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**SHABBAT: WHAT DOES IT
MEAN? WHAT CAN IT BE?**

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SHABBAT: WHAT DOES IT MEAN? WHAT CAN IT BE?

Of all the Jewish holidays, Shabbat is arguably the most well-known — but it is also widely ignored. Lurking at the end of each week, Shabbat is prone to be taken for granted or to be seen as workaday — an odd paradox for a day meant to signify a cessation of work. With its sheer frequency, Shabbat easily morphs into a non-holy day, shorn of the pomp of Rosh Hashanah or the circumstance of a Seder. Added to this is its association with stringent strictures and prohibitive rules, and it is no wonder that a majority of Jews prefer Saturday to Shabbat.

And yet, historically, Shabbat has been a centerpiece of the Jewish calendar and a linchpin of Jewish cultural life. In every generation, its ideals have informed Jewish values and practice across the religious spectrum. Can Shabbat continue to be instructive and even inspiring to Jews for whom the strictures of religious observance have little appeal? Are the ideals at the core of Shabbat incompatible with modern life, or can elements of Shabbat find receptivity in a fast-paced society hungry for moments of peace?

The essays in this issue of CONTACT examine the potential of Shabbat for individual sustenance and communal reinvigoration. Whether through explorations of the evolution in the ways in which we perceive Shabbat, visions for the future of Shabbat in Jewish life and in American society, or glimpses into novel and unique ways of commemorating the weekly holiday, the articles share a passion for Shabbat and a dedication to sharing its age-old message of Shalom.

Eli Valley
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I N T H I S I S S U E

3 SHABBAT IS OUR BIRTHRIGHT

Michael H. Steinhardt

5 THE CHALLENGE AND POTENTIAL OF SHABBAT IN COMMUNITIES

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

6 SHABBAT, SHABBOS AND SATURDAY: OPENING DOORS AT THE JCC

Rabbi Joy Levitt

7 SHABBAT IN SYNAGOGUES: IT'S CHANGED A LOT!

Rabbi Hayim Herring

8 REIMAGINING SHABBAT ON CAMPUS

Hart Levine

10 REFLECTIONS ON SHABBAT AT CHABAD ON CAMPUS

Chana R. Novack and Rabbi Hershey Novack

11 THE JOY OF SHABABA

Karina Zilberman

12 WHEN SHABBAT SIMPLY DRIBBLES AWAY

Alex Pomson

13 IN DEFENSE OF A SECULAR SABBATH

Judith Shulevitz

14 SHABBAT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Rabbi David Gedzelman



SHABBAT IS OUR BIRTHRIGHT

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

“**S**habbat” can be a scary word. For many Jews, it conjures religiosity and prohibition: swaying in synagogue, shutting the phone, avoiding work, money, computers, pens, even erasers. If Shabbat is the core of Judaism, one might conclude that ours is a religion of ascetism incompatible with modern life.

And yet, to view Shabbat solely through the lens of religion fails to appreciate its depth and its grandeur, two quali-

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ties that have made it the foundation of Jewish existence for millennia. It wasn't the rules and prohibitions that transformed Shabbat into the iconic Jewish experience. It was its simple yet ingenious emphasis on the social: A community taking a break and celebrating life together. In this, Shabbat cuts to the core of Jewish values and announces itself as perhaps the primary distinguishing element between Judaism and every other major religion. As Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “It is a day for praise, not a day for petitions.”

Those of us seeking to deepen Jewish engagement and strengthen the bonds of the

Jewish People would do well to examine the reasons Shabbat has been the archetypal Jewish holiday since antiquity. In my view, the heart and soul of Shabbat can be found not in the world's synagogues but in its dining rooms. Shabbat meals are a time of social connection, spiritual engagement and intellectual debate — the foundations of our community — all centered on the cornerstones of universal human yearning: good food and good drink.

Speaking from personal experience as a secular Jew, it is at Shabbat meals — whether as a host or a guest — that I feel most profoundly and intimately Jewish.

Among food, friendships and family, debating the news, joking and sharing gleanings of Jewish wisdom ancient or modern — at these moments, I feel more connected to the millennia-long trajectory of the Jewish People than I do anywhere outside of Israel.

Friday night meals are Judaism's prime example of Peoplehood because they are sanctuaries of commonality no matter one's gender, denomination, political views — or, for that matter, religion, as nothing forbids non-Jews from celebrating with us. Whether familial or communal, they are the quintessential Jewish experience that offers most of the virtues of being Jewish without requiring deep knowledge, particular religious beliefs or even a faith in the supernatural. Unfortunately, for too many

FROM THE TIME of our inception as a community, Shabbat has been an oasis of social, spiritual and sensual sanctity. It is time to return Shabbat to its role as a unifier of the Jewish People and a catalyst of Jewish reflection.

Jews Shabbat has been encrusted with rituals and rules, the sheer wonder of communal celebration lost or forgotten. It is time to return Shabbat to its traditional place of celebration: of eating, learning, debating and socializing for the purpose of “l'chaim.” Just as Shabbat has bound the Jewish people together for centuries, so it has the potential to revitalize Jewish commitments among those for whom Jewish experience has lost its interest and edge.

And we have an unparalleled opportunity: Hundreds of thousands of Birthright Israel participants have been returning to the Diaspora, craving points of connection and seeking to fan the flames of Jewish excitement ignited on their trip. In Israel it was easy: immersed in the “Birthright Bubble,” they were inundated 24/7 with Jewish history, culture and people. But the success of Birthright has become its greatest challenge: How can we recreate such intense and concentrated connections to Jewish life once participants have returned home? As the years go by, the magnitude of their Israel experience risks being diminished by the mundane exigencies of post-Birthright life.

After having devoted considerable energy to Birthright NEXT in the effort to keep Birthright alumni involved Jewishly, I have concluded that in this effort there is only one sine qua non, and that is Shabbat. Various other post-Birthright activities have at best a mixed record and have nowhere near the resonance that Shabbat can potentially have. Why not use Shabbat meals — the weekly bubble of Jewish celebration — as the primary connecting point for Birthright alumni and their friends?

I envision a nationwide Shabbat program that harnesses the success of Birthright Israel to make Shabbat meals a vital part of participants' weeks — and, in turn, a crucial element in their Jewish journeys. Shabbat meals provide a venue to catch up

with fellow participants, make friends, experience Jewish culture and learn something new. They offer opportunities for continuous Jewish engagement and empowerment untethered by daunting commitments. Who doesn't enjoy a meal among friends old and new? Our goal must be to

make Shabbat a habit in the lives of this generation so that they experience the true ethos of the Jewish people: The ways in which the social, spiritual and sensual come together as one.

