



Counting Sabbath days in pandemic days

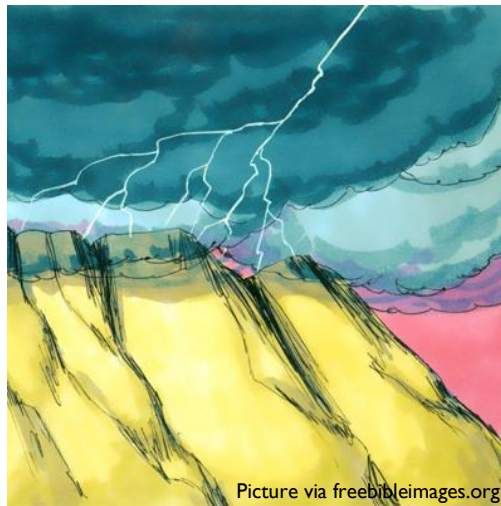
Karen Eliassen

Whether it is because we have been confined to our homes for long periods or because our essential work patterns have shifted, most of us would say that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to us losing track of time at some point in recent months. But when the days of the week all blur into one, how easy – and important – is it to keep one of them not just special, but holy? Karen Eliassen unlocks the exhortation to remember the Sabbath and finds the powerful consequences of counting our days.

'Lord, teach us to count
our days rightly.'¹

Losing track of what day of the week it is may or may not have serious consequences for our relationship with God, depending on who is doing the track-losing, under what circumstances – and on the sort of God with whom the track-loser is in a relationship. Equally for someone who is furloughed or laid off at home, or for someone who is an essential worker on the front lines, days may not be readily countable, let alone countable 'rightly'. Days may instead be experienced as bleeding into each other in a way that makes them all seem more or less alike. Surely God is in all of them, and surely he loves us whatever day of the week it is. End of story.

Unless, of course, the track-loser is a practising Jew tightly bound by the commandment to 'remember the sabbath day and keep it holy'.² This commandment, the fourth of the ten, is regularly touted as being key to our relationship with God – regularly touted, yet far from regularly heeded, if heeded at all. For most Christians, this fourth commandment packs



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hardly any punch beyond a misunderstood refuelling tactic. In what follows I want to touch on some of the consequences both of remembering and of not remembering the Sabbath from a scriptural perspective, because from that perspective the Sabbath commandment does prove itself to pack a powerful punch – a powerful, life-giving punch of the kind

we could do with these days.

Scripture does not beat about the bush when it comes to the consequences of *not* remembering the Sabbath. 'Whoever does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death', is the grim warning built in at the source itself, at the Sinai experience.³ A thousand or so years later, God is still relaying this message through his prophets. Here through Jeremiah: 'If you do not obey My command to hallow the sabbath day ... then I will set fire to its [Jerusalem's] gates ... and it shall not be extinguished.' And here through Ezekiel: 'They grossly desecrated My sabbaths. Then I thought to pour out My fury upon them ... and to make an end of them.'⁴

I think what will prove most helpful here is to stay clear of any kneejerk reactions to such texts – reactions against what we might construe as yet another repellent Old Testament text about a fury-out-pouring God. Instead, we might look at such texts not so much as texts *about* anything or anyone, a fury-out-pouring God or otherwise, but as texts signalling to us that the Sabbath is somehow, incomprehensibly and inexplicably, fundamentally a matter of life and death. Ironically, it turns out that at a life and death level, Jewish law does provide for a Sabbath exemption, the only one there is. The obligation to save an endangered life always overrides any religious commandment, so that on the Sabbath doctors can operate, soldiers can shoot, rescue workers can dig out, and so on.⁵ But for the rest of us, not saving lives yet not heeding the Sabbath either, are we really to be made ‘an end of’? I like to think that the invitation of these texts is not to be threatened into a terrorised but obedient mindset, but rather to be aroused into curiosity about the nature of the Sabbath experience itself. What on earth about the Sabbath is stirring such vehement non-negotiability? What are we not cottoning on to about the Sabbath? I don’t mean a dilettantish or an academic curiosity about the Sabbath that appropriates a lot of aesthetics or a lot of information, but when all is said and done can take it or leave it. I mean a passionate curiosity such as we have for that which we passionately love, are in love with. A loving relationship curiosity.

