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תחתית הטופס

Shabbat of the Full Moon

Early biblical laws demand a cessation of labor every seven days, but that was unconnected to Shabbat, which was originally a full moon celebration.

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The Monthly Shabbat and the Seventh Day of Rest

The seven-day weekly cycle has no inherent connection to nature. Yet it became central to Judaism, and through Judaism it now structures time and labor cycles across the globe. When the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, he adopted the seven-day week in accordance with the rotation of Shabbat (Sabbath) long established by Jews. As Christianity spread, so did the Jewish week. Although Revolutionary France, the Soviet Union, and others have occasionally tried to abolish it, the seven-day week has stood the test of time.[1]

But what do we know about the origins of this seven-day cycle? When and how did communities in ancient Israel and Judah come to embrace the practice of ceasing from their labors on Shabbat? And why did the biblical authors make this day a central feature of Israel’s national identity?[2] In exploring this issue, it is crucial to examine the relevant texts separately, rather than assuming that all relate to the same institution and practices.

New Moon and Then Shabbat

A number of early biblical texts, both from the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, refer to Shabbat in tandem with the celebration of the New Moon (*chodesh*). Thus in one of the Elisha legends from the book of Kings, a woman orders her husband to provide her with a servant and donkey so that she could travel to “the man of God” at Mount Carmel. The husband voices a concern:

מלכים ב ד:כג וַיֹּאמֶר מַדּוּעַ אתי הלכתי [אַתְּ הֹלֶכֶת] אֵלָיו הַיּוֹם לֹא חֹדֶשׁ וְלֹא שַׁבָּת וַתֹּאמֶר שָׁלוֹם.

2 Kgs 4:23 Why would you go to him today? It is neither New Moon or Shabbat. She answered, “It’s all right.”

Despite her husband’s protestations, the woman answers with “shalom,” saddles the donkey, and heads out with a servant.[3] Notice here how the husband, in his response, places Shabbat after New Moon and identifies both of these occasions as times when one would customarily visit a seer or prophet.

A number of other older biblical texts follow this one in pairing New Moon and Shabbat, and placing Shabbat after New Moon.[4]

Hosea

הושע ב:יג וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי כָּל מְשׂוֹשָׂהּ חַגָּהּ **חָדְשָׁהּ וְשַׁבַּתָּהּ**וְכֹל מוֹעֲדָהּ

Hos 2:13 I will put an end to (*ve-hishbati*) to all her mirth, her festival, her **New Moon**, her **Shabbat**, and all her festal assemblies.

Isaiah

ישעיהו א:יג לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הָבִיא מִנְחַת שָׁוְא קְטֹרֶת תּוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי **חֹדֶשׁ וְשַׁבָּת** קְרֹא מִקְרָא לֹא אוּכַל אָוֶן וַעֲצָרָה. א:יד חָדְשֵׁיכֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם שָׂנְאָה נַפְשִׁי הָיוּ עָלַי לָטֹרַח נִלְאֵיתִי נְשֹׂא.

Isa 1:13 Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to me. **New Moon** and **Shabbat**, the calling of assemblies–I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. 1:14 I hate your New Moon and your festal assemblies, They have become a burden to me.

Amos

עמוס ח:ד שִׁמְעוּ זֹאת הַשֹּׁאֲפִים אֶבְיוֹן וְלַשְׁבִּית ענוי [עֲנִיֵּי] אָרֶץ. ח:ה לֵאמֹר מָתַי יַעֲבֹר **הַחֹדֶשׁ**וְנַשְׁבִּירָה שֶּׁבֶר **וְהַשַּׁבָּת**וְנִפְתְּחָה בָּר לְהַקְטִין אֵיפָה וּלְהַגְדִּיל שֶׁקֶל וּלְעַוֵּת מֹאזְנֵי מִרְמָה. ח:ו לִקְנוֹת בַּכֶּסֶף דַּלִּים וְאֶבְיוֹן בַּעֲבוּר נַעֲלָיִם וּמַפַּל בַּר נַשְׁבִּיר.

Amos 8:4 Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, 8:5 saying, “When will the **New Moon** be over, So that we may sell grain, And **Shabbat**, that we may open the wheat market, To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, And to cheat with dishonest scales, 8:6 So as to buy the helpless for money And the needy for a pair of sandals.

