Transcending Physical Restriction

By observing the Shabbat as a day of rest, the Jew testifies to G-d’s creation of the world. The Talmud attests to the great reward that will come to those who observe the Shabbat.

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi, ‘Anyone who delights in the Shabbat is given a portion with no boundaries as it says, “then you will delight in G-d, and I will mount you astride the heights of the world.”... Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba said that Rabbi Yochanan said, “Anyone who observes Shabbat in accordance with its laws will be forgiven for his sins even if he worshipped idols like the generation of Enosh as it says, ‘Praiseworthy is the man who does this and the person who grasps it tightly, who guards the Shabbat against desecrating it.'”

This passage raises several questions. Why does the Talmud specifically mention the generation of Enosh? Why is delighting in the Shabbat so important? Why is the reward of a “portion with no boundaries” promised for observing the Shabbat?

The people of Enosh’s generation worshipped idols because they believed that G-d had created the world and then left it in the care of other gods and supernatural forces. However, they still kept Shabbat as a commemoration of G-d’s creation of the world in six days and His resting on the seventh. According to the Zohar, they believed that an angel called Shabbtai had been granted dominion over the world. The name Shabbtai is closely linked to the word Shabbat. However, its letters can be rearranged so that it becomes either “Ei Shabbat” or “Oy Shabbat,” meaning either “Shabbat should not exist” or “woe for the Shabbat.” The generation of Enosh believed that Shabbat, as controlled by the angel Shabbtai, involved pain and sorrow; Shabbat observance had nothing to do with joy and rapture.

In response, the Rabbis instructed Bnei Yisrael to delight in the Shabbat, and be happy in the observance of this holy day. By doing so, the Jews would show their appreciation of G-d, who created the world and continues to govern it, and thwart the beliefs of those who maintained that Shabbtai or any other god or power rules the world and determines the nature of the Shabbat. The Talmud also affirms that keeping the Shabbat is tantamount to observing the whole Torah. So even if one worshipped idols like the generation of Enosh, by keeping the Shabbat “in accordance with its laws,” he can demonstrate his rejection of that doctrine and be forgiven.

Why are Bnei Yisrael awarded “a portion with no boundaries” for Shabbat observance? The promise of such reward is great, but it is also vague. Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeshitz, the great leader of the German communities in Wandsbek Altona and Hamburg in the 18th century, explains that had G-d revealed the specific reward for Shabbat observance, the nations might have suspected Bnei Yisrael of observing the Shabbat in order to gain the reward. For this reason, the Talmud declares that the Torah did not reveal the exact reward for Shabbat observance to the nations of the world. This reward for observing Shabbat with happiness and receiving “a portion with no boundaries” correlates to Eretz Yisrael, a Land that is also described as “the portion with no boundaries.” The Land of Israel has been called “the land of the deer (skin)” because despite its small size, it miraculously expands like a deer-skin, which is elastic, and can hold as many Jews as necessary. Also, the Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael at Mount Sinai on a Shabbat, and after Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah and agreed to observe Shabbat, they were privileged to receive Eretz Yisrael as well.

While it is difficult to make sense of the strange circumstances we have all dealt with over the last few months, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are privileged to be a nation who has been graced with the three Divine gifts of Shabbat, Torah, and Eretz Yisrael, all of which allow us to transcend to spiritual heights and enjoy a “portion with no boundaries” even while being physically constrained in isolation.