

Shabbat

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always valued the utilitarian aspect of Judaism, even though utilitarianism in itself is hardly justification for living a religious life. Circumcision may indeed help reduce the risk of certain kinds of diseases. So might refraining from sex at certain times. But those are not the reasons most of us adhere to these laws.

The strict Shabbat of Judaism is the most relevant of all our rituals in the world in which we now live. Difficult, I concede, but immensely rewarding. The value in taking a break from constant cell phone rings, texts, and messages that apparently cannot wait for one minute, let alone 24 hours, has actually dehumanized us. Otherwise intelligent hominids have to check their screens as they walk, eat, and converse, as if their lives depend on them. The endless Tweets, Facebook likes, LinkedIn requests, Skype calls, WhatsApp, and Viber messages constantly nag and distract us. Having a day in which one does not have to deal with all of this must make enormous sense for our sanity and indeed our freedom.

Not being able to drive ensures that families members have to stay in easy reach of each other. They will sit together around a table several times to eat, converse, and perhaps sing and study. It requires one to read books rather than screens, to hold, to touch, to feel the print. Instead of the ubiquitous Muzak of electronic sounds and sights, the all-pervasive screens and games, we can free our senses to the sounds of nature and our own brains. We are forced out of the mundane, into another world. Not entirely cut off of course, and with some concessions and compromises, but different enough to be noticeable, beneficial both physically and mentally. Shabbat is a therapeutic break in an otherwise electronic nightmare of conformity and similarity imposed by media, most of which is either trivial and valueless or materially and commercially importuning and insidious.

It is true that actually keeping Shabbat requires discipline and being able to postpone gratification or harness it, which is often uncomfortable and grating. But how does one succeed in any area of life without self-control and delayed gratification?

Petty laws annoy us. But imagine you take your family somewhere where there is no such thing as a day off, of the sort of Sunday most of us in the West recognize. If you want your children to understand it you will have to be negative and restrictive. No formal clothes, lie in bed later than usual, read the bulky Sunday papers, go for a walk, sit down to a meal together. These demands are all going to sound petty. It won't help to say you can do whatever everyone else is doing on the other six days of the week. Kids will always want to do the opposite. Kids will always want to join their friends, the flow, the fashion, the easy fun way out. I know I always did, until yeshivah taught me the value of discipline.

This reflection on Shabbat was provoked by [a recent BBC talk and interview with Matthew Engel](#), a former schoolmate of mine, now a well-respected British journalist. In it he discussed how the strict Christian Sabbath that once controlled the Scottish Islands has slowly been eroded, to argue for the merits of a day off, a break from the pervasive culture of perpetual work, business, computers, and phones. But on the way to that point, he and his equally non-Jewish Jewish interviewer made fun of the Orthodox Shabbat.

Matthew comes from a non-Orthodox Jewish family, brought up in the wilds of Northamptonshire. He and his two elder brothers were sent to Carmel College, where Shabbat was strictly enforced. Matthew later carved out a distinguished career for himself, probably because of the very challenges, difficulties, and disciplines that were forced on him. He became a cricket fan. He was also forced to play cricket at Carmel. Eventually he became the editor of the bible of cricket known as [Wisden](#).

The cynic can make fun of everything and anyone, of handkerchiefs, and ties, and handshakes, and salutes—all meaningless aspects of most societies. One can make endless fun of cricket, just as he made fun of Judaism. It is a game which you can play for five days and get no result. A bowler hurls a lump of cork and leather at three sticks called stumps (a mystical number?). The ball must be thrown in the most unnatural way, over the shoulder at a batsman standing in front of the sticks, adopting rigid stances with funny names. The batsman wields a heavy slab of linseed anointed ash, and swings it in fixed and defined arcs. If the bowler actually hits the batsman, and they often try, he can claim “Leg Before Wicket” and get him dismissed, even if it hits his arm. There are ritual calls like “Howzat”, meaning he should leave the field. There are place names like “Silly Mid Off” and “Silly Mid On” (yes, honestly). And if a bowler hurls the ball six times (why six, indeed?) and the batsman fails to strike, everyone applauds. Yes, you applaud when nothing happens. I could go on, but you get my point. But it’s tradition of course. The defender of cricket will talk about broader and wider issues of gamesmanship, skill, and competition. He will resent you picking on small cultural details. But it’s those details that determine the difference between cricket and baseball.

So it is with Judaism. The broader idea of having a day that is different than the others is so wise and obviously beneficial. But the only way to achieve it and take it seriously is if there is a system to support and enforce the idea and give it structure.

Matthew ends up by saying he decided to make his own Sabbath which, out of deference to his heritage (ironically), he does on Saturday, despite describing his current religion as MYOBism (Mind Your Own Business). I wonder if he realized that, for all his rebellion, the idea had been planted in his subconscious and was now reemerging despite himself. His Sabbath is avoiding his computer and not answering his emails. But he confesses the overpowering attraction of horse racing, and making a bet leads him to make an exception.

And there you have it. If one tailors one’s religion to one’s own whims, one has neither consistency, nor pattern or communality. For all the inconvenience of a religious system, at least one has something recognizable

and definable that one can share, even if one, as most people do, often fails to live up to it all, whether it's orthodoxy in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or whatever.

In principle there's no reason why each and every individual shouldn't create his or her own lifestyle. And I haven't even mentioned the idea of God. But that tendency towards solipsism is what has made society such a selfish/me/want-it-now world of instant gratification and the lowest common denominator.

The Olympians who we thrill at currently and the great cricketers need more than natural physical talent. They need skills, courage, and enormous discipline. We might make fun of their early mornings, their strict regimes of controlled eating, sleeping, and exercise. But we admire and delight in the results nevertheless.