

## Yitro: Shabbat in the State of Israel

Moshe Taragin

Shabbat experience is seminal to Jewish identity. By reenacting Hashem's original schedule and ceasing from work on the seventh day we acknowledge Him as Creator of our world. For centuries, the ancient pagan mind was too confused to imagine one higher being responsible for both the diversity and dichotomy of this world. Confounded by Nature and her powerful forces, and intimidated by heavenly planets which loomed in the sky, the ancients presumed that myriad gods had fashioned this vast and mysterious universe.

Within this confused world, only our nation was able to conceive of a single Creator responsible for everything. Our steadfast Shabbat observance reaffirmed the existence of a divine Creator who had formed the world in six days and had withdrawn from creative activity on the seventh. Gradually, as Judaism spread, this confusion about creation lifted, and the majority of humanity acknowledged Hashem as Creator. Monotheism had arrived, and humanity at large looked to at the heavens and saw their Creator. While each major religion adopted of Sabbath-like observances, the original seventh day of divine rest was preserved for the people of Hashem.

For a span of about 1800 years most of humanity remained religious, believing in a divine author of our planet. This great age of faith in creation ended about 170 years ago, as Darwin's dramatic discoveries questioned belief in creation. Darwin concluded that our world was born out of a watery mixture of random chemicals, rather than being carefully crafted by a divine artist. Creatures weren't created by Hashem but had descended over time, through random change and natural selection. Darwinism launched a modern era of secularism which denies Hashem as creator and often even denies Hashem's existence. In an atheistic world in which divine creation is largely denied, Shabbat observance, and its affirmation of Hashem, is even more critical.

As Shabbat is so central to Jewish belief it was introduced even before the delivery of the Torah at Sinai. Weeks prior to Sinai at the desert encampment of Marah, we were instructed to observe a proto-Shabbat experience so that we would acknowledge Hashem as our Creator

before we embraced His torah. Before we encountered Hashem as the Lawgiver, we first recognized Him his as our Creator.

### Shabbat and Emancipation

In the modern era Shabbat observance has been profoundly impacted by historical shifts. Prior to Emancipation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews lived and worked on the margins of gentile society. Unable to enter classic professions, we carved out independent work environments and separate schedules, leaving us completely free to practice Shabbat observance. There were few factors pressuring against Shabbat observance.

Once emancipated, Jews who were eager to join the general work force, often faced the prospect of a six-day work week and its challenges for Shabbat observance. Many Jews were forced to make the difficult decision between gainful employment and Shabbat observance. Unfortunately, many abandoned Shabbat observance to secure stable employment. Oftentimes, rejection of halachik practice in general followed in the wake of the discarding of Shabbat observance. Once Shabbat observance fell, much of the system fell with it.

Other Jews heroically struggled to maintain Shabbat observance, even in the face of strenuous financial challenges. My grandfather emigrated to the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from White Russia, joining a staunchly Orthodox synagogue in Baltimore, which itself was a predominantly religious city. He formed a club in his synagogue called the "shomer Shabbat club", which barely attracted a few members. Keeping Shabbat in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century America meant searching for new employment every two weeks. On the first Shabbat Jews could call in sick, but by the second Shabbat their religious preferences were clear and they were summarily dismissed from employment.

Shabbat observance became a major struggle for Jews in Western societies and Shabbat observance became the defining feature distinguishing between observant and non-observant Jews. The term "shomer Shabbat" often became a code word for someone who was religiously observant. Shabbat continued to define Jews.

## Shabbat in Israel

In the modern state of Israel Shabbat observance has become more rich but also more complicated, both halachikally and socially. Maintaining our own Jewish state, we can no longer afford to delegate vital national services such as law enforcement, public utilities, and public health to non-Jews. Where possible, we have devised creative solutions to enable these vital functions without Shabbat desecration, or with minimal violation. Technological solutions have often allowed these functions to be performed in accordance with Shabbat guidelines. Obviously when life or public security are endangered Shabbat violation is mandated.

For centuries we dreamed of our own state, but we never imagined that it would complicate Shabbat observance. It has been edifying and challenging to encounter unforeseen religious challenges as our state has turned from a dream into a reality. Dreams are always perfect, but reality leaves a lot to the imagination. After thousands of years of stable but private Shabbat experience the shift to a more public Shabbat experience has forced us to adapt.

Additionally, life in the state of Israel has raised an entirely new and delicate question regarding Shabbat observance in the public sphere. Most religious and traditional Israelis agree that the character of our Jewish state cannot be preserved without three basic features- Shabbat and festivals, national kashrut availability, and marriage and conversion supervision. Without these three basic elements of Jewish identity, our state would be hollowed of its Jewish identity and its association with our illustrious past, our national rituals and our collective memory. For Israel to be the historical homeland of the Jews, Shabbat must be maintained in the public sphere.

Yet, even given the broad support for a general Shabbat ambience, most Israelis are not interested in full halachik compliance of Shabbat. Most traditional Israelis ritually mark Shabbat with festive meals, synagogue attendance and candle lighting, but have little desire for a complete shutdown of twenty-four hours and strict adherence to thirty nine prohibitions, not to mention the vast array of Rabbinic injunctions.

## Perspective of Religious Jews

Religious Jews hope for an era of widespread religious revival and a world in which every Jew observes full halachik Shabbat. The Gemara quotes a promise that full national compliance of two consecutive Shabbatot will herald Moshiach. That is our greatest hope.

Until that era develops however, religious Jews must be supportive of even partial Shabbat experience, even if it falls short of full halachik observance. Shabbat observance isn't binary and isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. Shabbat has many layers to it and for this reason, the laws and rituals of Shabbat were delivered in the desert in piecemeal fashion, signifying that even partial Shabbat experience is valuable.

All this presents us with the following challenge: how to preserve general Shabbat spirit in the public domain while not superimposing restrictive Shabbat policies upon a disinterested sector of non-observant Israelis. Generally, unilateral imposition of religious enforcement boomerangs, engendering dislike and distaste for religion. How can Shabbat spirit be preserved in the public commons and how can Shabbat interest, which already runs high in Greater Israel, be promoted in a non-threatening manner? Hard questions without any easy solutions.

The challenge is especially delicate in Israel, which still maintains a five-and-a-half day work week, leaving Shabbat day as the sole time for recreation and relaxation. If the day is stripped of any religious element, it will become empty of any spirit and will no longer be a collective national experience. The day will quickly degenerate into consumerism and traffic jams. Sabbath experience in many Western countries has generally deteriorated into shopping opportunities and sports events, straying for its original purpose. It does afford a day of greater relaxation, but rarely provides larger spiritual moments or impacts.

How can we protect our national heritage, stretch Shabbat into the public sphere, and maintain its meaning, while avoiding unilateral imposition and strong-armed enforcement, which is always counter-productive in the long run? This is a very delicate issue and requires nuanced and gradual adjustments, rather than hasty and radical solutions. All parties should realize that we share a common interest in reaching this goal. Shabbat is our national heritage and belongs to every Jew and to our collective memory. We now have the great privilege and challenge of implementing it in the land of history. Let's get it right.

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