But these meals will advance beyond eating and drinking and into weekly venues for sharing and learning. Shabbat meals are a perfect context for informal education. They're primarily social experiences, unfettered by the hierarchical burdens of traditional learning, and focused instead on peer engagement. Most of all, they are participant-powered. As I envision them, the meals will not take place in synagogues or JCCs but in homes, emphasizing both a DIY ethic and a grassroots appeal. Meals will potentially branch off into other activities ranging from traditional to alternative, depending on the respective community, all with an eye towards expanding participants' Jewish horizons. But while the education will be informal, it will be rigorous. We will carefully recruit, train and coach Shabbat ambassadors and hosts, educating them at learning retreats and providing them with original educational materials and activities, so that the meals

become more than simply sites of satiation. We will coordinate and partner with local institutions that have track records of engaging young adults. We will help develop computer and mobile apps to disseminate educational materials and activities tailored to diverse cohorts, and to make it easier for Birthright alumni to organize and participate in the meals. Finally, we will seek ways of bringing elements of the Birthright Israel experience, including but not limited to encounters with Israeli culture and society, into the structure of the meals and activities.

We should remember that for many Birthright alumni, the first experience of a meaningful and exhilarating Friday night Shabbat dinner took place on their Birthright trip. A thoughtful and rigorous Shabbat program has the potential to take one of the few elements of their Israel experience that is portable — Shabbat — and bring it back to the Diaspora intact. It helps participants to deepen the connections they made with one another on their trips, and creates opportunities for new connections based on their peers' respective social networks back home. It builds on Birthright's success, enhancing and expanding the ten-day bubble into what can turn into a weekly routine for life. This is crucial: we are not interested in one-shot events, annual Shabbat reunions or last-minute Friday get-togethers. We are interested in creating new social habits that become as memorable as the Bar or Bat Mitzvah — with an emphasis on the fact that while a Bar or Bat Mitzvah occurs once in a lifetime, Shabbat is a weekly celebration.

We at Birthright Israel have not done as good a job as we might have in attracting a majority or even a meaningful minority of our alumni. In my view, it is time to focus entirely on Friday night Shabbat experiences. Even if we start in pilot cities, the vision is to be broad and expand across the country. If executed properly, Birthright alumni will incorporate these meals into their lives so that ultimately they eagerly await Friday nights as a special time of Jewish connection, exploration and celebration.

From the time of our inception as a community, Shabbat has been an oasis of social, spiritual and sensual sanctity. It is time to return Shabbat to its role as a unifier of the Jewish People and a catalyst of Jewish reflection. If we are successful, Shabbat can help revolutionize Jewish engagement as a new social habit in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews, sealing the bonds of the Jewish People for generations to come. ■

THE CHALLENGE AND POTENTIAL OF SHABBAT IN COMMUNITIES

by RABBI ELIE KAUNFER

Shabbat is perhaps the best gateway drug for an involved Jewish life. For so many in the Jewish community, Shabbat is the clearest expression of the positive aspects of counter-cultural Jewish values. The general culture values electronic connectedness; Shabbat values unplugged fellowship. The general culture values the fast-paced and faddish; Shabbat values slow contemplation and consistency. The general culture values non-stop working; Shabbat values enforced (and sometimes inconvenient) breaks in the work cycle. While Shabbat is not an obvious step for many Jews, because of its counter-cultural nature, those who embrace its deep meaning and value often can't imagine how they could live without it.

Yet, Shabbat is also a lightning rod for some of the larger criticisms of engaged Jewish living. For many, alienation from Judaism was sparked by a particular Shabbat experience. "I didn't know what to do in services." "I felt judged by someone more observant." "This wasn't the tune I grew up with." "No one said hello to me at *Kiddush*."

This paradox is particularly acute in independent *minyanim*. Since the year 2000, more than 100 independent *minyanim* have been formed across the United States, in large cities and suburbs and, most recently, on college campuses. Tens of thousands of Jews (80 percent under the age of 40) have engaged with these *minyanim*. For many participants, these services provide their first real expression of intensive Jewish community. And these *minyanim* are overwhelmingly formed around Shabbat ritual: prayer and meals.

Independent *minyanim* represent some of the most positive aspects of Shabbat in the modern world. They also illustrate a particular challenge around the power of Shabbat.

First, the positive: Shabbat in an independent *minyan* is powerful because it is organized around a specific vision of what Shabbat ritual can be. People form *minyanim* because they have a picture of what Shabbat services, and/or Shabbat meals, should look

like. They don't mean for that vision to encompass all of Jewish life. But for the people who connect to that particular vision (for instance, prayer infused with original music; potluck meals; small and intimate physical settings), it can lead to a powerfully positive Shabbat experience.

When it works well, this focus on a specific vision can have broad appeal. If I attend a service that has a lot of participatory singing, even if I am not familiar with the words or melodies, I can often connect to positive aspects because I see the other people having a powerful experience. This runs counter to conventional wisdom about welcoming synagogues. A welcoming service (with page announcements, greeters and plenty of smiles) can sometimes lack appeal if the regulars don't connect to the core service itself. It is one thing to be welcomed into a room; it is another to enter a room where something powerful is happening. Of course the best services (in synagogues or independent *minyanim*) manage to do both.

The same is true for Shabbat eating culture. Similar to many traditional synagogue communities, many independent *minyanim* value the culture of inviting people for a meal. This happens both organically, relying on a culture of *ad hoc* hospitality, and through systems of organized hosted meals or of designated hosts for on-the-spot meal invitations. Other *minyanim* favor regular potluck meals: Come for the *davening*, stay for the meal. Community is often thickened through the one-on-one intimacy of sharing a meal together, and the benefits of the meal culture often pay back into the prayer culture.

There are of course challenges in independent *minyanim* around Shabbat, and I want to raise two of them. One is similar to a problem faced by many synagogues trying to welcome Bar Mitzvah guests: How can we best welcome people to an unfamiliar prayer experience, much of which is in Hebrew? The conventional wisdom is to guide the people through the choreography: Stand here, turn to this page, please be seated. Similarly, the written material focuses on the history and structure of the service: The *Shema* is about God's unity; the *Alenu* entered the Shabbat service in the Middle Ages, etc. Independent *minyanim* typically eschew these guides, but don't replace them with anything else. Per-

INDEPENDENT MINYANIM represent some of the most positive aspects of Shabbat in the modern world. They also illustrate a particular challenge around the power of Shabbat.

haps, however, the Shabbat experience for the first-timer in any prayer community shouldn't be focused on history or choreographic instructions, but on preparation for an experience. The focus can be more on the aesthetic experience than on intellectual information. Imagine a guidebook or email sent in advance that reads (in part) like this:

Welcome to our Shabbat service! A traditional Jewish prayer service is probably unlike most things you experience in your daily life. You will see people standing, sitting, swaying, bowing. These are all attempts to connect to God through prayer. You will hear music and melodies you have probably never encountered. Some of these are centuries old; some of them were written last year. Don't worry about following along with every word, especially in translation. Prayer is not about a cognitive experience of the words. We invite you to relax and experience this connection in any way you can. Know that no one is judging you, wondering what page you're on, or trying to ignore you. We are welcoming you to our intensive prayer space and we hope that your energy (even if entirely non-verbal) will contribute to the aesthetic we are building.