Oddly, for all the richness of Jewish traditions around Sabbath practices (think of the lighting of the candles, the *kiddush* blessing of the cup of wine, the eating of the braided *challah* loaf), Scripture itself does not tell us anything specific to do; it tells us only what to not do, namely work. Whatever is actively and concretely involved in remembering the Sabbath remains scripturally speaking elusive. The one hint about what to do on the Sabbath that ripples through all those moving Jewish Friday evening traditions turns up in Isaiah, and it is a hint spectacularly contrasting with the more familiar

death threats: ‘If you call the sabbath “delight” ... I will set you astride the heights of the earth.’⁶ The Hebrew concept of *oneg shabbat*, the joy of the Sabbath, which underlies all those non-scriptural Sabbath traditions, comes from this passage. Joy! Delight! Astride the heights! Now that is a glorious reason for keeping the Sabbath, a reason right in line with the Talmud’s description of the Sabbath as ‘a foretaste of the world to come’ – that world to come being the world in which the Messiah weighs in. The medieval midrash on Exodus explains it this way: ‘The scion of David (Mashiach) will come if they keep just one Shabbat, because the Shabbat is equivalent to all the *mitzvot*.’⁷ One Sabbath perfectly (that’s the catch in this context) kept is the equivalent of all the commandments (and Judaism has derived 613 of these from the Torah) perfectly kept. The scriptural message is unequivocal in its suggestion of extreme consequences to how we approach the Sabbath: the extent to which we remember potentially opens us to extreme consolation – the *oneg shabbat*; the extent to which we don’t remember the Sabbath potentially opens us to extreme desolation – death. If the potential consequences are so extreme, we do indeed need to keep track of what day of the week it is. So what happens when we lose track?

There is hardly anything under the sun that the Talmudic rabbis left undiscussed, but perhaps this applies especially to Sabbath concerns.⁸ Suppose a man is lost in the desert, the rabbis wondered, so lost that he loses track of what day it is. How would someone so lost in the desert then remember the Sabbath? The difficulty arises because the seven-day week is a cycle made by man, and it is not made out of anything that can be immediately experienced in nature, including in our own bodies. Yet this man-made week, this socially constructed time unit, has as its apex a Sabbath Day given and made holy by God. Israel’s God may be the God of all Creation, but he is not a nature god – he is a culture god who has great stakes in how we socially structure ourselves. But however we

socially structure ourselves, all is thrown to the four winds in the desert. In the Talmud, a discussion about how then to proceed ensues between two rabbis, Rav Huna and Hiyya bar Ra'v:

Rav Huna said: One who was walking along the way or in the desert, and he does not know when Shabbat occurs, he counts six days from the day that he realized that he lost track of Shabbat and then observes one day as Shabbat. Hiyya bar Ra'v says: He first observes one day as Shabbat and then he counts six weekdays. The Gemara explains: With regard to what do they disagree? One Sage, Ra'v Huna, held: It is like the creation of the world, weekdays followed by Shabbat. And one Sage, Hiyya bar Ra'v, held: It is like Adam, the first man, who was created on the sixth day. He observed Shabbat followed by the six days of the week.⁹

At one level, there is something slightly sinister about this Sabbath discussion on behalf of the lost desert man. Imagine the worst-case scenario where the man stumbles along half dead from hunger and thirst and with no hope of finding a way out. Who would or should truly give a darn what day it is? Why are the rabbis not concerned about his immediate welfare, why do they not exempt him from having to keep the Sabbath (they don't), and instead offer him something along the lines of a solid list of desert survival tricks? How existentially awful does a body's situation have to be before something can be prioritised above that *oneg shabbat*, according to the rabbis? Surely the desert man's cause is for lamenting, not for remembering the Sabbath, let alone delighting in it. But I am reminded of Tom Wright's early comment on the pandemic, that what we need now is 'a time of lament, of restraint, of precisely not jumping to "solutions".'¹⁰ Coupled with 'restraint,' lament becomes the underbelly of the Sabbath, an underbelly acknowledged and explored in Judaism to an extent barely imagined in Christianity.¹¹ An acknowledged underbelly gives a punch to concepts that otherwise present as not worth bothering about.

To begin to appreciate how the Sabbath, complete with underbelly, functions in crises, consider the following two stories from the Holocaust archives.

