

One of the key issues in the current Israeli *Kulturkampf* is public observance of the Sabbath. The "official" position of organized Orthodoxy is challenged in this controversial essay by a leading Israeli intellectual, whose writings have frequently appeared in TRADITION. Originally published in the influential Tel Aviv daily *Ha'aretz*, it was translated from the Hebrew by David E. Newman, Q.C., of Toronto.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE SABBATH IN OUR DAYS

The orthodox traditionalist, the avowed secularist, and the majority that oscillates between the two warring factions — all appreciate the basic role of the Sabbath in determining the nature of our life in Israel. Indeed, clarification of this issue has essentially become beclouded by the unfortunate combination in Israel of a great spiritual ideal with political party interests. The religious parties who emphasize compulsory Sabbath observance by the community evoke opposition where voluntary consent would have been possible. It is quite possible that the laws and customs that the "religious" want to impose on the community would have been voluntarily accepted by the majority had a discussion pertaining to the desirable form of the Sabbath preceded the controversy of compulsion. The legislative decrees would then have been merely the outer manifestation of an accepted national will.

Worse than the desire for hasty compulsion is the method usually employed to get support for legal compulsion of the Sabbath law or any other "religious" law, by attempting to get consent of the parliamentary majority through bargaining in economic, national, or administrative areas. Religious parties are prepared to vote for important national issues such as political relations with Germany, or military rule in the Arab Sector, not on their merit, but in exchange for favors in the so-called

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religious area. They degrade themselves before the general public. Inasmuch as the public identifies them with Jewish religion, the result is contempt for religion. They attempt to bring about observance by means of sinful acts. This is nothing short of desecration.

THE SABBATH IN OUR DAYS IS NOT A SOCIAL NECESSITY

The official religious community suffers from its adherence to narrow-minded concepts. If they really believe that the basic Jewish concepts are "eternal," that is to say, timeless, they should discover in every period a new confirmation for their justification and revival. However, they concentrate only on one aspect of time: on the past. They don't realize that modern technological life is more urgently in need of the Jewish Sabbath than the *Shtetl* of the nineteenth century or the Ghetto in its peak during the Middle Ages.

Throughout the centuries, the Sabbath was conceived, even by the traditional masses, as a day of rest, that is to say, a social institution. The weekday working hours were long, tiring and physically exhausting and the Sabbath came to counter-balance work by means of rest. Jewish intellectuals took pride in its teaching as a "social accomplishment" that protected the "working class." In their naïveté and their intellectual outlook, they compared it to Sunday and other weekly rest days (only the Sabbath was instituted earlier).

All that is gone with the wind. In the progressive parts of the world where the Jewish masses reside, Israel included, the modern technological society of affluence and plenty suffers from an excess of leisure, not from exhaustion or from overwork. Even without the Sabbath, there are many occasions for rest and vacation: every day after work, vacation with pay, official recreation, and insured sick leave. Not only is our secular Sabbath and Sunday in Christian society not a rest day, but on the contrary, it is a day of physical strain and dissipation of energy that is more exhausting than an ordinary weekday. The statistical proof of that fact is the large number of absentees from work in our

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country on Sundays, and on Mondays in western countries.

SABBATH FOR RECREATION?!

From the time that the Sabbath ceased to be an instrument for rest (revitalization of energy), its anthropological role was changed. It became a source of recreation, both active and passive, i.e., an outlet for surplus energy accumulated during the week. Passive recreation means attendance at the movies and sport fields; active recreation — car races, congregating on crowded beaches and in packed stores. It is not clear how to classify card games and drinking; nevertheless, they, too, contribute to the nature of the contemporary "Sabbath."

The criticism of the existing condition, from the practical standpoint, is directed in two different ways. Some bemoan the social inequity in the enjoyment of the Sabbath (and holidays). Mr. Simon Peres, for instance, hopes that every family will soon own a car. This hope can be realized but there will be unexpected results: the roads will be absolutely blocked on the Sabbath (and so the religious Israelis will achieve their objective indirectly). To make traffic possible, we will be forced to change most of the unoccupied areas to a complex of highways, service stations and garages, and as a result, there will be no logical destination to travel to on the Sabbath. There is more than a cynical joke in this dialectic evolution. It indicates that you cannot solve the problems of the technological era by the use of social values of a former era. The number of families today in Israel (and not religious ones) who do not use their cars on the Sabbath and holidays is on the increase because the congestion on the highways and desirable roads and the nervous strain shatter any feeling of rest or joy. So the home and the family circle become the natural place for Sabbath experience. This, too, is an organic development of the modern era.

Others concentrate their efforts upon easing the Sabbath for the secularist by struggling to limit the legal and administrative regulations pertaining to traffic, recreation, and public performances. They are of the opinion that if movies, night clubs and arenas would be permitted to operate and if the cafes (which

are still closed on the Sabbath) are opened and if buses, trains and airplanes would be added to the cars that congest the highways, this would provide a solution to the problem of the hardships that the Sabbath causes to many. This typical attitude is reflected in the article of Mr. Shabbetai Tebeth, "A Rest Day that will Spell Anarchy" (Ha'Aretz 2:7). In his opinion, the main trouble is "the religious aspect of the law of Sabbath rest." That is to say, the Sabbath in his opinion becomes a "free-for-all" because restrictive laws make it impossible to organize recreational opportunities that are consistent with the Sabbath.