Shabbat of Full Moon

If, in all these cases, Shabbat refers to the seventh day of the week, the order of Shabbat after New Moon would be odd. Biblical authors usually begin with what occurs more frequently. Such is precisely what we find in late post-exilic texts, for example Nehemiah 10:34: “… for the Shabbats, and for the New Moons, and for the Appointed Festivals.”[5] In these late texts, Shabbat refers to the seventh day of the week, so it comes before New Moon, which occurs every month, and is followed by the Appointed Festivals that are celebrated once a year. In the earlier texts, however, Shabbat appears to refer not to a day of the week but rather to *a lunar phase*. Just as *chodesh* refers to the new moon (compare *chadash*for “new”), the word*shabbat*, which follows *chodesh* in these texts, would seem to designate what we call “full moon.”[6]

What this means is that for much of Israel’s history before the exile (before 586 BCE), Shabbat would have been celebrated just once a month, about fifteen days after the new-moon observance. During these two lunar phases, communities paused from their quotidian labors in order to engage in cultic activities. Offerings and sacrifices were offered to the deity, followed by sumptuous feasts.

These were also auspicious times to consult oracles, which explains why, in the text from Kings examined above, the husband wonders why his wife would make the trek to a prophet when it was not yet New Moon or Shabbat. Similarly, many other older texts refer to cultic activities (offerings being made and regular business ceasing) on this full-moon Shabbat.[7]

The Full Moon

Full Moon is an important time in many cultures. Thirteen major Hindu festivals began at this propitious time each month of the year. Throughout the ancient Near East, the fifteenth of month was a time for ritual celebrations. A number of Jewish festivals (Sukkot, Pesach, Purim, Tu BiShvat, Tu B’Av) begin fifteen days after New Moon.[8] The choice to begin these festivals on this date must have had something to do with the full moon.

So if originally Shabbat was celebrated once a month, on Full Moon, how did it come to designate the culmination of a seven-day week?

The Number Seven

The number seven has symbolic meanings in a wide array of ancient texts that existed long before the first biblical writings. Thus, when the Southern Mesopotamian ruler Gudea builds a temple, he dedicates it for seven days.[9] (The account may provide the rationale for an annual festival.) In the flood account from the Ninevite version of the Gilgamesh Epic, the number seven plays a special role.[10] When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh mourns for six days and seven nights. Similarly, when the royal mother of Neo-Babylonian ruler Nabonidus dies, she is mourned for seven days and nights, parallel to seven-day periods of mourning known after the death of King Shulgi of Ur and after the Guteans invade Nippur.[11]

In epic literature from the Syrian kingdom of Ugarit, many rituals last seven days—not only mourning but also feasting.[12] In southern Anatolian and northern Mesopotamian places (such as Emar and Mari), as well as throughout southern Mesopotamia, a number of feasts, rituals, and other symbolic events are conducted for seven days. Thus, the hero Kirta, from the Ugaritic legend, undertakes a voyage as part of a military campaign that lasts seven days.[13] In Egypt too, the number seven assumed symbolic significance, likely due to foreign influence; it was often linked to creation and regeneration.[14] Even in Homeric literature, which partakes in some aspects of broader Mediterranean culture, feasts are often celebrated for seven days.[15]

Seven in the Bible

In the Bible, we can identify a broad array of activities that continue for seven days, months, or years. Many of them are ceremonial or commemorative in nature, just as we witnessed in the non-biblical evidence. They include mourning (“shiva”), feasts, weddings, temple dedications, and voyages.[16]

On the basis of this comparative evidence, we can be certain that the societies of Israel and Judah would have attached special meaning to the number seven from an early point in their histories. The question is: How did this symbolic number come to be identified with Shabbat, and when did a seven-day week become one of most basic ways of ordering time?

The Oldest Requirements for Seventh-Day Rest

Even though many activities lasted seven days in neighboring cultures, we do not find a regular weekly cycle during which one refrained from labor on the seventh day or regarded this day as sacred in some way. The closest we get to this notion is the Egyptian week. It lasted, however, ten days, not seven.[17]

Two biblical regulations in Exodus demand a pause after six days of labor, yet they originally had nothing to do with Shabbat. The first is found in a passage that most scholars assign to an older portion of the book, the so-called Covenant Code or Collection:

שמות כג:יב שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים **תַּעֲשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂיךָ** וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי **תִּשְׁבֹּת**לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ שׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרֶךָ וְיִנָּפֵשׁ בֶּן אֲמָתְךָ וְהַגֵּר.

Exod 23:12 Six days **you shall labor**, but on the seventh day **you shall cease**, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and the son of your maidservant and the resident alien may be refreshed.

שמות לד:כא שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים **תַּעֲבֹד**וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי **תִּשְׁבֹּת**בֶּחָרִישׁ וּבַקָּצִיר תִּשְׁבֹּת.

