessary in order for us to reassert control over our lives. During Sabbath days and sabbatical years, we can tune out the befuddling *bruit* of the banal infotainment industry and become attuned to the bravura Beethovenian bisbigliando of our own souls. But in order for leisure to truly be effective—in order for us to truly gain the time and mental space we need for self-awareness, reflection, and conscientiousness—these hours, days, and years of leisure must be made mandatory; otherwise, the lure of profit and the demand of work can prove too great a burden to overcome. The Torah thus mandates the Sabbath and the Sabbatical; a

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 139 (emphasis added). See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951). Cf. Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World* (discussing the relevance of, and need for, a Sabbath in a society marked by relentless consumerism and incessant technological stimulation), esp. 204, referencing the concept of a “technology Sabbath”—set-aside periods of time where ‘technological Sabbatarians’ disengage from e-mail, cellphones, and the Internet.

<sup>47</sup> Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup> Though the link between Shabbat and *Shemitah*—the Sabbath and the Sabbatical—is self-evident from the Torah (see Leviticus 25:2-7—“the land shall observe a sabbath [*sic*] of the Lord....in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest...” JPS), from their linguistic similarities, and from their conceptual parallels, the Talmud makes this link explicit through a *g’zeirah shavah* in *b. Moed Katan*, 4a. See also Mishnah, *Shevi’it* 1:4 (Shabbat as a *binyan av* for *Sh’vi’it*).

<sup>50</sup> Maimonides, *Moreh Nevuchim* [Guide], part III ch. 39 (translation mine). On additional conceptual linkages between Shabbat and *Shemitah* as elucidated by classical and medieval Jewish commentaries, see Ramban [Nachmanides] *Commentary on the Torah*, commentary to Leviticus 25:2, s.v. “*Shabbat LaShem*,” and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shabbat Ha’aretz*, introduction, 8. I am grateful to Eugene Rabina for pointing me to the interpretations of the Ramban and R. Kook.

society with a Sabbatical consciousness, and a society that upholds the ethic of necessary leisure, would mandate necessary times of leisure as well.<sup>51</sup>

#### IV. The Underlying Theology Implicit in the Ethic of Necessary Leisure

While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the theology undergirding the ethic of leisure, perhaps we can proffer the following position: God, as some Jewish thinkers and theologians have stated, is “free”—that is, in addition to the divine capacities (e.g., infinite consciousness, omniscience, and beneficence) and attributes (e.g., loving, merciful, and gracious) that theologians have traditionally ascribed to God, God is also characterized as being *free*: as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes,

From the outset, *the Hebrew Bible speaks of a free God*, not constrained by nature, *who, creating man in his own image, grants him that same freedom*, commanding him, not programming him, to do good. *The entire biblical project, from beginning to end, is about how to honor that freedom....Biblical morality is the morality of freedom, its politics are the politics of freedom, and its theology is the theology of freedom.*<sup>52</sup>

“Abrahamic monotheism,” continues Rabbi Sacks, “tells a story about the power of human freedom, lifted by its encounter with *the ultimate source of freedom.*”<sup>53</sup> Nothing binds God, and God is bound to no thing, person, or entity—God is radically free.

God, as described in the Bible, is “free from nature,” in stark contrast to the pagan gods which were bound to and embedded in nature.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Applying a sabbatical consciousness and integrating the ethic of leisure into governmental policy-making could significantly improve citizens’ work-life balance by, e.g., limiting the number of hours per day and per week that people can work; by crafting a national vacation policy; by placing limits on the number of days per year people can work; and perhaps even by marshaling economic resources to ensure that citizens enjoy at least one sabbatical year during their working careers.

<sup>52</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 124 (emphasis added); cf. *ibid.*, 71 (“[t]he Hebrew Bible is entirely about this drama of human freedom.”). On the “free God” theology, cf. Paul Tillich, *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling’s Positive Philosophy: Its Presuppositions and Principles* (Victor Nuovo, trans.; London: Associated University Presses, 1974), 137-8 (asserting that divine revelation is premised upon divine freedom); Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry Into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 22: “the [biblical] deity is like his worshippers: mobile, rootless and unpredictable. ‘I shall be where I shall be’ (3:14)—nothing more definite can be said. This is a God who is free, unconfined by the boundaries that man erects”; and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 106-7: “Paganism, with its notion that divine powers can be manipulated by a caste of professionals through a set of carefully prescribed procedures, is trapped in the reflexes of a mechanistic world-view while from the biblical perspective reality is in fact controlled by the will of an omnipotent God beyond all human manipulation.”

<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, 290 (emphasis added); cf. *ibid.*, 69, 113, 124, 126 (“It is no accident that freedom occupies a central place in the Hebrew Bible”), and 245.

