

Saving a Life Is Keeping Shabbat

By Yitzi Hurwitz

Living with ALS, there were countless times that I had to be saved on Shabbat, and I am grateful that I am so important to G-d that He determined that my life should take precedence over His holy Shabbat. Writing this article was very meaningful to me, as I am in a constant state of being "a sick person who is in danger," as we will discuss.

We are so precious and dear to G-d. He chose each and every one of us, and He shared with us His most prized possession, Shabbat. Yet, without us, it is nothing.

We read in parshat Acharei, "And you should keep my rules and ordinances, which a person must do *and live by them*; I Am G-d."¹

This verse is quoted by the Talmud as proof that one should save a life, even if it means desecrating Shabbat:

The Talmud² asks, "How do we know that saving a life pushes aside Shabbat?" It then explores several avenues to prove this, but fails to find concrete proof. It then brings the abovementioned verse, which stands up to the test and is not disproven. The Talmud concludes that, " 'You should live by them' and not die by them."

Why Shabbat?

There is a general rule in all of Torah³ that "There is nothing that stands before saving a life, other than idolatry, adultery and murder." So why would we need a separate proof to teach us that you can break Shabbat to save a life? Isn't Shabbat already included in this rule?

It is brought down in several places⁴ that the law of "It is better to break the Torah law, rather than be killed,"⁵ is also learned from this same verse, "You should live by them and not die by them." However, since the Talmud says this teaching specifically regarding Shabbat, we must conclude that there is something about this teaching that is connected uniquely with Shabbat, different than any other mitzvah. What is the unique aspect of this teaching that pertains to Shabbat?

The Rambam also teaches this teaching twice. When speaking about the general rules of the Torah,⁶ he writes, "For example, if an idol worshipper were to threaten a Jew, that he should break one of the mitzvot of the Torah or he will kill him, [the Jew] should break the mitzvah and not be killed. As it says with regards to mitzvot, 'Which a person must do and live by them,' you should live by them and not die by them."

And then again in the laws of Shabbat,⁷ he says, "It is forbidden to hesitate before transgressing the Shabbat for a sick person who is dangerously ill, as it says, 'Which a person must do and live by them,' you should live by them and not die by them."

Why the specific mention by Shabbat?

Regarding Shabbat, the Rambam continues, "This teaches you that the rules of the Torah are not a revenge on the world, but rather compassion, kindness and peace for the world." It seems that this should have been written in the other context because it talks about all the rules of the Torah. However, since he mentions all the rules of the Torah in the laws of Shabbat, we must conclude that there is something that we will learn from Shabbat that will give us a deeper understanding of this teaching, and that will also apply to the rest of the mitzvot. What are we meant to learn from Shabbat?

What Sets Shabbat Aside?

There is a difference between Shabbat and all other mitzvot. When it comes to mitzvot in general, the rule is, "There is nothing that stands before saving a life." Meaning, that saving a life "pushes away" the obligation of doing the mitzvah. One is still theoretically obligated, but saving a life trumps the obligation. Regarding Shabbat, however, the Rambam says, "When it comes to a sick person, Shabbat is like a weekday, for all the things that he needs." In other words, when it comes to saving a life, it is as if Shabbat does not exist.

Similarly, Rashi on the Talmud, when explaining why saving a life trumps mitzvot, says,⁸ "The reason for this is because the souls of Israel are more dear to G-d than the mitzvot G-d says, 'Nullify the mitzvah and he should live.'" Meaning, that when it comes to all mitzvot, we nullify the mitzvah. The mitzvah stands, but we nullify it. However, when it comes to saving a life on Shabbat, he says,⁹ "The person should do the mitzvot in a way that he will certainly live, and not to come to a possibility of death by doing it, so we break Shabbat when in doubt." In other words, when it comes to Shabbat, we don't nullify the mitzvah, rather, part of keeping Shabbat is that it should be done "in a way that he will certainly live, and not come to a possibility of death." So, saving a life is part of keeping Shabbat.

When it comes to saving a life on Shabbat, the Talmud¹⁰ says, "One who hurries is praised, one who asks a question is shedding blood." But the Rambam doesn't use these terms, instead he says, "It is forbidden to hesitate." In other words, the Talmud is telling us how to save a life: "hurry and don't question." The Rambam, on the other hand, in the laws of Shabbat, uses the term "It is forbidden." He is telling us a law of keeping Shabbat, that "It is forbidden to hesitate," saying that saving a life is part of keeping Shabbat.

How Saving a Life is Part of Shabbat

There is another Talmudic passage about saving a life on Shabbat:¹¹ "Desecrate one Shabbat, in order to keep many Shabbats." This is saying that one may break Shabbat to save a life for Shabbat's sake, but it is not saying that saving a life is part of keeping Shabbat. On the other hand, "You should live by them and not die by them," is saying that living is part of keeping mitzvot, and in our case, saving a life is part of the mitzvah of keeping Shabbat.

Why is saving a life part of keeping Shabbat?

Regarding Shabbat, the Torah says, "You should keep My Shabbats, for it is a sign between Me and you for generations, to know that I am G-d who makes you holy."¹² Rashi¹³ explains: "It is a great sign between us, that I chose you, when I bequeathed to you My rest day, to rest."

In order to have Shabbat, G-d and us are both necessary. If there is no Jew, there is no Shabbat. So when a person's life is in danger, the existence of Shabbat is under threat. Therefore, life must be saved in order to keep Shabbat long term.

In this case, the act of breaking Shabbat is how you keep the Shabbat. In other words, Shabbat itself is saying that you have to break Shabbat for its own sake, so there could be "a sign between Me and you." If there is no you, there is no Shabbat, and the sign doesn't exist.

In truth, every mitzvah is a sign between G-d and us, but the Torah only says it explicitly regarding the mitzvah of Shabbat. That is why the Talmud and the Rambam repeat the teaching of "You should live by them and not die by them" by Shabbat. It is so that we may apply to all the mitzvot what we learn from Shabbat—that saving a life is part and parcel of keeping the mitzvah.

May we soon merit to see the coming of Moshiach, and experience the era that is called "The day that is entirely Shabbat,"¹⁴ the era of Moshiach. The time has come.¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. Leviticus 18:5.
2. Talmud, Yoma 85a-b.
3. Talmud, Yoma 82a, Ketubot 19a.
4. Several places in Rashi, Sanhedrin 74a, Yoma 82b, Shabbat 30b, Pesachim 53b.
5. Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a.
6. Rambam Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah beginning of chapter 5.
7. Rambam Hilchot Shabbat 2:3.
8. Rashi, Yoma 82b.
9. Rashi, Yoma 85b.
10. See Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma 8:5. And see Talmud Yoma 84b.
11. Talmud, Yoma bottom of 85a and on.
12. Exodus 31:16.
13. Rashi to Exodus 31:16.
14. Grace After Meals, Harachaman that is added for Shabbos.
15. Based on Likutei Sichot volume 27 p. 133-140.

By Yitzi Hurwitz

Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz—father of seven, husband of Dina, and spiritual leader at Chabad Jewish Center in Temecula, Calif.—has been rendered immobile by ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease). Unable to speak or type, he uses his eyes to write heartfelt thoughts on the weekly Torah portion.

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