Exod 34:21 Six days **you shall work**, but on the seventh day **you shall cease**; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

The passage in 23:12 concerns farming activities, and it assumes that the addressees will have work-animals, home-born servants, and non-native residents to perform the most arduous fieldwork. The landowners are required to grant a pause every seven days so that their animals will have some “relief” and their laborers will be “refreshed”—something that would ultimately be in their own interest as well. This guideline is preceded directly by another statute related to *shemitta* or release of the land:

שמות כג:י וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת אַרְצֶךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ. כג:יא וְהַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּשְׁמְטֶנָּה וּנְטַשְׁתָּהּ וְאָכְלוּ אֶבְיֹנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְיִתְרָם תֹּאכַל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה כֵּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ לְזֵיתֶךָ.

Exod 23:10 Six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield, 23:11 but the seventh year you let it rest and lie still so that the poor of your people may eat; what they leave, the beasts of the field shall eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and olive grove.

The two laws share a similar ethical concern for both the disadvantaged and animals.[18] They are also structured analogously: six days/years + seventh day/year.

The second statute cited above (34:21) appears to presuppose the first one (23:12); if so, it would have been composed at a later time. It expands the purview of the older law by using a more general verb for work (*ta’avod*) and demanding that day of rest be granted even during critical periods when the fields had to be plowed or the crops harvested. This observation has direct implications for the history of Torah law.[19]

These two laws in Exodus 23 and 34 significantly do not call the seventh day “Shabbat,” which would make sense if Shabbat originally designated a lunar phase and had nothing to do with a weekly cycle. (The verb *tishbot* is unrelated to the noun Shabbat; see part two of this article.)

Another observation is equally important: These laws do not require communities to cease from particular activities on the same seventh day—in other words, they need not agree on a common fixed point in time from which all members of society collectively count the same seven days. What is required is that the Israelite landowner ceases from his labors every seventh day (whenever he chooses to begin the cycle) so that the animals and the humans in his employ have a regular respite from their travails.[20] Given the explicit motivation for this law, there is no reason that all members of society should cease from their various activities on the *same* day.

Summary: Two Separate Institutions

The texts explored above suggest that the populations of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah commemorated a Chodesh-Shabbat monthly cycle that revolved around the antipodes of New Moon and Full Moon. An unrelated legal statute required landowners to grant their workers and animals a rest every seven days. The former institution was communal and cultic, with the population celebrating collectively the same days. The latter was personal and ethical, and would be initiated by each landowner independently. This mandated day of rest was not yet called Shabbat. At this early stage in the development of the calendar, a standard seven-day week did not exist and Shabbat referred to the celebration of Full Moon.

How did these originally separate institutions merge into one, with Shabbat shifting from Full Moon to weekly celebration? That is the question we will address in [part two](http://thetorah.com/how-and-when-the-seventh-day-became-shabbat/) of this article.

Part 2: [How and When the Seventh Day Became Shabbat](http://thetorah.com/how-and-when-the-seventh-day-became-shabbat/)

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/shabbat-of-the-full-moon)

For a Spanish-language version of this essay, see [Sabbat en Plenilunio](http://thetorah.com/sabbat-en-plenilunio/" \o "Sabbat en Plenilunio).

1. The Romans, following the Etruscans, used eight-day (“nundinal”) cycle of market days. A seven-day week eventually adopted de facto, but was not officially adopted until Constantine. For a thoughtful reflection on these developments and the psychological impact of the weekly cycle, see Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Cycle: The History and Meaning of the Week*(Chicago, 1989).
2. In working on these questions, I am delighted to see that my findings overlap in many ways with the work of J. Meinhold, *Sabbat und Woche im Alten Testament: Eine Untersuchung* (Gottingen, 1905), as well has his article “Die Entstehung des Sabbats,” *ZAW*29 (1909): 81-112. Two additional studies that have come to similar conclusions are: Gnana Robinson, *The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath: A Comprehensive Exegetical Approach* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), and Alexandra Grund, *Die Entstehung des Sabbats: Seine Bedeutung für Israels Zeitkonzept und Erinnerungskultur* (Tübingen, 2011).
3. See 2 Kings 4:22-23.
4. For older references to Shabbat without New Moon, see 2 Kings 11:4-12, and 16:17-18.
5. See this fixed sequence also in 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:3, 8:13, 31:3. I will explain this order later in the article.
6. If the term did shift in meaning, it would not be unusual: There is abundant comparative evidence in the ancient Near East for shifts in meaning in the terminology for new moon, full moon, and the month names.
7. That the Full Moon was a time of celebration is independently confirmed in Psalm 81:4 and Proverbs 7:20, where the alternative terms for Full Moon (כסא / כסה) appear. This lexeme may have originated in Northern Israelian Hebrew. Its use in these passages can be explained variously and may have been necessitated by the shift in the meaning of Shabbat (from Full Moon to the seventh-day of the week).
8. In the book of Jubilees, Shavuot begins on the 15th as well.
9. The dedication of the Nin-Girsu sanctuary; see Cylinder B XVII 18-21.
10. XI 127ff., 141-146.
11. See William W. Hallo, *Origins: The Ancient Near Eastern Background of Some Modern Western Institutions*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp. 127-134.
12. KTU 1.14 III 1-4, VI 22-35; 1.17 I 5-16, II 32-34, V 3-6; 1.22 I 21.
13. KTU 1.14 III 1-4. For Emar, see Fleming, *Time at Emar: The Cultic Calendar and the Rituals from the Diviner’s Archive* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 2000).
14. See Matthias Rochholz, *Schöpfung, Feindvernichtung, Regeneration: Untersuchung zum Symbolgehalt der machtgeladenen Zahl 7 im alten Ägypten* (Wiesbaden, 2002).
15. Odyssey 12:397 and 14:249-252.
16. The following is a selective survey of seven in the Torah alone:

Wedding: Gen 29:27, 31:27  
Flood: Gen 7:2-4, 10; 8:10-11  
Sacrificial animals: Gen 21:28-30  
Jacob’s service: Gen 29-30  
Travel: Gen 31:23  
Rituals of prostration: Gen 33:3  
Seven cows in Joseph’s dream: Gen 41  
Mourning: Gen 50:10  
Children: Gen 46:25, Exod 2:16  
Days during the plagues: Exod 7:25  
Year of release: Exod 21, Deut 15  
Shmitta: Exod 23:10-11  
Festivals: Exod 12-13, 23:15, Lev 23, Num 28-29, Deut 16  
Lamps: Exod 25:37, Num 8:2  
Wearing vestments: Exod 29:3  
Redemption of first born: Exod 22:30, Lev 22  
Sin offerings: Lev 4  
Rites of Ordination: Lev 8  
Purification after Childbirth: Lev 12  
Year of Jubilee: Lev 23  
Nazirite: Num 6  
Hebron: Num 13:22  
Ceremony of Red Heifer: Num 19  
Seven altars: Num 23  
Quarantine outside the camp: Lev 13, Num 12:14-15, 31:19  
Purification: Lev 14-16  
Enemy Nations: Deut 7  
The revelation at Sinai: Exod 24:16  
Hakhel: Deut 31:10

1. Richard Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, 1950).
2. The Covenant Code in Exod 20-23, with the *mishpatim* at its core and “social-justice” concerns introduced by early revisions (8th century BCE?), is presented succinctly and perceptively by Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (London, 2005), pp. 140-149.
3. Many still attribute Exodus 34 (the so-called “Cultic Code,” “Ritual Decalogue,” or *Privilegrecht*) to the Yahwist (J) source, making it the oldest law code in the Torah. Recently scholars have even claimed that Exodus 34 originated without knowledge of the Covenant Code in Exodus 20-23, which they assign to the Elohist (E) source. Yet if Exod 34:21 presupposes 23:12, the classic Documentary analysis would be in error and one would need to consider an alternative model for the Torah’s composition history, such as the “Supplementary Approach.” (I will be writing more on various composition-history approaches in future contributions to TheTorah.com.)

It’s also possible that Exod 34:21 is a secondary insertion to the “Cultic Code.” See, e.g., Shimon Bar-On, “The Festival Calendars in Exodus XXIII 14-19 and XXXIV 18-26,”*VT* 48 (1998): 161-195 (reprinted in his monograph, Shimon Gesundheit, *Three Times a Year: Studies of Festival Legislation in the Pentateuch* (Tübingen, 2012)). Bar-On/Gesundheit offers an alternative view as to why 34:21 differs from 23:12. He however fails to see that both of these laws do not yet refer to Shabbat.

1. On this point my analysis differs from that Grund, *Entstehung*, who interprets the two Exodus laws discussed above as common seven-day cycles for the entire community. Compare the presentation of the six-year servitude rule in the Covenant Code (Exodus) to the parallel law in Deuteronomy: The six years in the Covenant Code begins from the point of servitude. Yet Deuteronomy seeks to fit this rule into a Shemittah cycle that is universally followed. See Zev Farber’s TABS essay, [“The Law of the Hebrew Slave: Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.”](http://thetorah.com/hebrew-slave-exodus-leviticus-and-deuteronomy/)