One other challenge around Shabbat: Lived Judaism, especially as played out in independent *minyanim*, has the danger of focusing solely on Shabbat as the time to express deep Jewish connection. The vast majority of independent *minyanim* meet only on Shabbat (and some on holidays). But Judaism is not expressed only on Shabbat. It plays out intensely in weekday *davening*, in communal acts of *hesed*, or lovingkindness, and in ongoing study opportunities. While Shabbat can be a powerful entry point, we risk it being the only stop in people's Jewish experience. The challenge for successful independent *minyanim* is to break out of the episodic experience of Judaism that relies only on Shabbat, and begin to build a culture of Jewish expression and engagement that runs all week long. Whether this happens through independent *minyanim* or through other institutions or communal expressions, we can't be satisfied with a successful model that works only on Shabbat. While Shabbat is a critical pathway, it really is only one element in a broader engaged Jewish life. ■

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SHABBAT, SHABBOS, AND SATURDAY: OPENING DOORS AT THE JCC

by RABBI JOY LEVITT

At The JCC in Manhattan, the values that animate and define us can be seen in the way we think about Shabbat. From the beginning, we knew that what we did (and did not do) on Shabbat would enable us to articulate the mission of the JCC regarding both its Jewish quality and its understanding of community, and to link Judaism and community in important ways.

For most of the last 50 years or so, the question of Shabbat and JCCs has largely been about opening or closing, and has often engendered a battle between synagogues and JCCs. Put simply, synagogues in the main wanted JCCs to close and JCCs, frequently in competition with for-profit health clubs, wanted to remain open. For The JCC in Manhattan, this binary way of approaching a potentially powerful decision was unhelpful — so we reframed the question. How can the JCC be a positive force in our community for rest and renewal on Shabbat within the context of a diverse community that defines these ideas in multiple ways? How can we honor the variety of practices in our community while also advancing the notion that, as a central idea in Jewish life, Shabbat is a gift to all of us? We started from an assumption that the old understanding of JCCs as “secular” and synagogues as “religious” was an inaccurate description of both institutions as well as of the people who attend them. While there are certainly people who are active synagogue members who only come to the JCC to exercise, and likewise JCC members who wouldn't step foot in a synagogue, we believe that everyone who walks through our doors is looking for meaning in their lives, hoping to find connections and searching for ways to strengthen their families with values. In other words, we don't see ourselves as either a secular or religious institution

Rabbi Joy Levitt is Executive Director of The Jewish Community Center in Manhattan. Prior to coming to the JCC she served for twenty years as a congregational rabbi on Long Island and in New Jersey. Most recently, she founded the Jewish Journey Project, an initiative designed to revolutionize Jewish education for children.

but rather a place of Jewish engagement laying down multiple pathways into Jewish life.

While our vision for Shabbat has not changed in the 12 years since the building opened, our programs and policies have evolved as we've come to better understand our community's needs. For years, we didn't open the building until 1pm, and then only for fitness-center members or for an occasional Shabbat lunch or discussion. Today, we welcome thousands of people into programs and activities that, while diverse in nature, adhere to two basic principles: there is no commercial culture at the JCC on Shabbat (that is, no business is transacted) and the look and feel of the building is very different than it is during the week.

• THE ART INSTALLATION:

Every Friday morning, people walk into the lobby and notice billowing white columns descending from the ceiling, announcing that Shabbat is coming. We held a contest and selected an artist — Michelle Brody — to design an installation that created an atmosphere of Shabbat in our lobby. Her installation evokes candlesticks, the Sabbath bride and any number of other Shabbat images that help us create a mood of rest.

• SHABBAT SHABBANG/ SHABBAT SHABBANG JR.:

Once a month, we hold large Shabbat dinners throughout the building, with different programming in each room. Everyone shares *Kiddush* in the lobby and then chooses from a set of experiences. It might be a lecture, a wine tasting, a musical concert or a study session; for Shabbat Shabbang, Jr., the programming is geared towards young children and families. These dinners are subsidized by a donor who wanted to make communal Shabbat dinners more affordable and loved the idea of different kinds of people coming together on Shabbat.

• SATURDAY MORNING PART- NERS:

Every Saturday morning, hundreds of underserved children from all over New York come to the JCC to swim, play basketball and engage in other supervised activi-

ties through a number of JCC partners, including the Children's Aid Society, Homes for the Homeless, New York Cares, Achilles' Kids and others. This program grew out of an awareness that because we were originally closed on Shabbat mornings, we had an asset — our building — that could be put to great use by organizations that worked with children in need. Even when we decided to open the fitness center on Shabbat mornings, we still reserved the pool for the Saturday morning Partners program. As a result, thousands of underserved children have learned to swim at the JCC.

• **R & R:** From Sukkot to Passover, the JCC is transformed every Shabbat afternoon with free programming for the entire community. We wanted to make an important statement that Shabbat is a gift to the community. Thanks to a few very generous donors, Shabbat is free at the JCC. We greet 600 to 800 people each Shabbat who come to do yoga and meditate, attend a family concert, do origami, listen to a cappella music, watch a film, study a text or be part of a book club. There are social-justice projects and opportunities to visit people in the hospital. We welcome everyone, and we are sensitive to the varying needs in the community. The lobby is free of amplified music or any technology, and there is both a Shabbat elevator and designated floors where we do not use amplification, writing materials or music.

Most helpful in growing these programs has been an articulation of the outcome we hoped to achieve and a measurement of every decision against that goal. We hoped to bring the richness of Shabbat to our community. We wanted to reach the widest possible group of people and honor the variety of ways people observe Shabbat. In other words, we wanted to reach people who call it Shabbat, *Shabbos*, Saturday or the weekend. We wanted to make sure our building extended beyond our community as a force for good. Judging from the response, we're on the right track — and we can only imagine what might come next. ■



Photograph by Anna Rozenblat

SHABBAT IN SYNAGOGUES: IT'S CHANGED A LOT!

by RABBI HAYIM HERRING

How much have synagogues' celebrations of Shabbat changed in a generation? In broad strokes, a trip back to the 1980s offers some clues to the revolutionary evolution we have witnessed.

If you walked into a Conservative congregation on Shabbat morning in the 1980s, you would typically find a mostly Hebrew service led by a rabbi and cantor that lasted for approximately three hours. You would also be able to attend a late Friday evening service, which would attract an older crowd and the Bar or Bat Mitzvah family, if one was being celebrated on Shabbat morning.

In a Reform congregation, the primary community service was held on Friday evening. If you were a member of a Reform congregation, it probably wouldn't occur to you to attend a Shabbat morning service unless you were invited to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Whether on Friday evening or Shabbat morning, the service had much more English than Hebrew.

And Orthodoxy? Typically, whether on Shabbat evening or Shabbat morning, you would find a straightforward Hebrew service, with little communal singing. Needless to say, you would not have expected to find women leading any aspects of the service.

Another standard feature of Shabbat in the synagogue was the *Dvar Torah*. This was a time prior to personal computing, the Internet and social media. Maybe I'm being unduly nostalgic, but it seems like people's attention spans were longer then. The sermon might therefore have occupied 20 minutes of the service.

In sum, a little over a generation ago, Shabbat celebration was characterized primarily by prayer and the sermon. It was very much pulpit focused — the sage was on the stage, the cantor conducted services and lay people were much more passive, with the exception of Orthodoxy, where the norm remains for lay people to lead services. It was very easy to identify the type of congregation one was in by the amount of Hebrew used, the presence or absence of musical instrumentation and the involvement of women in the service. Moreover, denominations across the country generally maintained commonalities in terms of melodies and *minhag* (custom).

