

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## A WEEK IMITATION

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Rashbam understands some parts of Torah as included for the sake of other parts, rather than because they have independent value. The most radical instance of this willingness is his subordination of the Creation Story, and perhaps the entire book of Genesis, to the Shabbat commandments in the Ten Statements.

*This entire section about the work of the six days – Moshe Rabbeinu prefaced it to explain to you what Hashem said at the time of The Giving of the Torah Remember the Shabbat to sanctify it . . . because six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth and the land and the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day.*

*This is what Scripture means when it says: There was evening and there was morning, the sixth day*

*– that sixth day that was the end of the six days that the Holy Blessed One said at the Giving of the Torah. That's why Mosheh said to Israel, to inform them that the word of the Holy Blessed One is true.*

*'Do you think that this world was always built as you see it now full of goodness?!*

*It was not so, rather In the beginning . . .*

*גם כל הפרשה הזאת של מלאכת ששה ימים*

*הקדימה משה רבינו לפרש לך מה שאמר הק' בשעת מתן תורה זכור את יום השבת לקדשו [וגו'] כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים*

*ואת הארץ את הים ואת כל אשר במ וינח ביום השביעי ,*

*וזהו שכת' ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי –*

*אותו ששי שהוא גמר ששה ימים שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא במתן תורה .*

*לכך אמר להם משה לישראל, להודיעם כי דבר הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת :*

*וכי אתם סבורים שהעולם הזה כל הימים בנוי כמו שאתם רואים אותו עכשיו מלא כל טוב ?!*

*לא היה כן, אלא בראשית ברא א-להים וגו'*

This approach seems to demand a literal understanding of the first Creation story. Shabbat takes place on the literal seventh day because G-d made the world for six days and rested on the seventh.

It might also make it very important for us to locate Shabbat on the correct day of what presumably has been a continuous

weekly calendar. If Hashem was super-creative on Friday and rested on Saturday, our *imitatio dei* is doubly flawed if we rest on Friday and create on Saturday. True, halakhah mandates individuals who have lost track to keep every seventh day as Shabbat, but that is clearly an inferior substitute.

But the Earth is round. This means that there is no universal 24-hour period during which all Jews keep Shabbat. So are we actually tracking Creation?

The simple answer is that the sun was already in the heavens on day 4. A literal understanding presumably requires at least days and nights 5-6 to have been caused by the Earth's rotation. This means that G-d's Shabbat needs to be conceptualized not as a static block of time, but rather as a rolling 24 hours following the sun, which our Shabbat matches.

Here we run into a problem, however. The dateline means that Jews around the world do not actually observe Shabbat over 24 hours. Rather, when Shabbat ends on the Eastern side of the line, it is just beginning on the Western side. Shabbat is observed for 48 hours out of every 168. That can't parallel G-d's period of rest.

This problem doesn't really bother me, because my preferred understanding of Genesis 1 is at the opposite extreme of literal. Rashi cites a midrash saying that Chapter 1 represents the world as G-d initially considered – *alah bemachshavah* – creating it with justice and without mercy. That's why the only name of G-d in Creation Story One is Elohim. But G-d decided that a world without mercy was unsustainable, and created the world with both. That's why Creation Stories Two and Three identify G-d as Hashem Elohim. Chapter One is therefore a hypothetical. So the issue of literalism is irrelevant.

I can also think of ways to make Rashbam compatible with a fundamentally metaphorical reading of Genesis 1. These ways may be somewhat stretched, but Maimonides and Sherlock Holmes teach that when the impossible has been eliminated, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

And – it is probably impossible (I like that phrase – you’ll see what it means) for Rashbam to believe that halakhah intends our Shabbat to literally correspond to G-d’s.

Here’s why. Rashbam identifies *erev* and *boker* as gerunds meaning “even-ing” and “morn-ing”. Even-ing means that it was light and then became dark; morn-ing means that it was dark and then it morned.

According to Rashbam, day comes before night in Genesis 1.

What about Shabbat? The yeshivish answer is that the calendar switched at Sinai. This means that halakhic night-before-day Shabbat is deliberately out of synch with G-d’s day-before-night rest.

However, that answer preceded Rabbi Dr. Hillel Novetsky’s manuscript- based edition of Rashbam to Genesis 1:31 on alhatorah.org. In that version, Rashbam explains that G-d rested, and the first Shabbat began, at sunset of the sixth day. So Rashbam must believe either in the 6.5 Days of Creation or else that G-d rested for 36 hours. Either way, our halakhic Shabbat does not correspond.

But addressing the problem that the dateline raises for literalism may nonetheless help us understand something important about halakhah.

The halakhic issues associated with the dateline are not to my knowledge addressed anywhere in Chazal or by any rishon. Why not? The easy answer is that Chazal thought the world is flat.

But that is plainly false. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1 teaches that a statue holding a ball in its hand is presumptively an idol, because the ball represents the world. Tosafot Avodah Zarah 41a draws the moral explicitly – the world is round (*shebaolam agul*). Tosafot also cite evidence from the Yerushalmi to that effect. There is counterevidence from the discussion on Bava Basra 25b about where the sun goes at night. But at least some members of Chazal and rishonim knew that the world was round. So why don’t they raise all the great dateline issues – sefirat haomer, counting seven clean days for niddah, Channukah lights, etc.?

I initially thought that the answer was that such issues could never arise in practice. The dateline arises in four circumstances: one person circumnavigated the globe while keeping a weekly calendar, two people meeting at a point which makes their combined journeys a circumnavigation, a person travelling fast enough to overtake the sun (=faster than the earth rotates), or two people communicating at a speed and from locations that, if they were one person, would require

them to have overtaken the sun. None of these are known to have happened before Magellan.

But on reflection, I realized this account was imprecise. It suggests that the halakhic dateline existed but was halakhically irrelevant. But actually, there was no “objective” halakhic dateline at all. Every individual would have gained or lost a day had they circumnavigated the globe, and individuals who met after circumnavigating in opposite directions would be two days apart. But the point at which the gain or loss happened would be subjective, depending on their original location and time of day. When it happened, the halakhah would almost certainly have required them to abandon their subjective count and observe the Shabbat of whatever community they found themselves in. I’m confident that’s what any Jews among Magellan’s crew were told if they asked.

But the telegraph meant that two Jews could be in communication while simultaneously living in communities with conflicting day-of-the-week calendars. (This was also a problem for non-Jewish human beings trying to date commercial transactions etc.) So it became necessary to draw a line that would standardize the days of the week everywhere. But here’s the key point – that line was entirely arbitrary from a halakhic perspective. Poskim were not discovering the line – they were creating it.

The crucial choice, I think, was whether to try to keep Jews on the same schedule as the rest of humanity – which is enormously helpful for commerce and social integration – or, on the analogy of the lunar calendar, deliberately seek to create difference that requires effort to overcome.

The discussion is ongoing, even though I haven’t seen it consciously framed in these terms. I leave it to you to decide how we have decided.

But if this analysis is correct, I think it’s important to acknowledge and internalize the idea that sometimes fundamental, deoraita halakhah that ramifies through the system needs to be created in response to new circumstances, and not just discovered.

*Shabbat shalom!*

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