Miriam Raz-Zunszajn was the daughter of the rabbi of Wereszczyn in Poland; she was eight years old when the Germans invaded Poland on a September Friday in 1939. Here is how she describes that evening's Sabbath in her memoirs:

Dark clouds covered the sky. Thunder, lightning and rain. The faces of my mother and father were even grayer than the clouds. War! say my parents, and I understand from their reaction that war is something menacing, even though I don't know exactly in what way. ... In the evening, the Shabbat table is covered with a festive white tablecloth, the braided challahs are also covered by their special cloth, the silver candlesticks glisten as always, but this time it is completely different. Grandmother and Mother bless the candles, but the blessing is accompanied by bitter weeping and takes a very, very long time. ... On this Shabbat, we remain indoors and don't go out for a walk as we usually do. We are cut off from the material world, but the material world does not cut itself off from us. The thunder of cannons becomes even louder, closer, and no one knows what to expect when it reaches us. One thing happens after another, the world around me seems to be sinking into a whirlpool.¹²

If this comes from the beginning of the war, here is a recollection from near the end of the war. In her book *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, Melissa Raphael relates this story from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp:

In Bergen-Belsen, in the first months of 1945, Bertha Ferderber-Salz remembers listening to an old Hungarian woman softly intoning a Sabbath prayer as she lay in utter dereliction in the darkness and stench of a filth-sodden bunk. The dying woman then wished Ferderber-Salz 'A good week! A good week to you, to the family, and to all

the House of Israel. Amen!’ When asked if she had been praying, the old woman replied ‘in a weak and barely audible voice’, ‘It is our duty to praise God at all times and in every place. God hears our prayers even when they are said from the deepest pit. And even if He does not come to our aid, there are other Jews in the world for whom we should request a good week.’¹³

Be our days like those barely breathed from inside ‘the deepest pit’ or that feel like ‘sinking into a whirlpool’, or like days lost in the desert or like our current pandemic days, or for that matter plain good old days – whatever our days be, let our prayer be to count them rightly. That way we can begin to remember the Sabbath, and be consoled by its intimations of ‘the world to come.’

In the early days of the pandemic, a poem by Lynn Ungar entitled *Pandemic* made the rounds of various responding Internet platforms. In a way, I have in all of the above been following the ‘what if’ of the poem’s first few lines:

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath –
the most sacred of times?

In such a sacred time, a Sabbath time, our relationship with God through our relationship with the world is at its most intimate. Not surprisingly, the ending note of Ungar’s poem reflects this Sabbath quality:

Promise this world your love –
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.¹⁴

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¹ Psalm 90:12. All Scripture texts are taken from the Tanakh translation by the *Jewish Publication Society*.
² Exodus 20:8.
³ Exodus 31:15.
⁴ Jeremiah 17:27; Ezekiel 20:13. The whole of chapter 20 in Ezekiel is one long rant against Sabbath ‘desecrators’.
⁵ This practical principle in Jewish Law is called *pikuach nefesh* in Hebrew, which simply means ‘saving life’.
⁶ Isaiah 58:13-14.
⁷ *Shemot Rabba* 25:12; 1:1. *Shemot* is the Hebrew name of the Book of Exodus, and simply means ‘names’ as Exodus starts with a list of names; *Rabba*, meaning ‘great’ and is a term generally applied to the Torah/Pentateuch midrashim. *Mitzvot* is the Hebrew for commandments.
⁸ The Shabbat tractate is the longest of the six tractates making up the Talmud – and that is to say nothing of the tractate devoted entirely to the law of Sabbath boundaries.
⁹ *Shabbat 69a-b: Losing Track of Shabbat*. For those interested, the above discussion continues with a convoluted ‘way of proceeding’ to cover all the possibilities in a kind of gamble that somewhere in there then will be a hit on the actual Sabbath Day.
¹⁰ Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (SPCK, 2020).
¹¹ Walter Brueggemann makes this observation in the preface to his *Sabbath As Resistance*: ‘As in so many things concerning Christian faith and practice, we have to be reeducated by Judaism that has been able to sustain its commitment to Sabbath as a positive practice of faith.’
¹² Miriam Raz-Zunszajnn, *Like Birds in Black and White*, 2002. This extract, and many others like it, is available at www.yadvashem.org, the website of The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem.
¹³ Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theory of the Holocaust* (Routledge, 2003), p. 57. One angle of her book uses the ‘world to come’ aspect of the Sabbath as a kind of standpoint from which to engage with the Holocaust.
¹⁴ Jewish Sabbath traditions have a long history of delving deeply and creatively into this wedding imagery – greeting the Sabbath Bride, engaging with the Sabbath Queen, experiencing the Shekinah (the feminine presence of God dwelling amongst his people) of Jewish mysticism. But that’s another story.