What's more, services were centered in synagogue buildings, where vestiges of formality continued to exist (for example, in levels of decorum and child-friendliness). In many places, the expectation for dress was jacket and tie for men and dresses and skirts, or dress pants, for women. Services were thought of as multi-gener-

ational experiences and not niche or generation specific, with the exception of "junior congregations" for children. One similarity that spanned denominational boundaries was the standard fare at the *Kiddush*: some version of tuna salad with too much mayonnaise, nasty-smelling herring and bad coffee.

There wasn't any singular event that caused the rather dramatic change in communal Shabbat celebration that we now take for granted. But in retrospect, it's quite incredible how radically different Shabbat is celebrated today. What has changed about the celebration of Shabbat? In sum, it is the sheer variety of experiences that constitute the celebration of Shabbat across America.

When historians and sociologists write the history of synagogues that pioneered new path-

THE AMOUNT OF CHANGE and innovation in the celebration of Shabbat is quite breathtaking when contrasted with the way Shabbat was observed only a generation ago.

ways for Shabbat in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, clearly, B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) and Kehilat Hadar, both in Manhattan, and Temple Sinai and IKAR, both in Los Angeles, will take their rightful places. These four congregations are often cited for their Shabbat experiences because their respective rabbinic leaders have invested and continue to invest significant efforts in creating intentional Shabbat communities characterized by high-quality music, spirited and spiritual *davening* and attention to choreography. But these are not the only efforts of note.

Within the past couple decades, each of the four major denominations has published a new *siddur*. With the relatively recent publication of the *Koren Sacks Siddur* (Koren Publishers, 2012), we've seen greater attention to a more eloquent English translation for the Modern Orthodox Jewish community. Conversely, the Reconstructionist and Reform prayer books now incorporate much more Hebrew than previous iterations, and the Reconstructionist *siddur* incorporates beautiful artwork. Current versions of the Conservative *siddur* include contemporary translations and readings in English and still adhere primarily to a traditional egalitarian Hebrew liturgy.

Meanwhile, the venues for Shabbat services now transcend the walls of the synagogue building, whether that means they take place at the lake, at the beach, in the park or in a parking lot under the stars. And if you can't physically get to a Shabbat service, some synagogues will bring the service to you by live streaming.

Instrumentation (outside of the Orthodox community) plays a much larger role on Shabbat than in the past. Not long ago, you'd find musical instrumentation primarily in Reform congregations. However, it is now increasingly common to

find some form of musical instrumentation in many non-Orthodox congregations. In addition, liturgy and musical styles are much more original and eclectic. Melodies written by Debbie Friedman in Reconstructionist, Conservative and Reform congregations, and by Shlomo Carlebach in every kind of congregation, are now common. In Modern Orthodoxy, there has been a clear shift away from the melodies of Eastern Europe to a more contemporary style of music from Israel and the United States. The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, the Reconstructionist movement and others have spawned more energetic and more meditative chanting styles, and other congregations continue to innovate in this essential element of Shabbat celebration.

Synagogue 2000 did a significant job at promoting healing services, which are still very popular at many congregations on Shabbat. STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), the foundation that I led for almost a decade (and which was supported by The Steinhardt Foundation among other philanthropic partners) also had a major impact on the variety of experiences

one still finds today in Shabbat services. Some may take for granted that in non-Orthodox congregations, one might typically find multiple experiences in addition to prayer on a given Shabbat. Torah and yoga classes, meditation, drumming circles, discussions of contemporary Jewish issues and a host of other experiences can be found in congregations that were directly or indirectly influenced by Synaplex™, one of STAR's signature initiatives, which focused on building a Shabbat community.

Because of these demographic-specific experiences, some of which are very casual, the way people dress for Shabbat has changed. I've been in synagogues where individuals in dress clothes bump up against those in yoga pants or bicycle clothing. More often than not, in this era of business casual, people tend to dress down for Shabbat anyway.

The amount of change and innovation in the celebration of Shabbat is quite breathtaking when contrasted with the way Shabbat was observed only a generation ago. This innovation, combined with a sensitivity to the traditions and values of Shabbat, is yet another sign of the vitality of the American Jewish community. There is every reason to expect that the American Jewish community, nurtured by some exciting developments in Israel, will continue to be an incubator of innovation in the years ahead. Counting a holographic projection of a person in a *minyan*, *siddurim* that you can customize and download, hybrid digital and physical Shabbat services involving congregations in other communities — all of these and more are possible. With any luck, synagogues will find more creative staples at *Kiddush* lunches than tuna, herring and bland coffee. ■

Rabbi Hayim Herring, Ph.D. is C.E.O. of HayimHerring.com, a consulting firm that "prepares today's leaders for tomorrow's organizations"™ by advancing future oriented solutions for nonprofit leaders. He recently authored Tomorrow's Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life (The Alban Institute, 2012).

REIMAGINING SHABBAT ON CAMPUS

by HART LEVINE



The state of Shabbat life in college can be deceptive. Many campus Hillels and Chabads are bursting on Friday nights with engaged students, innovative programming and dynamic staff. However, no matter how amazing the offerings are, these institutions are considered successful if they reach just 10 or 20 percent of Jews on campus through weekly Shabbat dinners. Some blame the core communities at Hillel and Chabad for being intimidating, exclusive or of no interest to the majority of Jews on campus. Others think traditional events like Shabbat dinners are an archaic and ineffective engagement model, or that Judaism itself needs revamping.

As a student at the University of Pennsylvania and as someone whose life revolved around weekly Shabbat dinners and the community that formed around them, I felt that a

solution to this problem might lie within. I was part of such a beautiful and meaningful community — albeit one whose walls were hard to climb — and I wished we could find ways to open it up to those on the outside.

So we set out to try. Finding students who were strangers to Jewish life and outsiders of the Jewish community seemed to be a challenge, until we realized that we all knew people who were Jewish but not actively involved — from classes, dorms and activities around campus. My friends and I started inviting these students to Shabbat dinners, but instead of bringing them to Hillel or Chabad, we created our own welcoming Shabbat spaces in our homes, our apartments and our dorms. Some of these guests were new to Shabbat (a few had just found out they were Jewish), some had minimal exposure (through grandparents, summer camp or an occasional showing at Hillel or Chabad), and some had grown up religious (perhaps even studying in Israel before college) but neglected it when they got to campus. For

whatever reason, these students weren't coming to Hillel or Chabad — but Shabbat at a friend's apartment? Sure, they said, why not?

Of course, there's more to being Jewish than having a bunch of Jews together, and our Shabbat dinners filled that role by providing a framework of meaningful Jewish content. During the meal, we would introduce and share the rituals and their themes — *Shalom Aleichem* and welcoming, *Kiddush* and sanctity, *Hamotzi* and sustenance, *Birkat Hamazon* and gratitude. There would sometimes be a song and often an ice-breaker, but other than that there was no script — it was just students sharing of themselves with their peers in an authentic and genuine manner. And because the hosts were actively engaged Jewishly, the Shabbat meals were transformed into spaces and micro-communities of meaningful Jewish life.