I shall not discuss details but there are some forms of dramatic and musical experiences that are suitable for the Sabbath, as are certain public group recreational activities. On the other hand, very little can be accomplished in our society by compulsory methods whose spiritual objective the majority of the public does not understand. However, the question is not about details. The main question is not even of compulsion or the lack of it. The question is: Do we need the Sabbath for recreation? Is recreation basic to the Sabbath or, on the contrary, is recreation of the essence of the secular days, the very epitome of secularity?

The technological age utterly destroys man's soul in the absence of counter-balances, "help-mates or opponents," more powerful than it. The challenge of the "hustle-bustle" destroys the rhythm of emotional communication between men and transforms it (in the best case) into a variety of functions devoid of spiritual and emotional content. The government's concern for the materialistic needs of the individual, young and old, exempts one from feelings of sympathy; since there is health insurance, visiting the sick becomes "unnecessary"; since there is full employment and a steady income, charity is "superfluous"; since all are assured of opportunities to rise economically and socially in accordance with their abilities, the sense of justice becomes feeble. The essence of these concepts, and the experience of charity and justice, and human affection and their emotions, continue to lose their existential reality. At best, they are but subjects for psychological and sociological research.

The multiplicity of choices and variety of opportunity in the

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choice of things erode the spiritual peace of man. The object of modern advertisement, including "public relations," is to rob the last bit of serenity from "the customer" and to prod him continually from one tasteless craving to a worse one, and so the inner bond and communication of the individual soul is crushed; it never reaches self-understanding and self-appreciation.

The saying, "Many choices lead to disaster," was never as apt as today. Modern recreation with its ever-revolving stage aggravates disintegration; it accentuates the lack of equilibrium by providing ever-increasing stimuli to those engaged in the restless climb up the ladder of material attainment.

Recreation, commercial and governmental, is an organic part of the modern progressive spiritual void. It does not cure the ravages of time but aggravates them. It creates the illusion that a revitalization of energy is taking place, whereas in actuality the very sources of such revitalization are destroyed. The equilibrium of technological man — the victim of abundance and free time — is not attained by recreation, which itself is entangled in a feverish and vicious circle. Instead, the circle must be broken at its very source. What is needed is a radical and permanent break. Through liberation from the rules and methods controlling this circle, the individual and his immediate environment will be enabled to return to their sources; to basic relationships, to a peaceful rhythm; to an intensive approach; to humble ambitions and cheerful outlook, to something that our sages would call "emanation of holiness."

That is why we need the Sabbath. It is essential for us, if we wish to exist for any length of time on earth.

THERE IS NOTHING MORE MODERN THAN THE ORIGINAL SABBATH

We must interpret the Sabbath in the spirit of the times; that was always necessary. Moreover, contemporary conditions must adjust to the Sabbath. Above all, it is important to understand its origin. The Sabbath in its original form, in its spiritual sense and psychological standards, is more important to us than to the many preceding generations.

Were not the following words meant for us? "Man's disposition on the Sabbath is unlike his disposition on week days." "That your behavior on the Sabbath shall be different from your behavior on week days — the Sabbath conversation shall be unlike your week day conversation." If we are concerned with recreation, then the essence of Sabbath recreation is the revitalization of the human soul. We begin with new ideas in the Torah — "A person should discover some original thoughts in the Torah each Sabbath." Maimonides summarizes and deepens this concept. "Through it (the Sabbath) will be established the basis of creation *ex nihilo*." "The Sabbath is the perfection of creation." This means it is in a category completely different from the category of the secular. It is necessary to live a complete life, and he adds, "Jews, because they aim for perfection, observe the Sabbath." The same concept is expressed by Reb Yitzchak Leib of Berdichev differently: "On the Sabbath, man returns to his source . . . Sabbath is derived from the word *Shivah* (return)." Is it not clear that the Sabbath is utterly different from the Christian Sunday and, especially, from the secular Sunday of western man? Possibly, the modern psychologist who coined the expression "creative leisure" felt something of the spirit of the Sabbath.

Jewish tradition never considered the essence of the Sabbath as a rest day. Rest from routine work is meant. "Remember the Sabbath day not only to rest from work but to sanctify it, to supplement it with the holiness of the Torah and its secrets . . . and do not entertain the idea that rest from work alone is sufficient." (Rabbi Moses Alshich, a student of Rabbi Joseph Karo.) Modern intellectuals have naive ideas; even Mr. Tebeth blundered in his article — as if physical idleness, even if luxurious, with an excess of sleep is typical of the Sabbath. The very converse is true. "Those who stuff their stomachs and then, because of gluttony become drowsy and waste their brains . . . these are not enjoying the Sabbath . . . for the Sabbath is sacred." (The Shelah Hakadosh)

Let not the moderns think that there is something novel in their complaint that the Sabbath is "oppressive." Forty generations ago this debate was carried on in traditional circles. "Do

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you think I gave you the Sabbath to harm you?" Even the warning to the devout ones who are enraged not to bandy excommunications and frighten the public with threats is not new. "The attitude towards the Sabbath must be in the nature of a joyful rest, not as a burden that one wants to get rid of," preaches Reb Chaim Aryeh Leib of Yadovna.

BELIEF AND GOOD TASTE

Preaching belief does not bring about belief. Belief comes about subconsciously, although it is possible to enjoy its fruits through pragmatic evidence, with the aid of intellectual casuistry, even with the aid of secular terminology and modern media. Belief and good taste are not contradictory terms. If Orthodox Jews were more at peace with themselves, they would learn from time to time to speak in the language of the contemporary generation and sense its hardships. Love for fellow Jews makes this obligatory.