Saving a Life is Keeping Shabbos

In Parshas Acharei, it says, “And you should keep My rules and ordinances, which a person must do, and live by them, I Am Hashem.”[1]

This verse is quoted by the Talmud as proof that one should save a life, even if it means desecrating Shabbos. The Talmud[2] asks, “How do we know that saving a life pushes off Shabbos?” The Talmud tries several different ways to prove it, but they all are not concrete. Then it brings the proof from our verse, which stands up to the test and resists being disproven. “It says, ‘And you should keep my rules and ordinances, which a person must do and live by them’ – you should live by them and not die by them.”

There is a general rule in all of Torah: “There is nothing that stands before saving a life, other than idolatry, adultery and murder.”[3] So why do we need a separate proof to teach us that you can break Shabbos to save a life? Isn’t Shabbos already included in this rule?

It is brought down in several places[4] that the law of “[It is better to] break the law, rather than be killed”[5] is also learned from this same verse: “You should live by them and not die by them.” So, since the Talmud brings this teaching specifically about Shabbos, we must conclude that there is something unique about this teaching, “You should live by them and not die by them,” that has specifically to do with Shabbos, different from any other Mitzvah. What is the unique aspect of this teaching that pertains to Shabbos? The verse itself, “And you should keep my rules and my ordinances…and live by them,” is talking about all Mitzvos, so why does the Talmud specify Shabbos?

The Rambam also relates this teaching twice. When speaking about the general rules of the Torah,[6] he says, “For example, if an idol worshiper were to threaten a Jew, that he should break one of the Mitzvos of the Torah or he will kill him, he should break the Mitzvah and not be killed. As it says with regards to Mitzvos, ‘which a person does and lives by them,’ you should live by them and not die by them.” And then again, by the laws of Shabbos,[7] he says, “It is forbidden to hesitate to break Shabbos for a sick person who is in danger, as it says, ‘Which a person does and lives by them,’ and not die by them.” Why the specific mention regarding Shabbos?

By Shabbos, 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 by the general rules, because it talks about all the rules of the Torah. Being that he mentions all the rules of the Torah, we must conclude that there is something that we will learn from Shabbos that will give us a deeper understanding of this teaching, and that will also apply to the rest of the Mitzvos. What are we meant to learn from Shabbos?

There is a difference between all the Mitzvos and keeping Shabbos. When it comes to Mitzvos 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. You are still obligated, but saving a life trumps the obligation. However, by Shabbos, the Rambam says, “When it comes to a sick person, Shabbos is like a weekday, for all the things that he needs.” In other words, when it comes to saving a life, it is not Shabbos; there isn’t any obligation to begin with.

Similarly, Rashi on the Talmud, when explaining why saving a life trumps most other Mitzvos, he says,[8] “The reason for this is because the souls of Israel are more dear to Hashem than the Mitzvos. Hashem says, ‘Nullify the Mitzvah and he should live,’” meaning that when it comes to just about all

[1] Vayikra, 18:5.
[2] Talmud, Yoma 85a–b.
[3] Talmud, Yoma 82a, Kesubos 19a.
[4] Several places in Rashi: Sanhedrin 74a, Yoma 82b, Shabbos 30b, Pesachim 53b.
[5] Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a.
[6] Rambam, *Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah*, beginning of Chapter 5.
[7] Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos*, 2:3.
[8] Rashi, Yoma 82b.

Mitzvos, the Mitzvah is still obligaory, but we nullify it. However, when it comes to saving a life on Shabbos, he says,[9] "The person should do the Mitzvos in a way that he will certainly live, and not to come to a possibility of death by doing it, so we break Shabbos when in doubt." In other words, when it comes to Shabbos, we don't nullify the Mitzvah, rather, part of keeping Shabbos 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 Shabbos.

When it comes to saving a life on Shabbos, the Talmud[10] 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, uses the term "It is forbidden," in the laws of Shabbos. He is telling us a law of keeping Shabbos: "It is forbidden to hesitate." He is saying that saving a life is part of keeping Shabbos.

There is another Talmudic passage about saving a life on Shabbos: "Desecrate one Shabbos in order to keep many Shabbosim."[11] This is saying that in a case where a life is in danger, we should break Shabbos for Shabbos' sake, but it is not saying that saving a life is part of keeping Shabbos. On the other hand, "You should live by them and not die by them" is saying that living is part of keeping Mitzvos, and in our case, saving a life is part of the Mitzvah of keeping Shabbos.

Why is saving a life part of keeping Shabbos?

Regarding Shabbos, the Torah says, "You should keep My Shabbosim, for it is a sign between Me and you for generations, to know that I Am Hashem, Who makes you holy."[12] Rashi explains, "It is a great sign between us, that I chose you, when I bequeathed to you My rest day, to rest."[13]

In order to have Shabbos, there is the necessity of both Hashem and us. If there is no us, there is no Shabbos. So when a person's life is in danger, the existence of Shabbos is also under threat. Therefore, his life must be saved in order to have Shabbos.

It is not just that he is being saved, but the act of breaking Shabbos in this case is how you keep the Shabbos. In other words, Shabbos itself is saying that you have to do the act of breaking Shabbos, for its own sake, so there could continue to be "a sign between Me and you" – if there is no you, there is no Shabbos, and the sign doesn't exist.

In truth, every Mitzvah is a sign between Hashem and us, but the Torah only says it openly about the Mitzvah of Shabbos. That is why the Talmud and the Rambam repeat the teaching of "You should live by them and not die by them" regarding Shabbos – so that we apply to all the Mitzvos what we learn from Shabbos: that saving a life is part of keeping the Mitzvah.

As you can imagine, writing this article was very meaningful to me, as I am in a constant state of being "a sick person who is in danger." There were countless times that I had to be saved on Shabbos, and I am grateful that I am so important to Hashem and to His Shabbos.

We are so precious and dear to Hashem. He chose each and every one of us, and He shared with us His most prized possession, Shabbos. He made it so that without us, it is nothing.[14]

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

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[9] Rashi, Yoma, 85b.
[10] See Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma, 8:5. Also see Talmud Yoma, 84b.
[11] Talmud, Yoma, bottom of 85a and on.
[12] Shemos, 31:16.
[13] Rashi to Shemos 31:16.
[14] Based on *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 27, pp. 133–140.
[15] Grace After Meals, the "*Harachaman*" that is added for Shabbos.