Since these meals were run by regulars of the Jewish community, they also served as entryways to further Jewish and communal involvement. Hearing the blessings and lit-

Hart Levine is the Director of Heart to Heart, a grassroots movement of Jewish students and young adults sharing Jewish life with their peers.



IN SOME ways, the greatest outcomes from the Shabbat meals were the friendships formed around the tables between people from across the involved/uninvolved divide.



urgency of Shabbat dinner led to requests for Hebrew lessons and the beginnings of peer-based Hebrew learning programs; falling in love with the songs and *zemirot* led to appearances at tishes and at Jewish a cappella concerts; and asking inquisitive and probing questions led to follow-up conversations and weekly *chevrutas*.

In some ways, the greatest outcomes from the Shabbat meals were the friendships formed around the tables between people from across the involved/uninvolved divide. These relationships were also the means through which outsiders could venture in and become integrated into a meaningful and sustainable community at Hillel or Chabad.

These student-led dinners also served to challenge a certain assumption about Jewish life. I remember telling a friend about the dinners and she asked, “So which rabbi runs them?” After I explained that it was actually just run by students, she responded, “No, I know, but which rabbi makes the blessings and does the rituals?” Her inability to under-

stand our model of student-led dinners seems to be symptomatic of a larger trend in today’s Jewry — that most people don’t see themselves as authentically Jewish or capable. It’s easy to see why this is so, given that the most pervasive spiritual models involve rabbis. Our Shabbat dinners were the perfect opportunity to demonstrate peer-led and home-based Judaism. Here were people who lived and breathed Shabbat but who were also regular students, friends and classmates. This made it relatable and tangible, showing that rabbis aren’t the only members of the community who do Shabbat or live Jewishly. Our dinner companions saw that they, too, could be owners, shapers and hosts of their Judaism.

What started out as a few dinners run by my friends and me has turned into an organization called Heart to Heart, named for the personal relationships and meaningful connections on which this model is based. Working in close partnership with the OU, we have organized 450 dinners over the past

three years on 40 campuses for 6,255 students — 60 percent of whom were previously uninvolved in Jewish life. Now I know I didn’t invent this — Jews have been keeping Shabbat for thousands of years, and we’ve been welcoming strangers into our homes since Abraham and his tent. But what we have created is a network, a movement, of thousands of college students and young adults who live and breathe Jewish life, sharing and creating experiences, relationships and community with their peers — which is exemplified best through the mindful mixing of regulars and non-regulars around a Shabbat table.

There’s something powerful about the intimacy and serenity of Shabbat that is sometimes lost in cafeteria-style dining halls and their crowded, endless tables. But seat 15 Jewish college students around a table, give them a framework and some food, and something magical will happen: strangers, acquaintances and friends will turn into a community. ■

REFLECTIONS ON SHABBAT AT CHABAD ON CAMPUS

by CHANA R. NOVACK and RABBI HERSHEY NOVACK



Why do college students flock to their local Chabad on Campus for Shabbat dinner each week? For the free food, right?

Well, not exactly. While a home-cooked meal can set the stage for a Shabbat experience, it is merely a platform. All over campus, students have easy access to good food, well-appointed dining spaces and a wide variety of exciting programs and activities, all at no direct cost.

Maybe it's the alcohol? Sorry. Our Chabad House, like virtually all in the Chabad on Campus network, does not serve anything stronger than a bit of Kiddush wine.

So what do students see in the Chabad Shabbat dinner experience? Well, we asked a few of them. Here are some of the ideas that they shared with us along with our observations as educators.

ACCEPTANCE:

At Chabad, every student is accepted as they are; personal Jewish observance and practice are not critiqued. We encourage everybody to *Zachor* (remember) the Shabbat, in cele-

bration as a community, without judging how they might *Shamor* (guard) and keep the laws of Shabbat.

Since the Jewish student population is quite diverse, we seek to build community that is broadly inclusive. Students who are more involved — let's call them "Shabbat natives" — have the opportunity to take ownership of the Shabbat experience by taking on responsibilities such as preparing, inviting friends, welcoming guests, serving the meals and sticking around after dinner to create an atmosphere of *Oneg Shabbat*. This might include playing board games, singing *nigunim* and *Z'mirot* or merely chatting — just as they might in their own homes. The secret is to create a cultural environment that is both meaningful for the students who observe Shabbat in a rich manner, while also welcoming and accessible to students who might be at their first Shabbat dinner ever.

BEING, NOT DOING:

Shabbat serves as a break from all the work and pressures of college. It is a time to rejuvenate. An implicit message of Shabbat is that what matters most is a person's essence, not their actions. This runs counter to the archetype of the high-achieving college stu-

dent who is, by nature or nurture, deadline-driven and goal-oriented. Refraining from *melacha*, or certain types of work prohibited on Shabbat, is a celebration of covenant, not one's deeds. This healthy message empowers college students with a vital sense of perspective. As one sophomore told us, "Shabbat provides an outlet through which outside noise can be silenced."

COMMUNITY:

The need to create a sense of "manageable community" is a driving force in the lives of college students. Manageable community helps to provide context in a large and impersonal class of students. Chabad serves as a comfortable environment in which to meet new friends and form community. Students eat together, talk together, share in the rituals of the Shabbat meal and create lifelong bonds. For them, the social aspects of Shabbat at Chabad are paramount.

The Jewish context of hospitality is critical. At Shabbat at Chabad, students have the opportunity to meet professors, visiting parents, businesspeople in town for conferences, Israeli politicians, Israeli backpackers, philanthropists and individuals visiting the area for medical treatment. It's a diverse and eclectic crowd that gathers around our Shabbat table.

Chana R. Novack and Rabbi Hershey Novack are the founding directors of Chabad on Campus — Rohr Center for Jewish Life at Washington University in St. Louis, where they are beginning their twelfth year.

DONORS AND DEDICATION:

We are blessed with a diverse array of donors, typically alumni of the universities that we serve and the parents of current students, along with faculty and other friends, who place great value in the service we provide. Beyond providing generous support, they also offer encouragement and guidance to the local Chabad family. This effusive support, broadly defined, cannot be overstated.

EDUCATION:

We want students to discover the beauty and warmth of a traditional Shabbat and ultimately to choose to incorporate it into their lives. We do this by using a multidimensional tool of experiential education: Shabbat dinner. Shabbat dinner is a hands-on learning tool that impacts via affect, behavior and cognition. Dr. Leonard Saxe calls this trifecta the “Kishkes, Cortex, and Kinesthetics Principle.” When the educator deploys all these aspects, the combined result is a powerful and rounded pedagogical experience.

Formal education occurs as well. During the meal, typically the rabbi will share a *Dvar Torah*. This teaching must be meaningful yet brief, broadly relevant to contemporary students, yet Jewish and Chasidic at its core. Ultimately, we want people to consider Chabad a location where they will appreciate powerful Jewish ideas and ideals.

