

BACKGROUND: *THE SABBATH*

The word Sabbath (in Hebrew, *Shabbat*) comes from the Hebrew verb *shavat*, to rest, as it is written in the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath of G0d; you shall not do any work – you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days G0d made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore G0d blessed the Sabbath and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

The Sabbath begins at sunset, Friday, and ends the following Saturday night when at least three stars are visible in the heavens. One cannot underestimate the importance of the Sabbath; it is, for instance, the only ritual included in the Ten Commandments. Yet, its observance among Jews today varies widely: from total observance to total non-observance. This *Backgrounder* will deal with the Sabbath from a Jewish orthodox perspective. Reform and, to a lesser extent, conservative Jews tend to observe the Sabbath in a less strict way, although it is hard to pinpoint the differences between these three groups.

In the liturgy for the Friday night Sabbath service, the Sabbath is compared to a bride and this image explains both its importance in Jewish life and the preparations necessary before its start. These preparations include cooking the meals, cleaning the house, getting washed and dressed up as if welcoming your future spouse.

The Sabbath really starts with the lighting of the Sabbath candles.. Traditionally, two candles are lit. They represent the two forms of the Fourth Commandments: “Remember” (Exodus 20:8) and “Observe” (Deuteronomy 5:12) “the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” This lighting should be performed eighteen minutes before sunset. . The evening continues with the Sabbath evening service at the synagogue and the Sabbath dinner. The table for this dinner is special because it contains the Sabbath candles, two unsliced Sabbath loaves, known in Hebrew as *hallah*, and a *Kiddush* cup. Before the meal starts, the parents bless their children. Then the *Kiddush* (sanctification in Hebrew) is recited while holding the *Kiddush* cup, everyone performs the ritual washing of their hands and, finally, the head of the household recites the blessing of the bread over the *hallah*. The Sabbath meal, as the rest of the Sabbath, is a festive occasion, a “delight” (Isaiah 58:13), usually climaxing in songs and the *Birkat Hamazon* (the grace after meals). The same ritual also applies to the other two Sabbath meals eaten on Saturday, usually around noon and near the end of the afternoon.

Work (the traditional translation of the Hebrew word *melakha*) is not allowed during the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). The *Mishna* (the first part of the Talmud containing traditional oral interpretations of the *Torah*), using the *Torah* as well as the construction of the Tabernacle as a benchmark for tasks not allowed on the Sabbaths¹, had come up with 39 interdictions. These are: cooking and baking; grinding, fine chopping, straining; washing clothes; knitting, crocheting, embroidering; sewing, pasting, gluing; constructing or repairing; writing, erasing, drawing, painting, coloring, typing; hair cutting, shaving, paring nails; kindling or extinguishing a fire; lighting a candle; smoking; cutting or tearing (except cutting food); fishing, trapping; garden care lawn or maintenance; carrying (i.e., pushing or moving an object more than six feet within

¹ The construction of the Tabernacle had to stop on Sabbaths and the passage narrating it comes just after the interdiction of working on Sabbaths.

the “public domain” or from a “private domain²” into a “public domain” or vice-versa. (from : Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew*).

Rabbis extended the list by including acts which could lead to performing work during Sabbaths or which do not lead to the sanctification of the day. They include: buying and selling; riding an animal; boating; playing a musical instrument; switching on or off electricity or any electrical apparatus; handling objects that are forbidden to use during the Sabbaths (money, writing instruments, candles, money purses); weddings; journeying beyond the city boundary; watching television; performing physically strenuous tasks; driving a car, preparing for a post-Sabbath activity; and engaging in athletic activities (from: Donin, *ibid.*).

Instead rabbis suggested leisure activities such as studying the Torah (or any other Jewish text), reading, walking leisurely, visiting friends, home games such as chess or checkers, or just resting. What is important is to separate this day from the rest of the days of the week and to “sanctify” it as God commanded the Israelite people at Mount Sinai.

The interdictions listed above are automatically lifted when a person’s life is in danger (this is defined in the broadest possible terms): “The saving of life waives any restrictions due to the Sabbath” (*Talmud, Tractate Yoma*, 85a; *Tractate Shabbat* 132a). This includes giving birth in particular.

Despite its many rules and rituals, the Sabbath is anything but a chore. As one *midrash* (a rabbinical commentary) puts it: “Sanctify Sabbath with food and drink, with splendid clothes. Delight yourself with pleasure and God will reward you for this very pleasure.” (Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:1).

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² The concepts of public and private domains are hard to define. Generally speaking, a private domain encompasses one’s house or apartment and the courtyard adjacent to it if it is surrounded by a fence. The halls and the lobby of an apartment house are also considered to be private domain (From: Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*).