

Ksharim



Lesson 33

Shabbat in Israel



1. Outline

Shabbat in the Diaspora
Shabbat in secular Zionism
Current issues
Looking to the future

2. Introduction

Shabbat is one of the hallmarks of Judaism, and can be seen as perhaps the central institution of Jewish life and symbol of Jewish identity. From ancient times until today the sanctifying of the Sabbath has set Jews apart from the other nations and afforded them a holy “space” in time. Although different streams of Judaism observe Shabbat differently, all are united in viewing it as a precious and unique day. From the beginning of the Zionist revolt against the Jewish religious tradition, Shabbat has provided the focus of many unresolved questions pertaining to the role of Jewish religion in the State. What makes it a “Jewish” state? How is that Jewishness to be reflected in the public realm? Can a democratic state legislate “Jewishness”? The issue of Shabbat and the ongoing debates, tensions and disputes it has caused in Israel make it a relevant and salient case study for exploring these issues and dilemmas.

Compared to all the other holidays we have considered, Shabbat is the most universal, the least tied directly to *Eretz Yisrael* and its landscape. The study of Shabbat in Israel focuses not on our historical memories of Israel, but on our struggle to find the place of “Jewish values” in a real-life Jewish state.

3. Lesson goals

- a. Awareness of the issues arising regarding the place of Shabbat in Israel
- b. Knowledge of highlights of historical development of place of Shabbat in Israeli law and culture
- c. Awareness of the status quo and major ideas for future solutions

4. Expanded outline

- a. Shabbat in the Diaspora
 - i. One of best known modern work exploring the centrality of Shabbat in Jewish life through the ages is Abraham Joshua Heschel’s “The Sabbath.” There he argues that what is distinctive about the Jews is their preference for sanctifying time over space (perhaps a byproduct of our exile??) – and the key symbol of

this preference is the Shabbat, which has no referent in nature or in the land. For an excerpt look here:

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/Shabbat/Shabbat_Themes_and_Theology/Shabbat_Sanctuary_in_Time.htm

- ii. There is a huge amount of literature – polemic, homiletic, fiction, poetry, etc., dedicated to showing the impact of and importance of Shabbat as a key halachic, spiritual, and sociological component of Jewish life, sustaining the individual and the community. Shabbat observance was traditionally taken as a symbol of adherence to Jewish law at large and of loyalty to the community – it served as a criterion for admitting the credibility of a witness in court.
- iii. In a way, as the famous (or infamous) concept of the “Shabbes-goy” suggests, it is easier to observe the Shabbat in a non-Jewish environment. The fact that the non-Jewish majority is not obligated to observe Sabbath makes life easier for Jews, who don’t have to think about who is running the generators in the electric power station, or policing the streets, etc., on Shabbat. Shabbat as an observance within a minority Jewish community, while it has its frustrations (conflicts regarding work, school, cultural life – wherein Jews observing Shabbat can be excluded from opportunities), overall serves as a uniting and strengthening factor, a peaceful island in time. The abovementioned conflicts remain essentially dilemmas for the individual and his/her conscience. If the entire population were Jewish, the dilemma would be more difficult, and could not be seen as only personal... And indeed, that is what we face in the Jewish state.

b. Shabbat in secular Zionism

- i. There were powerful streams within the early Zionist movement that saw Jewish religious observance as a temporary measure, needed to preserve the Jewish people in exile, but becoming irrelevant with the restoration of our status as a nation, whose Jewishness would be defined by cultural attributes like land and language. For example, see the excerpt by Jacob Klatzkin among the sources below. And for a discussion of the secular-religious conflict in early Zionism, see these two chapters in Steve Israel’s overview of Zionist history:
http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Eye+on+Israel/Story_Zionism/Zionism+in+Practice++The+Organisation+and+its+Tensions.htm
http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Eye+on+Israel/Story_Zionism/Different+Models+of+Zionism.htm
- ii. The crucial question became, of course, what should become of Shabbat and the Jewish holidays in general in the new secular nation state: are they part of

Jewish religion and hence to be discarded, or part of Jewish culture and hence to be preserved and renewed? Can Jewish religion be separated from Jewish culture? See the famous answer of one of the most influential thinkers in the movement, Achad Ha'am, in the sources below...

- iii. Throughout the pre-state period there was a three way struggle among the Orthodox, who argued that the public halachic observance of Shabbat in a Jewish state was a *sine qua non*; the secular traditionalists (disciples of Achad Ha'am) who believed that Shabbat had to be a part of Jewish culture, but with updated definitions and observances, without the strictures of halachah; and those who argued that Zionism must reject the Jewish religion and its observances, relics of the Diaspora life we were abandoning. For an example of the rhetoric of this conflict, see the proclamation of the rabbinate, in the sources below, concerning one of the secular Zionists' most beloved new "religious" activities: the folk dance.
- iv. Perhaps it was our gut feeling that Shabbat and the Jewish tradition must be part of a Jewish state – without a clear definition of what part – that led to a century of conflict. For example, see the passage below, in the sources, from the American textbook "Guide to Zionism," by the prominent American Zionist educator Jesse Sampter, from 1920.