FAMILY:

Young adults feel the connection to a home environment and want to be welcomed by one. Yet, Chabad is far more than an experience in “radical hospitality,” to borrow Dr. Ron Wolfson’s phrase from *Relational Judaism* (Jewish Lights, 2013). While we do serve as a Jewish communal institution, at our core we are a family. Each Chabad on Campus is headed up by a husband and wife team, typically aided by some wonderful children. Shabbat is what we do with our family every Friday evening, and we invite students to celebrate Shabbat as part of our family. Our staff doesn’t take turns being “on call” for Shabbat dinners, nor do we cancel Shabbat dinners during school breaks. If it’s Friday night, we are going to be celebrating with our family, and we naturally invite students to join us. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks called this “*haimish*.”

GLOBAL:

There are many challenges facing the Jewish People today. For example, many young Jews are Jewishly-illiterate, cut off from the core ideas and practices of Judaism. Some analysts argue that young Jewish Americans are distancing themselves from Israel. Within Israel, there appear to be deep divisions, particularly along the secular/religious axis. It is therefore appropriate to highlight a positive global trend. Parallel to

the Chabad on Campus network, there is another Chabad network serving a significant population of young Jews: Israelis who have just completed military service. This population often departs Israel for a period of travel, trekking in such places as Thailand, Nepal, India, Cambodia, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Australia, New Zealand and, yes, even in New York. To reach them, the Chabad movement has opened Chabad Houses in each of these places. To our knowledge, there is no other Jewish organization that operates on this scale, with professional staff at virtually every significant location where young Jews are to be found. Common throughout this system is the Shabbat at Chabad experience. By binding a diverse set of young people with a common social platform and shared religious language, perhaps this program can help connect Jews with their heritage and bridge divides within the Jewish People.

Rabbi Yossy Gordon, Executive Vice President of the Chabad on Campus Int’l Foundation, summed it up for us nicely. “Students are smart. They perceive the genuine *Ahavas Yisroel* [love of the Jewish People], as well as the dedication to serving *Am Yisroel* [the People of Israel], that motivates the Chabad family to set up shop on a college campus and open their home to all.”

And students get it. ■

THE JOY OF SHABABA

by KARINA ZILBERMAN

I am not going to tell you what Shabbat is — you already know that. Instead, I am going to talk about joy.

Every week, I am blessed to be in the presence of children and their grownups while they are all celebrating Shabbat together. I have experienced for myself how fun can be transformed and elevated to the highest level — joy — when it happens in a meaningful context. As Martin Buber said, “The beating heart of the universe is holy joy.” (Quoted in *Simplicity: The Art of Living* by Richard Rohr, Crossroad, 1992)

So what makes joy holy?

Joy becomes holy when it is connected to a community, to a tradition and to our authentic selves. As Reb Nachman of Breslov said, “It’s a great mitzvah to be always happy.” (*Likutey Moharan*, Breslov Research Institute, 1995) True joy is a huge challenge, but when it is connected to a community, its power is endless.

When we started Shababa in 92Y’s lobby with just me, my puppets and my guitar on a Friday morning in October 2007, I wanted to bring Shabbat to the people and remove all the obstacles. I didn’t want families to have to look for me in the 92Y’s impressive catalogue or to sign up for a “Shabbat Kids” class, program or service. That would have already created an obstacle and a lot of conscious work for these very busy adults. Instead, I thought, “What if we invited adults and children alike to be part of a story — a Shabbat

story where everybody is part of the narrative?”

That is the philosophy behind Shababa, a series of intergenerational community gatherings throughout the week that provide a range of ways to connect to celebratory Jewish life and the Shababa community, including High Holiday and Shabbat experiences, holiday celebrations, singing groups, an annual benefit concert and *tzedakah* projects. I don’t believe in pediatric Judaism. Entertaining children in a Jewish setting is not an effective path to a joy which can bind children and adults to Jewish tradition. But experiencing a journey together — parents, children, grandparents, nannies, strangers-who-become-friends — that is how we participate in something larger than ourselves. That is the moment when transformation happens. It is the difference between a program and an experience. Shabbat is something to experience, not to assist.

This intergenerational, experiential, joy-driven approach to Jewish education and community has been recognized and celebrated by the Covenant Foundation and many Jewish Community Centers in North America, England, Israel, Germany and Russia. To bring this joyful, intergenerational approach to Jewish communities around the world, we are in the early stages of creating the Shababa Network, through which synagogues, community centers and day schools can access this methodology, adapt it for their own communities and share their experiences and learning with one another. Together, we hope to help more people make Shabbat a joyous intergenerational experience. ■

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WHEN SHABBAT SIMPLY DRIBBLES AWAY

by ALEX POMSON

For the last ten years, I have been stalking Jewish families. This has been a socially acceptable kind of stalking; in formal terms, I am engaged in family-life course research. Together with my colleague, Randal Schnoor, I have been studying a group of Jewish families in Toronto whose children were in the early grades of elementary school when we initially launched a study of their Jewish day school. Today, returning to these families for a third interview in ten years, the same children are either in high school or a few years beyond.

It has been an intriguing sample of families to study. In Jewish terms, most were barely engaged when they enrolled their children in a Jewish day school: hardly any were synagogue members, few had received a Jewish day school education themselves, and a significant minority were living in intermarried families. For wildly different reasons, they had travelled a long and winding road that led to at least one child spending a few years in a Jewish day school.

Thanks to funding from the Canadian government, we have had an opportunity to return to these families nearly a decade after we first met them, after most of their children have graduated or withdrawn from Jewish day school. This has given us a chance to explore the extent to which the relationships and behaviors stimulated by their children's schooling have survived as more than a fragile web of memories or good intentions. More than anything else, how these families mark Shabbat has served as a prism through which to observe the Jewish routes along which they have travelled.

Like many families with little pre-existing Jewish cultural capital, observance of Shabbat was the Jewish expression they were most likely to adapt once their children started Jewish elementary school. Their synagogue attendance did not generally change; neither did their observance of Jewish dietary practices nor their memberships in other Jewish organizations. But when it came to Shabbat, a good deal shifted.

In their children's first years at elementary school, many families began to mark Shabbat for the first time in their own homes, rather

than sporadically at the homes of their parents. If they had previously observed Shabbat through gathering at home for a weekly family meal, they now added *Kiddush* or sang some special Hebrew songs. If previously they had made it a custom to go out to eat as a family on a Friday night, now there was Jewish talk at the table — about, for example, the children's *mitzvah* of the week.

The reasons behind such changes are not hard to discern, and they have significance for those interested in nurturing Jewish engagement more broadly. Children bring home the accoutrements of Shabbat in their school bags: they make *Kiddush* cups in school; their kindergarten classes have a Shabbat box that students take turns bringing home. For parents, without having to leave the comfort zone of their homes, as it were, Shabbat finds its way into their lives. And in an age in which parents value connecting school with home, most take the view of “why wouldn't we?” If their children have learned at school how to celebrate Shabbat, why wouldn't they also celebrate it at home in some way?

Some parents do resist, and are not comfortable chanting blessings over wine or bread when they themselves have rejected most reli-

MORE THAN anything else, how these families mark Shabbat has served as a prism through which to observe the Jewish routes along which they have travelled.

gious expressions, but the great majority are willing to indulge their children. In fact, it is so normal to adapt the rhythms of their own lives to those of their children that some parents, we found, didn't notice what had changed at home until someone else commented on it.

