The Shabbat right before Purim is called Shabbat Zachor, which means the Shabbat of Remembrance. We remember the powerlessness felt among the Jews of Shushan when Haman planned their execution. We remember their joy and triumph when Esther saved her people from Haman’s edict. Memory is powerful and formative. Memory is an expression of identity, our deepest fear and hope, loss and joy.

And memory is core to the practice of Shabbat, not only on Shabbat Zachor, but every Shabbat. From the Book of Exodus (20:8) we read: Zachor et HaShabbat l’kodsho—Remember the Sabbath l’kodsho, to keep it holy. Through our remembering, we learn to set aside time for sacred connection. Through our marking of sacred time, we remember to cultivate sacredness in all areas of our life.

In the prayer L’cha Dodi, sung every Shabbat as we welcome the Sabbath bride, we say Shamor v’zachor b’dibor echad—Keep and remember uttered as one command/word. For Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, the leader of nineteenth century modern Orthodoxy, zakhor is verbal expression, while shamor is physical demonstration. Since they were uttered as one expression at Sinai, they remain inseparable. Zakhor alone would be a ‘mere theoretical observance of Sabbath’, while shamor alone would mean that Shabbat would ‘neither be taken to heart nor accepted by the spirit.’ (Daniel Landes, My People’s Prayer Book- Kabbalat Shabbat, p.133)

Questions To Discuss

• Share a memory of a Purim and/or Shabbat that has stayed with you? Why do you carry this memory with you? What does it continue to teach you?

• Remember the Sabbath l’kodsho. What is a new way you hope to cultivate holiness in your life? What is a practice that will help you remember to do so?

• Consider Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch’s distinction between shamor and zakhor. What is an aspect of your life that requires more balance between the “theoretical” and the “taken to heart”? In other words, is there something that your do based on principle but don’t feel connected emotionally or spiritually? How could you create more balance?