c. Current issues

- i. When the United Nations delegation came to Palestine in 1947 to negotiate the details of the partition resolution, it was crucial that there be unanimous acceptance by the various subgroups of the Yishuv (the Jewish community). In order to gain the acceptance of the Agudat Yisrael faction (what we call today "ultra-Orthodox," or non-Zionist Orthodox, the Jewish Agency wrote a letter of commitment that later became known as the "status quo agreement," and which has governed, at least officially, religion-state relationships ever since. The letter stated:
 - 1. It is clear that the legal day of rest in the Jewish state will be the Shabbat, with the understanding the Christians and members of other religions shall have permission to rest on their weekly holy day.
 - 2. All necessary measures must be taken to insure that in every government-sponsored kitchen serving Jews, the food will be kosher.
 - 3. With respect to personal (marital) status, all the members of the executive recognize the seriousness of the problem and the great difficulties, and on the part of all the bodies that the Jewish Agency executive represents, the maximum will be done in order to provide for the deep needs of the religious, and to avoid, God forbid, the division of the House of Israel in two.

4. With respect to education, full autonomy is promised to every “stream” in education... and there will be no infringement by the government on the religious conscience... of any part of Israel. The state will, of course set minimum requirements in the area of Hebrew language, history, science, etc., and will oversee the fulfillment of these requirements, while granting complete freedom to each “stream” to run its education system according to its views, and will avoid any infringement of religious conscience.
- ii. Clearly, there were some vague statements in this agreement – sufficient to sustain almost 60 years of acrimonious debate. The agreement was understood to include some interesting anomalies, as it was accepted by the sides that the actual status quo “on the ground” at the end of the Mandate would be binding. For example – in Haifa, a mixed city, the buses ran on Shabbat – and so they do to this day, while in other cities they do not.
- iii. The conflict that became part of Israeli culture before 1948 seems only to have become more entrenched and polarized once the Jewish state came into existence. The battlefield constantly shifts – from opening movie theaters on Shabbat to opening shopping malls, from cabinet crises over moving giant electric generators on empty roads on Shabbat to El Al flights landing on Friday night. Here are four essays that present our current dilemma:
- <http://www.wzo.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=1833>
<http://www.wzo.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=1834>
http://www.juf.org/news_public_affairs/article.asp?key=2916
<http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/sabbobs.htm>

d. Looking to the future

- i. In recent years there have been several proposals for redefining the “status quo” that have achieved a lot of public attention. Perhaps the best known is that set forth by Dr. Ruth Gavison, a secular judge, and Rabbi Y. Medan:
- www.gavison-medan.org.il/english/faq/
- ii. And here is another, from the liberal-religious party, Meimad:
- <http://www.wujs.org.il/activist/programmes/programmes/shabbat/rappendix2.shtml>

And another...

- <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3180388,00.html>
- iii. But the question arises, can this be resolved by law, or is there a deeper problem of identity, of tolerance and respect, that remains outside whatever elaborate choreography we create? See, for example,
- <http://www.jewishmediaresources.com/article/606/>
www.jewishsf.com/content/2/module/displaystory/story_id/10159/edition_id/194/format/html/displaystory.html

And two Galilee Diary entries on this dilemma:

http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=8128&pge_prg_id=28355&pge_id=1697

http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=4014&pge_prg_id=17074&pge_id=1698

And some interesting numbers:

A Portrait of Israeli Jewry—Beliefs, Observances and Values Among Israeli Jews 2000, Guttman Center of the Israel Democracy Institute for the Avi Chai Foundation.

Findings:

- Between 48-55% of Israeli Jews observe Shabbat with some ritual (e.g. candle lighting or Kiddush, Sabbath meal).
- 24-27% attend synagogue, don't travel or use electricity or attend entertainment requiring payment.
- 41% refrain from working publicly outside the house.
- 37% refrain from working in the house or kindling a fire.
- The large majority of Jewish Israelis spend Shabbat together with family
- 70% answered that generally there was a need for a public expression of Shabbat but on specific questions most are for opening up public entertainment on Shabbat with 61% supporting opening shopping centers within cities but only 17% said they would shop on Shabbat.

Sources

Jacob Klatzkin, "Boundaries" (1914)

What is really new in Zionism is the territorial-political definition of Jewish nationalism. Strip Zionism of the territorial principle and you have destroyed its character and erased the distinctions between it and the preceding periods. This is its originality - that Judaism depends on form and not on content. For it the alternatives are clear: Either the Jewish people shall redeem the land and thereby continue to live, even if the spiritual content of Judaism changes radically, or we shall remain in exile and rot away even if the spiritual tradition continues to exist.

In longing for our land we do not desire to create there a base for the spiritual values of Judaism. To regain our land is for us an end in itself - the attaining of a free national life. The content of our life will be national when its forms become national. Indeed, let it not be said that the land is a precondition for a national life; living on the land is *ipso facto* the national life.