These patterns naturally played out when their children were still quite young, when they sought out or depended on their parents' attention. We have now had a chance, almost ten years later, to see what shifts occurred over a longer period of time due to what biologists call ontogenetic change (the natural processes of aging) and/or what sociologists call generational change (the shifting roles in the family brought about by new life stages such as the move from elementary school to high school or through life transitions such as Bar or Bat Mitzvah or parental divorce).

We found that just as some parents had previously not noticed how they had adopted a fairly regular practice of marking Shabbat in some way, others now hadn't noticed that it had withered away. As one father wistfully commented, “I don't remember a conscious decision to stop [doing anything together on a Friday night]. It just sort of happened... which is too bad.”

When there are few other sources of Jewish inspiration at home (a common denominator among a significant minority of our sample), it seems that children have an outsized influence on whatever Jewish practices do or do not happen. In the same way that it was comfortable to take on Shabbat practices when children brought them home from school, it has also been easy to let them drop when children no longer agitated for them. As another father explained, “As they got older, they were playing here and there outside. We didn't insist that they come in and we do [Shabbat].”

These last examples highlight the erosion of practices as a consequence of aging or ontogenetic processes. Those same processes, we are finding, can also lead to an intensification of Jewish practices, particularly in terms of engagement outside the house. One single mother, when we first interviewed her, did not go to synagogue on Shabbat because, she said, her young daughter was too tired at the end of the school week and wanted to sleep in. Now that her daughter was older and ready to come along with her on Shabbat, she had become a frequent *shul*-goer and, more recently, a board member at a synagogue towards which her daughter gravitated because of social opportunities there.

A more common phenomenon — driven by generational rather than ontogenetic change — is how the run-up to Bar/Bat mitzvah, and then a year of ferrying children to celebrate with others, cements parents into social and communal relationships that might not otherwise have taken hold once they had left the adult social networks of their children's schools. If parents and children choose to mark their Bar or Bat Mitzvah within a congregation, rather than in the context of a home-made event (an increasingly widespread phenomenon), this choice keeps in motion a flywheel of Jewish social engagement that was set in motion during their time at school. In turn, this dynamic sees expression in maintaining Shabbat practices in both public and private spaces, at home with a stable circle of Jewish friends and in the community.

Because parents' Shabbat habits are largely driven by their children's interests or simply by their physical presence, once their children age and move on from Jewish schools, little remains of whatever customs they took on during those years when their children were young. Without social reinforcement, this dynamic is almost inevitable despite the best of intentions. To use the evocative phrase with which Franz Kafka bemoaned his father's failure to pass on what he called the few flimsy gestures he performed in the name of Judaism, these customs and practices simply seem to “dribble away.” This happens even when these customs are as joyful as some of the Shabbat experiences had been in the lives of young families. ■

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IN DEFENSE OF A SECULAR SABBATH

by JUDITH SHULEVITZ

Anyone who has ever found herself on a synagogue mailing list has come across this *aperçu* by the writer and Zionist Ahad Ha'am: "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel." Though raised Hasidic, Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927) was very much a *Haskalah* rationalist. Nonetheless, he based his Zionism on Jewish institutions like the Sabbath, for he thought Israel should root itself, as a nation, in Judaism's cultural, social and ethical traditions rather than in ethnic nationalism and anti-anti-Semitism. But was he right? Does the day of rest strengthen the bonds of a nation, or is that grandiloquence? Certainly Sabbath laws now divide Israel as much as they unite it.

In the past decade or so, however, prominent secular Israeli intellectuals have begun expressing the same thought as Ahad Ha'am. These non-Haredi Sabbatharians want to protect the Sabbath from consumerism and save it for not only rest, but also for unifying the Israeli public. For, in theory at least, the Sabbath is a profoundly political institution, in that it makes time for people to gather and partake in the discussions that lead to collective activity.

Throughout the 19th and much of the 20th Century, American Christians debated the merits of the Sabbath with a similar passion, and many of their arguments had as strong a political flavor as Ahad Ha'am's. The civic (as opposed to theological) discussion turned on the question of whether there was anything about Sunday that warranted preservation once the old Puritan rigor had lost its appeal. The answer was that the American Sunday had become indispensable to the task of fostering America's exceptional qualities — its egalitarianism and pluralism.

In a famous 1872 speech pleading for the opening of libraries and for public transportation on Sundays, the minister and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher argued that only the liberalization of the Sabbath would conserve its character as "a day peculiarly American" in its serendipitous neighborliness, family-minded "household love," moral uplift and "poetic element." (Henry Ward Beecher, "Libraries and Public Reading Rooms: Should They Be Opened on Sunday?" Cambridge, Mass., J. Ford, 1872).

In 1906, an Episcopalian minister in Boston claimed, portentously, that Sunday had given the American character its "moral earnestness ...

that utters itself in every grand institution of freedom" and allowed "eighty million persons, the refugees of every land" to become a single people. In 1961, Supreme Court Justices Earl Warren and Felix Frankfurter wrote into legal history the link between the Sabbath and civic consciousness in separate but concurring opinions in defense of Sunday-closing (or blue) laws in a case called *McGowan et al. v. Maryland*. It's jarring to remember how recently Americans couldn't work or shop on Sunday, except when medically necessary or when certain services or stores were deemed essential to fun on days off. What was wrong with letting people shop? Frankfurter glossed over the obvious point that it forced everyone in the retail sector to work and emphasized instead something less tangible: the bustling, humming feel of a street open for business, which, he said, had the power to destroy "a cultural asset of importance: a release from the daily grind, a preserve of mental peace, an opportunity for self-disposition." Warren and Frankfurter maintained that the Protestant Sunday had evolved into a secular day of recuperation, a public good that promoted the health of the American people and the orderliness of its society. Therefore, they ruled, blue laws did not violate the First Amendment's stricture against the establishment of religion.

As for the day of rest falling on Sunday, Frankfurter — who was Jewish — pointed out that to share a day of rest, you had to pick one, and it might as well be the one that most people already observed. The secular Sunday was implicitly a national holiday. One day a week — it is worth remembering — the country honored life beyond duty and the imperatives of the marketplace. For 24 hours, Americans stayed home and ate huge family dinners, or went to church, or set off on afternoon drives. And they not only did these things with members of their inner circle; they did them with the knowledge that everyone else was doing them, too. That gave them permission not to work, along with the rest of the nation. They had fewer choices, but it has now become evident, in retrospect, that buried inside that lack of choice was a certain freedom, because trailing behind the inexhaustible options for leisure we enjoy today is the realization that we're not doing everything we could be doing.

Not too long ago, David Levy, a professor at the Information School at the University of Washington, updated Frankfurter's secular Sabbatharianism for the networked age by calling for a new "informational environmentalism." He says we need to fight to save ourselves from the "pollutants" of communications overload: the overabundance of information that turns us into triagers and managers, rather than readers; the proliferation of bad or useless or

ersatz information; the forces that push us to process information quickly rather than thoughtfully. If we don't fend off those pollutants, he cautions, we risk becoming cut off from the world, less able to make wise decisions, stressed and out of control of our own lives. "Much as the modern-day environmental movement has worked to cultivate and preserve certain natural habitats, such as wetlands and old-growth forests, for the health of the planet, so too should we now begin to cultivate and preserve human habitats for the sake of our own well-being," Levy writes. (David L. Levy, "More, Faster, Better: Governance in an Age of Overload, Busyness, and Speed," in *First Monday, Special Issue No. 7, "Command Lines: The Emergence of Governance in Global Hyperspace,"* 2006.)

