

Shabbat: Antique or Advanced?

“Don’t worry, G-d won’t zap you if you do not start Shabbat on time.” Or how about, “Unity as represented by the leader of my faith, is more important than your silly adherence to form over substance.” None of these words were spoken in precisely this way, but they reflect the attitude that many have towards those who believe in keeping the Sabbath.

One of my favorite movies of all time was *Chariots of Fire*. The Christian who kept Sunday as the Sabbath willingly gave up a career as a runner in order to live his faith. Movie goers expressed great admiration for that man. How many of us are really willing to sacrifice for higher spiritual goals?

Today in the Christian world, the Sabbath is all but forgotten about. Sunday is the second day of the weekend, and is a great time to sleep off a Saturday night hangover. For many Jews outside of Israel, Saturday and the Sabbath is likewise celebrated as a time to catch up on errands, and Friday night is often “first Friday.”

How lonely and isolated it feels to observe the Sabbath. I would probably be retired by now if I had a dollar for every time someone asked me why I could not do something on Friday night or Saturday. I have been called everything from old-fashioned, Biblical, antique and obsolete to “out of touch” and irrelevant.

When my kids were growing up in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, it was a struggle to convince them that they were better off with family than going out Friday night. Saturdays were particularly difficult, especially on beautiful spring and fall days. The “peace of the Sabbath” is something that moderns for the most part simply do not get.

The religious, over the centuries, have pictured the Sabbath as a glimpse into paradise. The Sabbath was to be a time not only of perfect rest, but also of family, good meals and contemplation about a more spiritual lifestyle. So important is the Sabbath to Judaism that it is mentioned as one of the core beliefs in the Torah. Some Rabbis claim that when all Jews observe the Sabbath, the Messiah will come to introduce a time of permanent peace and tranquility.

However, being Sabbath servant is easier said than done. When I became President of the Trial Lawyers, I indicated that there would be no Saturday meetings for me. I did not want to insult anyone who observed Sunday as the Sabbath, and therefore I reasoned that we could easily have our meetings and conclaves Monday through Thursday and Friday morning. This might be good for the organization and also for family unity, which many high profile wage earners do not do very well. The outcry surprised me. Perhaps most upsetting was that some members of my own faith not only treated me shabbily, but were outright hostile. Only one meeting during my entire term was held behind my back, and nothing good came from that. The organization prospered and survived during my term, had one of its rare balanced budgets. It d

defeated many attempts to beat back the right of access to the courts. I stuck to my convictions, and the organization was successful.

There is a marvelous book written by former Senator and Vice Presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman about the challenges that he faced being an observant Jew in Washington, DC. John McCain once joked that he had so much salmon as a result of being in Lieberman's presence, since Lieberman kept kosher, that he was thinking of converting to Judaism himself! Lieberman got lots of grief for leaving the Democratic Party and becoming an independent, but he was able to live the life commanded by an adherence to principles as old as recorded history.

Being Senator Lieberman, or an observant Jew anywhere can be challenging. Very frequently, both Jewish and non-Jewish members of the community either do not understand or simply are ignorant of the Jewish faith. Others are hostile. The lack of understanding and nasty backbiting directed to a Jew who observes his or her faith can come from the right or left, politically. Intolerance knows no boundaries politically. A right-winger can be a bigot, and a left-winger can be completely sanctimonious. Neither does society any good.

For those who would like to understand what it means for a Jew, and perhaps others, who observe Shabbat, there is a marvelous book by the same name by the great Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Sabbath." This marvelous little book describes that observance of Shabbat is not some arcane old-world superstition, superseded by more modern notions and changing dogma. Rather, Shabbat is an opportunity to elevate our souls in a way that puts us more in touch with ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the Divine. Recently, I was thinking how different our current Presidential campaign would be if both candidates observed the religion they claim to be adherents of. They would both take off on Sunday, and they would realize the power of words to reap good or evil. In Hebrew we call it *lashon hara*, the evil tongue. Speaking ill of others is one thing that we should think about.

Lest this be a religious lecture, which is not my intent, the peace of one day or 26 hours withdrawing from the world of strife and anger does not require that a person be religious or adhere to any religion. Just think what a great world it would be if everyone allowed one 26-hour period where they attempted to imitate the world of respect, regard, peace and paradise. Such a world may be impossible on a global scale, but each one of us can consider Sabbath for ourselves and respect those who observe this ancient and, at the same time, current institution.

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