It is no accident that the theory of Judaism as a spiritual outlook, even in its nationalist form, has fought hard against the territorialist conception of Zionism. It feared, correctly, that from such Zionism it would receive its deathblow. All the varieties of "spiritual" thought, including the nationalist, have joined in combating political

Zionism in the name of the spirit of Judaism, i.e., the ethics of the prophets, and have asserted that the ultimate goal of the Jewish people is not a political state but the reign of absolute justice. All these schools of thought mocked Herzl, the hero and genius of our renaissance, by saying: We are a priest people, a nation of prophets - what does he mean coming to us talking about political action? The "spiritists" all cited the Galut as evidence that the basis for our life is the eternal content of Judaism.

Zionism stands opposed to all this. Its real beginning is *The Jewish State* and its basic intention, whether consciously or unconsciously, is to deny any conception of Jewish identity based on spiritual criteria.

Zionism began a new era, not only for the purpose of making an end to the Diaspora but also in order to establish a new definition of Jewish identity - a *secular definition*. I am certain that the builders of our land will in the future sacrifice themselves for national forms, for land and language, as our ancestors accepted martyrdom for the sake of the religious content of Judaism. But we are, as yet, standing at the crossroads and do not yet see the distinction between one period and another. The Galut figure of Ahad Ha-Am still obscures the nationalist light of Herzl.

The "spiritual" criterion is a grave danger not only to our national renaissance but, even more, to our renaissance as individuals. It binds our spirit with the chains of tradition and subordinates our life to specific doctrines, to a heritage and to the values of an ancient outlook. We are constrained by antiquated values, and, in the name of national unity and cohesiveness, our personalities are crippled, for we are denied freedom of thought. Moreover, the "spiritual" definition of what is a Jew leads to national chauvinism. National freedom is meaningless unless it fosters the freedom of the individual. There can be no national renaissance worth fighting for unless it liberates and revives human values within the national ethos.

Echad Ha'am, "Shabbat and Zionism," 1898

(responding to a discussion in the Berlin community about postponing Shabbat to Sunday)

We see great men, secular researchers, who are far removed from religious belief and freely admit that they do not keep Shabbat or any other religious laws – nevertheless vehemently defending the Shabbat, as a *historical institution of the whole nation*, and without a shadow of religious hypocrisy that used to take a central place in these debates, opposing the idea of adding a "second Shabbat for the Diaspora:" Is there better evidence than this for the awakening of the national "Jewish spirit," among our western brethren even outside the Zionist camp?

There is no need to be a Zionist or to be a strict observer of the mitzvot in order to recognize the value of the Shabbat, one of the leaders of the community stated. And he is right. Whoever feels in his heart a true connection to the life of the nation through the generations cannot possibly – even if he denies the world to come and

the Jewish state – imagine the reality of the People of Israel without the Shabbat queen. It can be said with no exaggeration, that more than Israel kept the Shabbat – the Shabbat kept them, and without it and its return to them of their “soul” and its renewal of their spiritual life each week, the tribulations of the work week would have pulled them farther and farther down into the depths of materialism and moral and intellectual degradation.

A rabbinical proclamation, 1947

... regarding the folk dance festival that attracted 25,000 people to Kibbutz Dalia in 1947, held on a weekend...

This is high-handed desecration of the Shabbat, an insult to the land and to the Yishuv, and the desecration of the memories of the nation’s sacred dead, done in a crude and offensive manner. This is the content of the “folk dances” held on Friday night the 2nd of Tamuz 5707 in Dalia, which stands on the land of the nation, in imitation of the primitive Aryan pagan custom that the Nazi tyrant renewed in the years of his rule... Wipe the dust from your eyes, holy and pure brothers, and see how you are memorializing them in our land in the presence of 30,000 people – with the desecration of the Shabbat, the glory of the nation, which was dearer to them than life, and with the mocking dances of male and female dancers to the music of an orchestra, just a short time after the Holocaust of the Jews in Maidanek, Auschwitz, and Bergen Belsen... We protest and reject in shame the “culture center” of the Histadrut, organizer of these dances, which ignored all of the appeals made to it to cancel these folk dances or at least postpone them to a weekday. By their actions they are deviating from the Torah of the nation, attacking its living soul, and undermining the foundations of the culture of Israel.

Jesse Sampter, Guide to Zionism, 1920

...There will be no State Church. The State Church tyranny grew out of Christianity, where a religion was thrust from above upon a people which had not developed it. From the day of Protestantism the State Church was imperiled, and democracy cannot endure it. However, national religion is very different from a State Church. Our national religion will be Judaism not because it will be forced upon anyone – for indeed minority religions and other interest must be carefully safeguarded – but because it will be the natural expression of the life of the Jewish people.

If the community observes the Sabbath in its public life, the national festivals and holy days, if Jewish law is embodied in the law and moral and social code and public opinion of the country, if Jewish ideals of internationalism and justice are practiced in our dealings with foreign powers, will not the Jewish nation be living by the Jewish faith? A new conception of religion is attracting the attention of psychologists and sociologists, the conception of religion as the soul of a people, as a corporate manifestation of group life, not merely, in the Christian sense, as a form of personal belief. That new conception is the ancient Jewish conception which must now be tested by modern experience.