

Reflections on the Jewish Sabbath

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What does Shabbat mean to the modern Jew? A quick story: when Joseph Lieberman was nominated as a vice presidential candidate in 2000, the Jewish senator announced that he would not campaign on Shabbat. In lieu of shaking hands and gaining votes, Lieberman instead observed what he called a “sanctuary in my week which has become more important to me as I’ve gone on in life and become busier.”¹

What is it about this millennia-old holiday that would cause a politician to give up a chance to gain more votes in pursuit of the nation’s second highest office? It’s one thing to skip your job for one day each year – as baseball legend Sandy Koufax famously did during the Yom Kippur opener of the 1965 World Series – but quite another to skip your job for one day out of *each week*.²

Of course, using the phrase “skipping your job” to describe Shabbat observance is a questionable use of language, because, after all, Shabbat *is* a kind of job. It’s the job of every Jew. The fourth commandment on the tablets that Moses brought down from Sinai says, “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it. Six days you shall labor and perform all your work but the seventh day is Shabbat.”³

Shabbat divides the week into six days and one day, paralleling the division of time in the story of Creation. Indeed, at its very core, Shabbat is a commemoration of Creation, a reminder of the miracle of existence. In the hustle and bustle of today’s modern world, sometimes we fail to take the time and appreciate the wondrous nature of our very existence. Shabbat offers a time to rest, reflect, and appreciate this. But

Shabbat is not just a passive holiday in which we spend time on reflection; Shabbat is in some sense a *re-enactment* of Creation.

When we allow Shabbat to divide our week into the six-and-one pattern of Creation, we are imbuing our own lives with the same majesty and purpose that accompanied Creation. “You shall not do any work [on Shabbat],” says the Torah, “for in six days G-d created the heavens and the earth... and He rested on the seventh day.”⁴ Even if you believe, as do I, that the story of Creation is not literal truth but rather a metaphorical account, you can still appreciate the grandeur of the creation of the universe. Moreover, you can still appreciate how a celebration of Shabbat allows a small amount of that grandeur to fill our own modern lives. Think about it: by celebrating Shabbat, you are showing appreciation for the existence of the millions of stars, of the earth and moon, and of animals and plants of every kind. Shabbat helps to satisfy our urge to instill meaning in the everyday, an urge that has existed as long as man himself. As Rabbi Nachman once said, “Every person must carry the holiness of Shabbat to hallow the other days of the week.”⁵

This holiday not only connects us with G-d, but with an unbroken chain of Jews stretching back through the centuries. When you light the Shabbat candles and utter the prayers, you are instantly connected to the millions of Jews, throughout history, who celebrated Shabbat in the most varied of places. You are connected to Yemenite Jews who celebrated Shabbat amid the sands of the desert, and to Russian Jews who lit candles amid the snow. When you utter *Baruch atah adonai* you are connected to Jews in the feudal villages of medieval Europe. You are part of a chain extending still further back, to the Jews of the Roman Empire, to the Jews of Persia, to the most ancient Jews who

lived in the biblical lands of Israel. Whenever a Jew celebrates the arrival of the Sabbath, he or she is sewing another thread into the great tapestry of the Jewish people's history.

With the positive benefits of Shabbat clearly established, why is Shabbat not more widely observed among modern American Jews? According to a recent study, only 28% of American Jews light candles on Shabbat. Compare this to the 52% who "regard being Jewish as very important," or the 72% who light Chanukah candles.⁶ Why the disparity? Perhaps today's Jews are put off by what they consider the onerous requirements of a traditional Shabbat observation. After all, the Talmud prescribes thirty-nine labors that should not be carried out on Shabbat, and more recent rabbinic interpretations have put off-limits many of the conveniences of modern life, such as television. But this concern is misplaced for two reasons. First, Shabbat observation is not supposed to be a burden, but rather a break from burden. Shabbat is when "we stop rushing to make a living, and instead live and celebrate life," says British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks. "It remains a supreme example of holy time, an oasis of rest in an otherwise restless age."⁷ And secondly, it is not necessary to follow every single tenet of the Shabbat stipulations in order to have performed a *mitzvah*. As with so many aspects of Jewish life, there is nothing wrong with trying a bit at a time. If you haven't lit candles before, try lighting candles. If you've lit candles before but haven't gone to a Friday night service, try going to a Friday night service. I myself do not observe every rule of Shabbat, but just like millions of Jews, I'm trying my best to carve out my own meaning in the grand tradition of Shabbat. For as author Ahad Ha'am once said, "more than the Jewish people has preserved the Shabbat, the Shabbat has preserved the Jewish people."⁸

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