

Why Secular Jews Need Shabbat

The Israeli Supreme Court's decision last week regarding the opening of grocery stores in Tel Aviv on Shabbat is not, per se, about Shabbat, the values it embodies, the city's ethos or the nature of public space in a Jewish and democratic state. The court was specifically concerned with the local authority's obligation to follow the law and not selectively enforce it.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to use this occasion to discuss the character of Shabbat in Israeli society.

Shabbat is one of Judaism's greatest contributions to mankind, sanctifying the seventh day for rest. It is a day when we do not work, do not earn a living, do not conduct business or add to our wealth. A day devoted to family, to community, to leisure, to culture, to learning and to the spirit.

Shabbat does not only belong to observant Jews but to all of us. It is in everyone's interest that Shabbat not be a regular day of the week.

But what makes it unlike other days? Different Jews will respond to this question according to their beliefs and lifestyles. Our public space should give expression to these different paths alongside each other.

Every two months in Jerusalem, there is an event called Oneg Shel Shabbat (Shabbat Delight). Dozens of religious and secular organizations gather to create a multifaceted cultural Shabbat at sites throughout the city that is open to the entire public.

In tens, if not in hundreds, of secular communities, there are Kabbalat Shabbat (Welcoming the Sabbath) ceremonies every week that elevate the soul, connect their participants to Jewish texts and fill Shabbat, and their lives, with meaning. Thus my

kibbutz, Kibbutz Ortal, has for the past five years welcomed the Sabbath with a short ceremony that includes the lighting of candles, kiddush, Shabbat songs and a sermon about the weekly Torah portion.

I would like to see the Sabbath in the Jewish state have a special character—a day of neither commerce nor work, but of cultural and community life.

In my mind's eye, I see a Shabbat where cinemas and the theater—including the national theater—are open. I see a Shabbat of music and dance performances, with open museums and sports competitions. I see a Shabbat of trips and tourism.

True, this is not the halachic Shabbat, but it is Shabbat as it should be. It is a break from commerce and the pursuit of money, a day of delight for the individual and community's soul. Nothing could be further from this vision than a Shabbat of shopping, consumerism, getting and spending and growing richer while enslaving workers who have their Shabbat snatched away.

Ahad Haam, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of recent centuries and father of the cultural and spiritual school of Zionism, defined himself as an atheist and did not follow Orthodox Jewish law. But Shabbat was very dear to him.

"There is no need to be a punctilious observer of commandments," he wrote, "in order to recognize the value of Shabbat. Those who in their heart feel a real connection with the life of the nation throughout the generations, cannot in any way depict the reality of the people of Israel without the Sabbath queen. It can be said without exaggeration that more than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel. Without it, which restored their souls and reinvigorated their spirits each week, the hardships of the days of creation would pull them further and further downward until they hit the lowest level of materialism and moral and mental debasement."

In other words, what makes human beings higher than animals?
Shabbat.

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