<sup>54</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (Schocken: New York, 1970), 11-12. Elaborating upon this concept, Rabbi Sacks writes that “[u]nlike the gods of myth, God is not part of nature. He is the author of nature which he created by a free act of will. By conferring his image on humankind, God gives us freedom of the will....Rejecting myth, the Bible

If we are called upon to imitate God, as Deuteronomy (28:9, 5:33, 8:6, 11:22, 13:5) teaches us—“*v’halakhta bid’rakhav* [and you shall walk in his ways]”—and, as the rabbinic sources teach, if we are called upon to imitate God by acting like God,<sup>55</sup> then we are also called upon to imitate God’s attribute of freedom by striving for more freedom for ourselves and by seeking to move society along the path of greater freedom.

By creating us in His image, the free God endowed us with an inkling of His capacity for total, complete, and radical freedom; to imitate God is to strive for greater freedom on behalf of as many people as possible and in as many manners as possible, for

[O]ur freedom and creativity are what connect us to the divine .... one of the driving themes of the Hebrew Bible is that *it is precisely in our freedom that the human person most resembles God.*<sup>56</sup>

“Abrahamic monotheism,” Rabbi Sacks further states, “is based upon the idea that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings.”<sup>57</sup> God desires that we all become free, because God is free; thus, we are instructed to imitate the free God by seeking more freedom for ourselves, for others—physical, intellectual, and spiritual freedom—and by striving to construct a world in which more people can achieve more varieties of freedom. On the Sabbath day and during the Sabbatical year, we are free from our labors and, in ancient times when the institution of slavery was still extant, slaves were free during Sabbaths and Sabbaticals as well; the prohibition against working a slave on the Sabbath, and the command to free slaves during the Sabbatical year, is reflective of the ultimate goal that Judaism envisions for humanity—complete and total freedom.<sup>58</sup>

At the heart of the Shabbat and the *Shemita* is one of the central teachings of Judaism: the crucial, non-negotiable, inviolable principle that every human being deserves to be free. The institutions of the Sabbath and Sabbatical proclaim a ringing message of freedom: they teach that liberty should fill the earth as water fills the seas. They cry out to a psychologically enslaved society to release humanity from its intellectual bonds; they cry out to an overworked world to uphold the ethic of necessary leisure; and they cry out to an overwhelmed world to allow the free human being to imitate the free God by achieving complete freedom.<sup>59</sup>

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discovers freedom.” Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, 68-9. Cf. Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 35, and 145: “God is unique because God is truly free. The Divine is not programmed.”

<sup>55</sup> See *b. Shab.* 133b, *Sotah* 14a, and *Sifrei* on Deut. 11:22; cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Character Traits” 1:5-6, and idem, *Guide of the Perplexed* i. 54; cf. Norman Lamm, “Some Notes on the Concept of *Imitatio Dei*,” in *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume* (ed. Leo Landman; Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1980) 217-29; and Leon Roth, “*Imitatio Dei* and the Idea of Holiness,” in *Is There a Jewish Philosophy?: Rethinking Fundamentals* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), 22-3.

<sup>56</sup> Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, 113 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 228 (the command that, on “the Sabbath...even slaves are free,” guides slave-masters to “eventually learn that no human should enslave another”).

<sup>59</sup> On further conceptual (and pragmatic) associations between Shabbat, *Shemita*, and freedom, see, e.g., Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, 149-153.

Judaism, as Rabbi Irving Greenberg teaches, believes that redemption starts with the Jews, but doesn't end with the Jews: Judaism envisions freedom for everyone.<sup>60</sup> In the perfect messianic world, every individual will have achieved this state of complete and total freedom; when we act out our vision for a perfect world during Sabbath days and Sabbatical years, we rehearse this messianic state of complete freedom—a freedom that will allow us to more closely imitate the free God, thereby bringing us closer to realizing our potentials as beings created in the image of God.

True leisure is “that place in which we realize our humanity,”<sup>61</sup> and Sabbath days and Sabbatical years are the mandated times of leisure “in which we abandon our plebeian pursuits and reclaim our authentic state.”<sup>62</sup> In a society whose extended work-hours and overriding emphasis on economic productivity make it extremely difficult to realize our humanity, the Shabbat day and the *Shemittah* year are potent antidotes to the poison of overwhelming work. The Sabbath and the Sabbatical are not only ritualistic precepts; they are also ethical institutions which, by their very existence—and through the power of their observance—lodge ethical protests against the indignity inflicted upon overworked individuals. During the Sabbath and the Sabbatical, we attain the reflective time we ought to have, and we regain the opportunity to realize our humanity. In an overwhelmed, overburdened, and overworked society, the Sabbath and the Sabbatical sonorously state that a reinvigorated societal ethic of leisure is absolutely necessary.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 149, 153.

<sup>61</sup> Leisure Studies Department, University of Iowa, as referenced in Schulte, *Overwhelmed*, inside flap. Cf. Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 202:

In 1948...German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper wrote a book on leisure in which he begged his readers not to succumb to the ethos of “total work” and forget the ancient understanding of leisure as the highest good, the point of life that which makes possible the achievements of the human spirit, philosophy and music. “Leisure,” wrote Pieper, “is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality.” In 1962, the American political philosopher Sebastian de Grazia defended leisure in the name of Aristotle, who thought that a citizen could not be free without leisure and the ability to use it well.

<sup>62</sup> Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 30.