How would we go about this? "We will need to cultivate unhurried activities and quiet places, sanctuaries in time and space for reflection and contemplation," he says. Which sanctuary in time does he have in mind? The Sabbath, of course. "I by no means want to argue for the broad-scale adoption of traditional Sabbath practices ... by the larger population," he says. What does he want to argue for? He is loath to say: "I could speak to the ways I myself am experimenting with such ideas at home and in the workplace, but effective change will most importantly come through collective reflection, experimentation, and action: local communities creating sanctuaries that fit their particular circumstances."

But his hesitation to commit himself seems a little misplaced, because the Sabbath already exists, and, as Frankfurter might have said, presents itself as the obvious answer. The Sabbath has a claim on us in that it comes to us out of the past — out of the bodies of our mothers and fathers, out of the churches and synagogues on our streets, out of our own dreams — to train us to pay attention to it. And why do we need to be trained? Permit this quasi-secular Jew to quote a *midrash*. Consider the mystery surrounding God's first Sabbath. Why *did* God stop, anyway? In the 18th Century, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (the Vilna Gaon) ventured this explanation: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only once we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating in the first place. (Or — as Gaon didn't say — why it *wasn't* worth creating, why it isn't up to snuff and should be created anew. After all, God, contemplating his first creation, decided to destroy it in a flood.) We could let the world wind us up and set us to working, like dolls that go until they fall over because they have no way of stopping. But that would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember. ■

Judith Shulevitz is an editor and columnist at The New Republic. Before that, she was the founding culture editor of Slate and the editor of Lingua Franca. She has been a columnist for The New York Times Book Review, Slate, and New York Magazine. Her book, The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time (Random House, 2010), was a New York Times Notable Book, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, and winner of The American Library Association's 2011 Sophie Brody Medal for Jewish Literature.

SHABBAT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

Recently, my wife and I invited a young African-American Christian family who live in our building in Harlem over for a Shabbat dinner. We went to some length to explain in advance what, exactly, a Shabbat dinner entails: the food, the blessings, the learning, the celebration. Before we'd finished the explanation, our neighbors assured us that they'd enjoyed many Shabbat dinners at Hillel during their years at Yale as well as in friends' homes after college, and knew all about it.

So it is in America today. In the early 21st Century, Shabbat seems to be in the public sphere. And more than any other aspect of Shabbat ritual and celebration, the Friday night Shabbat dinner has attained greater cultural familiarity now than at any other time. This is true of non-Jews of a certain educational background and socio-economic status, but it is also true of Jews. I would venture to say that the average American Jew who came of age (early twenties) in the late 1990s or mid 2000s had far more familiarity as teens and young adults with Shabbat experiences, especially the Shabbat dinner, than my peers who went to college beginning in the mid to late 1970s, when I believe Jewish connection and identity bottomed out in America.

Outside of what was then a small Orthodox community, the elite Havurah movement and very committed members of the Conservative movement, the home ritual of the Friday night Shabbat dinner was virtually unknown to the masses of assimilating American Jews in the 1960s and 70s. In fact, by the 1950s, liberal synagogues had created a structure of Jewish communal life centered on late Friday night services that precluded inspired Friday night dinners at home for those committed to the life of the synagogue. I remember when I was teaching eighth grade Sunday school in a liberal congregation in the early 1980s, I was organizing a

Shabbat dinner with parents of students at one of their homes only to be rebuffed by the rabbi, who informed me that it was a violation of Temple policy to organize any event that would compete with Friday night services. In the past 30 years, however, a growing number of synagogues have become open to supporting an array of activities inside and outside the synagogue building that can now happen even when the rabbi preaches his or her weekly sermon.

More and more young Jewish adults and families find this special time of personal connection, spiritual elevation and physical enjoyment a most welcome antidote to the never-ending demands of work and the relentless pace of life in our contemporary world. Young people without formal affiliation to synagogues and other Jewish institutions are invited to the homes of friends for Shabbat dinners and invite friends over for the same. The mainstream media makes references to Shabbat dinners without explanation, making clear the assumption that they are familiar in the general culture.

The question is whether we can capitalize on this cultural familiarity in order to champion and teach the values implicit in Shabbat from which American Jews and perhaps the general culture can benefit. The idea that time can be experienced not as fleeting but as full, not as limited but as temporarily infinite on a weekly basis, can speak to a culture in which one's work is never finished, in which there is always one more email to write, one more issue to deal with. A world in which one is never complete and always in need of improvement sorely needs the sense of wholeness and perfection that can come from a commitment to regard one's work as done and complete every Friday evening, no matter what is left to do, and from a spiritual discipline that puts one in an altogether different relation of action to the created world. There are reasons why sitting down with family and friends as darkness falls after a week of work, to lift a glass of wine and invoke

the possibility of transcendence in one's life appeals to those living in a culture and society that can drain such possibilities away. If the Shabbat dinner is somewhat in the public sphere, does the general culture's familiarity with Shabbat end with dinner, or might that dinner experience inspire an appreciation for the overall spiritual discipline of what the Jewish Sabbath represents in all?

In the end, many Jewish Americans will find it easier to appreciate the spiritual wisdom of the Jewish Sabbath if they see that their non-Jewish peers, friends, co-workers and family members see its value as well. This doesn't mean that for Jews to find the rhythm of some kind of regular Shabbat practice compelling, the non-Jews in their lives need to be Sabbath observers. It means that the more the general culture affirms and applauds the virtues of what Shabbat can mean, the less uncomfortable Jews will be with trying it on. For that reason, educational programs, institutional incentives and community campaigns that work to make Shabbat a habit in the lives of American Jews would be mistaken to make such endeavors parochial and exclusive.

In the Torah, only one particular practice or observance is called, in and of itself, an Eternal Covenant. The centrality of the Sabbath to the whole system of Jewish spiritual wisdom and practice moves us to understand that the very ethos of the Jewish people balances the tension between acting in the world and viewing it as complete, between working towards improving the world and knowing that Creation is awesome and majestic just as it is. The Friday night *Kiddush* over wine tells us that Shabbat is both a remembrance of the reality of Creation and a monument to our moving from slavery to freedom. Shabbat inspires us to profoundly appreciate that the static and the dynamic, the unchanging and the changing, can be experienced as one in transcendent moments that we can share together. The Jews have something that everyone else needs. Let's not be greedy. ■

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It wasn't the rules and prohibitions that transformed Shabbat into the iconic Jewish experience. It was its simple yet ingenious emphasis on the social: A community taking a break and celebrating life together. In this, Shabbat cuts to the core of Jewish values and announces itself as perhaps the primary distinguishing element between Judaism and every other major religion. As Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, 'It is a day for praise, not a day for petitions.'

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT