

# Two Concepts Of Shabbat

## The State-of-Being Shabbat And The Seventh-Day Shabbat

### **The Failure of Seventh-Day Shabbat**

In the 1960s, this writer introduced a new concept of Shabbat: Shabbat as a state of being.<sup>1</sup> This is an appropriate time to focus anew on this concept, which will be referred to as the "State-of-Being Shabbat." The reason is that the problem of the "Seventh-Day Shabbat," namely, the historical concept of a Shabbat that occurs on Friday evening and Saturday, is once again a subject of discussion, particularly in the Reform Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> The difficulties facing the Seventh-Day Shabbat are of grave importance not only to Reform, however, but to the entire modernist Jewish community,<sup>3</sup> both because of the Shabbat's central status historically, and because of the general problem of lack of observance of the historical Jewish temporal religious occasions, that is, the holidays and rituals that are celebrated at times determined by the "Jewish" calendar (in reality, a Babylonian-Jewish calendar). The reason the historical temporal religious observances are of such serious importance to the modernist Jewish community is that it is hardly conceivable that a religious community can survive the abandonment of the major observances that concretely express and celebrate its beliefs and values. For what does the lack of observance of religious occasions mean other than that its supposed adherents reject them, and thereby implicitly signal their rejection of the religion's validity and relevance for their lives?

The event in the Reform Jewish community that occasioned a resurgence of interest in the Seventh-Day Shabbat's difficulties was the address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) delivered by its then outgoing president, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, at its convention held in June 1985. (Rabbi Plaut also summarized his address in an article that appeared in the Winter 1985-86 issue of *Reform Judaism*.) In his address Plaut sated in no uncertain terms his view that Friday evening services in Reform temples are decidedly unsuccessful:

Our prayer services have become worshipful exercises demanded by traditional habits, but with rare exceptions, and they exist, they are filled neither with drama nor intellectual acuity, and instead feature set rituals which the rabbi dreads and the small congregation endures...

...we must ask whether it is not time to draw the consequences of what our people are telling us by their very absence. For the six to ten percent of our members who come on those Friday nights that do not enjoy the benefit of special events are simply not enough. Irreverently again, no business would consider running at that rate and I venture to suggest neither should the spiritual business of our movement.

...I find in its [the synagogue's] roster of opportunities the late Friday night service to be of greatly reduced importance. In my experience and my travels around the world I have seen it as a resounding failure. It therefore needs to be reassessed and if required, abandoned forthwith as the centerpiece of Reform religious expression.

Though they [Friday night services] have become sacred cows in the minds of many, they have long ago lost their function of sacredness and all too often have retained only a pseudo-historical halo.

It should quickly be added that the Friday experience was even then [in 1869] somewhat of a failure, so that in short order Reform Jews clamored for an even more convenient time. One hundred and ten congregations, by the far majority, went to Sunday morning services as their chief worship experience of the week. But that too fizzled because the new members who joined our movement could not relate to Sunday mornings and demanded that there be a Shabbat experience. So back we went to Friday night, though the success was not inspiring.<sup>4</sup>

Plaut's remarks, as is clear, speak only of the failure of the Friday evening service. Apparently Plaut is of the opinion that the problem of the Shabbat is only the Friday evening service. In this, I believe, Plaut is in error. The problem in my view is much more fundamental; it is the concept of the Seventh-Day Shabbat itself. It is the Seventh-Day Shabbat that has failed, not merely the Friday evening service. The failure of the Friday evening service is just symptomatic of the general failure of the Seventh-Day Shabbat in the modernist Jewish community. What this means concretely is that the Seventh-Day Shabbat does not have the potency to attract modernist Jews on the whole to observe it. Modernist Jews, with rare exceptions, do not alter their work or social behavior on Friday nights or Saturdays in order to celebrate the Seventh-Day Shabbat.

This having been said, the question then becomes: What should the modernist Jewish community do regarding the Shabbat? Should a massive effort be mounted to revivify observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat, or should some other course of action be pursued? Conventional wisdom maintains the former, i.e., that the Seventh-Day Shabbat should be resurrected. Plaut, who subscribes to this view, argues that rabbis should direct their energy to having their members "reintroduce a meaningful Friday night experience at home." In my opinion, however, such attempts to resurrect the Seventh-Day Shabbat are foredoomed. The reason is that the cause for the failure of the Seventh-Day Shabbat is not that the particular ways in which it has been observed have been unsuccessful, but that the Seventh-Day Shabbat is *per se* a religious observance that has lost its significance for the great majority of modernist Jews in contemporary society. To understand why this is the case, we must enter upon an analysis of the conditions I believe are necessary for religious observances to be meaningful for the generality of a religious community. By an observance being meaningful for the generality of a religious community I mean that its value for the members of the community is such that the observance *per se* motivates all or almost all the members to keep it. It follows, therefore, that without the conditions that are necessary for an observance to be meaningful, few, if any, members of the religious community will keep it.

## What makes a Religious Observance Meaningful?

This analysis of the conditions that are necessary for a religious observance to be meaningful is based upon a concept that will be referred to as the *existential context theory of meaningful religious observance*. This theory states that a religious observance will be meaningful to the generality of members of a religious community only to the degree that the observance is in harmony with its existential context. *An observance's existential context consists of the intellectual, economic, cultural-social, and political conditions of the environment in which the members of the religious community live.* Thus, the existential context of a religious observance upon which its meaningfulness depends is constituted of the basic conditions of the environment of the persons who are to keep the observance. These conditions impart to the existential context a dynamic and characteristic configuration with which a particular religious observance may or may not be in harmony. A religious observance that is in harmony with its existential context is termed *rhythmic*; an observance that is out of harmony with its existential context is *arrhythmic*.

It will be helpful to introduce some further terms here. A religious observance is said to be potent when it is meaningful for all or the great majority of the members of a religious community. The observance is referred to as *inefficacious* when it is meaningful for only a minority of the community. And the observance is termed *impotent* when it is meaningful for none or almost none of the members of the community. Since, according to the existential context theory of meaningful religious observance, the meaningfulness of an observance is dependent upon the degree to which it is in harmony with its existential context, an observance, the meaningfulness of an observance is dependent upon the degree to which it is in harmony with its existential context, an observance will be potent if it is rhythmic; it will be inefficacious if it is partially arrhythmic; and it will be impotent if it is mostly or entirely arrhythmic. The rule simply is that the greater the disharmony between an observance and its existential context, the closer to impotence it comes. An observance that is arrhythmic becomes impotent for members of a religious community and as a

consequence they are no longer motivated to observe it. As a result, they no longer keep the observance and it falls into disuse.

Hence a religious observance may be likened to a living organism such as a plant. As a plant requires for its existence an interdependent relation with a nurturing environment, so does an observance require a nurturing organic relation with its existential context. Moreover, critical observation teaches that each possesses a life history. The plant in interrelationship with changes in its environment comes into existence, flourishes, weakens, and dies. Similarly, over the course of time, the religious observance in interrelationship with changes in its existential context will emerge, grow potent, turn inefficacious, and, finally, become impotent.

It will be helpful to clarify further the notion of rhythmic religious observation by presenting a concrete illustration. The biblical "Festival of Ingathering" serves this purpose well.

The ancient Israelites, according to the Bible, were commanded by the god Yahweh to celebrate "the Festival of Ingathering...when [they] gather in the fruit of [their] labor from the field" (Exod. 23:16). Examining the Festival of Ingathering we see why it was rhythmic, that is, in harmony with the environmental conditions in which the ancient Israelites lived.

*Intellectual conditions:* The Festival of Ingathering was in harmony with the basic beliefs of the ancient Israelite community regarding reality. These were: that there existed a theistic god Yahweh; that Yahweh had commanded that the Israelites were to celebrate the Festival of Ingathering; that failure to celebrate the Festival of Ingathering was to disobey Yahweh and, therefore, sinful; and that such sinful disobedience would lead to Yahweh's punishing them.

*Economic conditions:* The Festival of Ingathering was an agricultural festival and the economy of the Israelites was primarily agricultural. Moreover, and of great importance, the celebration took place immediately when a major economic event in their lives - completion of the harvest - signaled that it was appropriate to hold a harvest celebration. Thus the Festival of Ingathering was in harmony with the structure and flow of the economy.

*Cultural-social conditions:* The Festival of Ingathering was not only a religious holiday, but also the cultural-social expression of a sentiment present in the consciousness of the dominant religious community in which the Israelites lived.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Festival of Ingathering was celebrated *immediately* following the harvest, while the community still felt intensely the emotions of thankfulness and gratitude toward divine providence. Moreover, generally all the persons with whom the Israelites interacted, nuclear family, extended family, and coreligionists, observed the Festival of Ingathering and thereby reinforced its social and psychic power.

*Political conditions:* Ancient Israel was a theocracy, a state governed by divine law, namely, the law commanded by the god Yahweh. Accordingly, the Festival of Ingathering was not only a religious observance, but a political and legal holiday of the state as well.

Having examined the existential context with which the Festival of Ingathering was harmonious, and which, therefore, made the holiday rhythmic for the ancient Israelites, it requires little effort to construct a hypothetical existential context with which the Festival of Ingathering would be disharmonious. Such a hypothetical disharmonious existential context would conceivably have the following characteristics:

1. If the Israelite community on the whole believed that harvests were basically produced by natural causes rather than through supernatural action by a theistic god such as Yahweh, and, in addition, that neither Yahweh nor any other deity had commanded keeping the Festival of Ingathering. This would mean that there was neither a religious obligation to keep the festival nor divine punishment for not keeping it.

2. If the Festival of Ingathering, an agricultural festival, bore no relation to the way in which the Israelites earned their livelihood, as would be the case, for example, if their economic activity were commercial, industrial, and technological. Thus, the time appropriate for an agricultural celebration, such as the completion of a harvest, would hold no relevance to the time appropriate for a holiday for those working in the commercial, industrial, and technological spheres of their economy.

3. If the Festival of Ingathering were not a cultural-social expression of the values and sentiments experienced by the dominant religious community in which the Israelites lived. And if the families and other social groups to which individual Israelites belonged did not by and large keep the Festival of Ingathering.

4. If the Festival of Ingathering were simply a religious celebration rather than a political and legal holiday as well. Moreover, if instead of living in a country ruled by a theocratic dictatorship that compelled religious observance, the Israelites lived in a country where there was a separation of religious institutions from the state and which guaranteed religious freedom, so that no one was legally obligated to observe the Festival.

In point of fact, a counterpart of the Festival of Ingathering does exist in the present; it is the harvest festival of Sukkot. Sukkot is, in fact, disharmonious with its existential context - the intellectual, economic, cultural-social, and political conditions that constitute the environment of the modernist Jew - in the way that the Festival of Ingathering is disharmonious with the existential context hypothetically projected in the example given above. One can see the result. Sukkot has become arrhythmic for the vast majority of modernist Jews, and is thereby inefficacious for some communities and impotent for most. Modernist Jews are in the main unaware when Sukkot occurs; let alone do they observe it.

### **The Seventh-Day Shabbat Is Arrhythmic**

We return then to the Seventh-Day Shabbat, the view that Shabbat is a day, a temporal occasion, that is to be observed from Friday evening to Saturday night as a period of rest and special liturgical services. It is evident from the earlier discussion, as well as from general experience, that the Seventh-Day Shabbat lacks meaning for the great majority of modernist Jews. The only question is whether a massive effort to revivify it should be made. For those who subscribe to the existential context theory of meaningful religious observance, this question is decided by whether the Seventh-Day Shabbat is

disharmonious with its existential context, and, therefore, arrhythmic. If it is arrhythmic - and I believe the analysis that follows will show this to be the case - the Seventh-Day Shabbat cannot be made potent and there remains no reasonable alternative but to replace it with a different concept of Shabbat. To continue to expend energy upon an arrhythmic observance is an exercise in futility and a wasteful expenditure of the modernist Jewish community's limited human and economic resources.

The point must be stressed that if the Seventh-Day Shabbat has become arrhythmic no one is guilty of wrong-doing. No individual or group within a religious community - neither clergy nor laity - is responsible for a religious observance becoming disharmonious with its existential context, for changes in an existential context result from theological and historical forces that are beyond the control of any religious community. It makes no more sense to hold a person or group responsible for the obsolescence of a religious observance than it does to blame someone for the extinction of a life form such as the dinosaur. On the other hand, it is reasonable for the modernist Jewish community to hold itself responsible for squandering its resources in a vain effort to preserve an observance once it has become aware that the observance is arrhythmic.

To see that the Seventh-Day Shabbat is arrhythmic, we can follow the same procedure as with the Festival of Ingathering above. We will examine the nature of the existential context with which the Seventh-Day Shabbat has historically been harmonious, and compare this with its contemporary existential context. The point may be noted that the Seventh-Day Shabbat has been harmonious with a number of existential contexts since its emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the mass exodus of Jews from Europe's ghettos, and the appearance of great numbers of modernist Jews, that the Seventh-Day Shabbat has become Arrhythmic for the majority of Jews.



## When Seventh-Day Shabbat Was Rhythmic

The following is a description of the typical existential context with which the Seventh-Day Shabbat has historically been in harmony. As defined earlier, the existential context of a religious observance is constituted of the environmental conditions of the persons who are to keep the observance.

*Intellectual Conditions:* In ancient and medieval times (which lasted in Eastern Europe into the 19<sup>th</sup> century), practically all Jews lived in self-contained communities. By a self-contained Jewish community is meant one that on the whole is intellectually, culturally-socially, and to varying degrees, politically and economically, set apart from non-Jewish communities. Such self-contained communities have historically been Jewish states, quasi-states, or ghettos, and within these communities, Jews constituted either the dominant religious group or the only religious group.

The fundamental beliefs regarding ultimate reality of the self-contained communities in which the ancient and medieval Jews lived strongly supported observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat. Among these beliefs was the doctrine that the universe was created by the deity Yahweh in six days and that on the seventh he rested, which imparted to the seventh day for all time a unique, special, and holy quality. Another basic tenet was that Yahweh had commanded the Jews to observe the Seventh-Day Shabbat, which consisted of a strict prohibition against work, among many other regulations.

An important sentiment that arose in the course of Jewish history was that a special expression of Yahweh's providence and love, including the assurance of a joyous eternal life, manifested itself to the Jews at the time of the Seventh-Day Shabbat celebration. This resulted in the Jews' experiencing a profound sense of perfect security, physical and psychic, during the observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat. This sense of perfect security through relationship with an all-providing Yahweh brought Jews, when celebrating the Seventh-Day Shabbat, to a consciousness of a state of ultimate meaningful existence, a state that may also be referred to as *soteria*.

*Economic conditions:* Regardless of the nature of the various economic systems under which Jews lived in ancient and medieval times, they were able

to desist from economic activity during the Seventh-Day Shabbat and suffered negligible financial harm. The primary reason was that the self-contained communities in which they lived were so structured that economic activity for all practical purposes came to a halt on the seventh day.

*Cultural-social conditions:* The Seventh-Day Shabbat pervaded the cultural and social life of the self-contained communities of the ancient and medieval Jews. It was the holy day of rest in the Jewish calendar by which they measured time and according to which they structured their cultural and social activities. Children did not attend school on the seventh day, and festive gatherings of family and friends took place. In addition to unique religious services, food and clothing were all special on the seventh day. Moreover, for the ancient and medieval Jews, cultural areas such as literature, music, and other fine arts practically always expressed religious themes, and the Seventh-Day Shabbat was a pervasive subject to these pursuits. Once the synagogue came into existence, it became the Jews' cultural and social center, and its special Seventh-Day Shabbat activities reinforced and enhanced the individual Jew's experience of *soteria* on the seventh day.

*Political conditions:* Whether Jews in antiquity or the Middle Ages lived in a Jewish state, quasi-state, or ghetto, they lived in communities that are accurately described as theocratic. The Jewish religions they adhered to (no matter how else they differed) decreed as dogma the belief that Yahweh, God of the Universe, had issued commandments to the Jews, and that he had given to Jewish leaders and communities the right to enforce obedience to these commandments. Consequently, since observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat was believed to have been commanded by Yahweh, Jews who failed to keep it were considered sinners and were, therefore, punished by Jewish leaders and communities to the extent that they possessed power to do so. Such punishment ranged from death in the biblical period to excommunication and social and economic ostracism in the Middle Ages.

It is evident from above discussion that the Seventh-Day Shabbat was a rhythmic observance for ancient and medieval Jews, a celebration profoundly harmonious with its existential context. Subjected to a comparable analysis, it is equally evident that the Seventh-Day Shabbat in modernist Jewish

communities is an arrhythmic observance disharmonious with its existential context. We can use this even in a brief survey of the environmental conditions in which modernist Jews live.

## **The Modernist Jew's Existential Context**

Before proceeding to a discussion of the environmental conditions in which modernist Jews live, it will be helpful to make two prefatory general comments.

First, a distinction is to be drawn between modernist Jewish communities that are extra-Israel (that is, outside the state of Israel), and those that are in Israel. Therefore, unless specifically referred to as "modernist Israeli Jewish communities," by "modernist Jewish communities" is meant those that are extra-Israel.

Second, the Jewish communities of antiquity and the Middle Ages as pointed out earlier, were self-contained, and Jews in effect, therefore, lived in their own environments separated and isolated from the environments in which non-Jews lived. Modernist Jewish communities, on the other hand, are not self-contained; they are integrated with the general communities of which they are a part. Thus modernist Jews (such as those in America) live in two communities: in modernist Jewish communities, and in the general communities they share with non-Jews. Since modernist Jews live in two communities, they live in two environments as well: a modernist Jewish environment and a general one. As a result, the existential context of modernist Jews' religious observances is a composite, a blend of the Jewish and general environments.

*Intellectual conditions:* The most important of the environmental conditions required to make a religious observance rhythmic are, to my mind, the intellectual conditions, or beliefs regarding ultimate reality. Regardless of how favorable economic, cultural-social, and political conditions may be for keeping an observance, if persons' beliefs regarding ultimate reality do not justify keeping the observance, history shows the overwhelming majority of them will eventually abandon it. Consequently, the most important reason ancient and medieval Jews kept the Seventh-Day Shabbat was that the self-

contained Jewish communities in which they lived affirmed the ultimate reality in which a creator God of the Universe had commanded observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat. The situation for modernist Jews is just the opposite; the intellectual environment of the communities in which they live does not support the view that a creator God of the Universe commanded observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat.

The reason is that both the Jewish and general communities of modernist Jews are dominated by a critical and scientific mentality that militates against this view. The fundamental source of the notion that a creator God of the Universe commanded observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Critical study of the Bible, by modernist Jewish and non-Jewish scholars alike, shows that there is no credible evidence that the Bible is a veridical or literally accurate historical document. Consequently, for the modernist Jew there is no objectively-based divine command to keep the Seventh-Day Shabbat, and, of course, no promise of a supernatural reward of perfect security for the person who does so. Thus for the modernist Jew there is no objective religious reason for keeping the Seventh-Day Shabbat. This is not to gainsay that an individual modernist Jew may have subjective or personal reasons for observing a Seventh-Day Shabbat, but for the modernist Jewish community there is no obligation to do so.

Two further points bear mention here:

1. The argument can be put forth that modernist Jews have an obligation to keep the Seventh-Day Shabbat, although they do not believe that a deity commanded it, because Jews in the past observed it. In my view, this argument is flawed for at least two reasons.

First, it should be borne in mind that Jews of the past did not observe the Seventh-Day Shabbat because Jews before them did so. Integral to their keeping it was their belief that the deity Yahweh had so commanded it. Once it is no longer accepted that a creator God of the Universe has commanded keeping the Seventh-Day Shabbat there is no religious or psychological way of observing it the way past Jews did, that is, the necessary state of belief that God commanded its observance is absent.

Second, if one maintains that there is an obligation to keep a religious observance because Jews of the past did, and, therefore, modernist Jews have an obligation to keep the Seventh-Day Shabbat, then it should also be maintained that there is an obligation to keep all the observances Jews of the past have kept, such as *kashrut*, *mikveh*, and indeed the entire Orthodox Jewish Halacha. Clearly, modernist Jews reject this reasoning for the view that an observance must be relevant and meaningful in the present, and hold that past Jewish usage confers no binding obligation upon subsequent generations of Jews.

2. It is significant to note that even when modernist Jews live in a general community that is Jewish, namely, the state of Israel, they do not for the most part observe the seventh day as a religious occasion. This supports the view stated earlier that intellectual conditions are the fundamental reason for keeping as religious observance, and, as a result, once these conditions no longer support belief in a religious observance, the religious observance is abandoned. Modernist Israeli Jewish communities, like modernist Jewish communities everywhere, do not believe there is an objective religious obligation to observe a Seventh-Day Shabbat. Hence, like modernist Jews who live in non-Jewish general communities, modernist Israeli Jews do not for the most part keep the seventh day as a religious observance, even though economic, cultural-social, and political conditions in Israel are favorable for them to do so.

*Economic conditions:* In the non-Jewish general communities in which all modernist Jews other than Israelis live, the seventh day is an ordinary day for work or commerce, and therefore, in conflict with the concept of the seventh day as Shabbat, a holy day of rest. Many modernist Jews would suffer significant financial or career disadvantages if they did not work on the seventh day. Economic loss, all would agree, is no justification for disobeying the commands of a creator God of the Universe. Since the modernist Jewish community, however, has no credible evidence that any deity has ordained the seventh day as a day of rest, it makes little sense for modernist Jews to refrain from work on the seventh day and suffer financial loss when they are violating

no divine command or religious obligation by doing so. That this is the sentiment of modernist Jews is evident from their behavior.

*Cultural-social conditions:* Like the economic conditions, the cultural-social conditions of the general communities in which modernist Jews live (except, to a degree, for those who reside in Israel) are antagonistic to observance of a Seventh-Day Shabbat. In the civil (Gregorian) calendar by which, realistically speaking, modernist Jews measure time and which determines the flow of their lives (rather than the Jewish calendar), the seventh day has no special significance, let alone is it a holy day of rest. Cultural and social activities of every sort, from theatre to sport events, take place on the seventh day. Similarly, the Seventh-Day Shabbat occupies no place in the cultural consciousness of the general community. Since modernist Jews are properly participants in the rich cultural and social life of the general communities in which they live, observance of the Seventh-Day Shabbat not only receives no support from these Jews' cultural and social experiences, but, often instead, competition. Once the point has been recognized that that Seventh-Day Shabbat is not a religious obligation for modernist Jews, there can be no objection to their obvious preference for engaging in the cultural and social activities of their general communities rather than observing a Seventh-Day Shabbat.

*Political conditions:* Unlike the theocratic Jewish communities in which ancient and medieval Jews lived, modernist Jews live in Jewish religious communities that possess neither the institutional nor social power to enforce religious observance. This is to be attributed to widespread acceptance of the principle of separation of religion and state in the countries in which modernist Jews live. Possessing personal religious freedom, modernist Jews need follow religious practices only if they wish to do so. It is reasonable to suppose they wish to do so only if they find the practices relevant and meaningful. Given the profound conflict between the intellectual, economic, and cultural-social conditions of the modernist Jews' environment and the Seventh-Day Shabbat that has been described, few may be expected to keep the Seventh-Day Shabbat, and reality bears out this expectation.

Comparing the environments described above, of the ancient and medieval Jews with that of modernist Jews, it is evident that the Seventh-Day Shabbat for the former was as harmonious with its existential context as it is disharmonious for the latter. Thus the Seventh-Day Shabbat, although a rhythmic observance once, has become arrhythmic for modernist Jews. As such, in accordance with the existential context theory of meaningful religious observance, the Seventh-Day Shabbat is fated to be inefficacious at best for modernist Jewish communities and impotent at worst.

There is, then, no reasonable hope that in the world of the modernist Jew the Seventh-Day Shabbat can be fashioned into a potent religious observance. This being the case, more than unproductive, it is destructive in a modernist Jewish community to continue to hold to the concept of the Seventh-Day Shabbat, in which the seventh day is presented as the central religious observance of the community. Empty temples on the seventh day and general lack of observance sap the strength of rabbis and discourage congregants, leading to self-images of defeat and hopelessness as religious Jews. Perhaps nothing is more corrosive of the Jewish future than teaching young people the concept of the Seventh-Day Shabbat in religious schools when all about them they see modernist Jewish adults disregard the day the youngsters have been told is a divinely ordained day of rest. What can make a better case to Jewish youngsters of the untruth and irrelevance of their religion?

### **The State-of-Being Shabbat**

The solution to the problem of the Seventh-Day Shabbat, I believe, is not to discard Shabbat, but to replace the seventh-day concept with one that provides a Shabbat that is rhythmic and harmonious with the existential context that the environment of the modern Jew creates. Such a concept is Shabbat as a state of being. The State-of-Being Shabbat is at once an evolutionary emergent form the Seventh-Day Shabbat and radically different from it. Hence to explain the nature of the State-of-Being Shabbat we will begin with an analysis of the traditional experience of the Seventh-Day Shabbat, that is, a

dissection of the contents of the consciousness of a person celebrating the Seventh-Day Shabbat.

These contents can be divided into two basic categories.

The first category consists of these elements: (1) Awareness of the principles that underlie the Seventh-Day Shabbat, as, for example, the belief that the universe was created in six days by the god Yahweh, who rested on the seventh day, and thereupon commanded that it be kept as a day of rest, and the belief that those who keep the Seventh-Day Shabbat receive perfect security from Yahweh, divine (supernatural) protection in this world and eternal blessed life in the next. (2) Concentration on the practices prescribed for the Seventh-Day Shabbat, such as recitation of obligatory prayers, and absolute abstention from work as well as all other prohibited activities. (3) A conception of the seventh day, the period of time that constitutes the Shabbat, as being a "thing," an object that is itself holy. (4) A perception of perfect security at having kept the commandment of an all-protecting God.

The second category of the contents of the consciousness of a person engaged in the traditional celebration of the Seventh-Day Shabbat is an experience of ultimate meaningful existence or *soteria*, the psychic state of being to which the first category, consisting of the consciousness of beliefs and practices, brings the person.

In the concept of the State-of-Being Shabbat, it is only this second category of the contents of consciousness of the traditional Seventh-Day Shabbat, the experience of *soteria*, that is considered to be Shabbat; the first category, consciousness of beliefs and practices, is viewed as only an instrument or vehicle of Shabbat, a means whereby the state of being that is Shabbat is produced. Accordingly, since Shabbat is the experience of *soteria* alone, and a belief such as the seventh day being a holy day of rest is merely a vehicle that serves to bring about Shabbat, a person who finds the holy seventh day concept impotent in producing the experience of *soteria* can simply treat the seventh day as an ordinary day. In the concept of Shabbat as a state-of-being, it is only the experience of *soteria* that is Shabbat, and vehicles that cannot bring about Shabbat are discarded or dispensed with as one wishes.



Some further observations on the nature and implications of the State-of-Being Shabbat will help to clarify the concept.

1. There is no particular time when Shabbat is celebrated. Since it is Shabbat whenever *soteria* is experienced, Shabbat can be celebrated at any time for any period of time. It may be experienced by some persons often, and by others rarely. Accordingly, the State-of-Being Shabbat is detemporalized.

2. There is no particular place where Shabbat is celebrated. It may be experienced in a temple or on the shore of an ocean. Thus, the State-of-Being Shabbat is despatialized.

3. The vehicles that produce Shabbat can vary from person to person, and for the same person, from one occasion to the next. The sight of a beautiful landscape, completion of a difficult task, a vacation, can serve as vehicles of Shabbat.

4. A communal or individual experience can serve as a vehicle of Shabbat.

5. Beliefs and practices, customarily associated with the Seventh-Day Shabbat need not be discarded by those who subscribe to the State-of-Being Shabbat. Persons who experience *soteria* by virtue of attending seventh-day temple services, or by believing that Yahweh created the universe in six days and ordained the seventh a holy day of rest, should, of course, follow such practices and beliefs and celebrate Shabbat on the seventh day.

6. The basic meaning of the word Shabbat in the state-of-being concept is significantly different from that in the seventh-day concept. In the Seventh-Day Shabbat, the primary sense of "Shabbat" is "rest from work." In the State-of-Being Shabbat, the primary sense of "Shabbat" is "rest from negative moods" (such as angst and melancholy) that destroy the meaningfulness of human existence.

7. The primary tasks of rabbis with respect to the State-of-Being Shabbat is to elucidate the conditions necessary to attain *soteria*, and to explain the nature of Shabbat as the awareness and enjoyment of ultimate meaningful existence. In addition, rabbis can strive to help provide - for those who wish it - an environment in their temples or on retreats conducive to the experience of Shabbat.

It is not, nor can it be, the function of rabbis to produce a state of *soteria* within their congregants, for no human can bring about a state of ultimate meaningful existence in another human. This is a task for which every individual must accept personal responsibility. Thus the State-of-Being Shabbat does away with a view held by many who subscribe to the Seventh-Day Shabbat. This is that rabbis are responsible for seeing to it that congregants are motivated to attend Shabbat services, a feat rabbis are presumably to accomplish primarily through sermons that produce an experience of profound spiritual meaningfulness. This same view holds rabbis responsible for the general failure of the Seventh-Day Shabbat. As was explained earlier, however, neither rabbis nor anyone else can make the Seventh-Day Shabbat meaningful for the great majority of modernist Jews because it is arrhythmic. An observance must itself possess sufficient value to act as a magnet that attracts congregants; rabbis cannot carry the burden of an arrhythmic, ineffectual observance and accomplish that which the observance itself fails to do.

8. There are a variety of destructive consequences that result from treating an ineffectual Seventh-Day Shabbat as a central observance of modernist Judaism. One is that a rabbi's self-image necessarily suffers from the meager attendance at seventh-day services (a condition that is exacerbated by the rabbi's being held responsible for the failure). Another is that congregants develop a defeatist attitude toward the ability of a religious Jewishness to survive. Perhaps the most destructive consequence is the perception, conscious or subconscious, among many modernist Jews that if the Seventh-Day Shabbat is a fundamental observance of modernist Judaism, and is meaningless to them, then modernist Judaism in its entirety is irrelevant to their lives. This point is of particular significance in the case of modernist Jewish youngsters.

## **The State of Being Shabbat As A Life History Event**

Offering the concept of a State-of-Being Shabbat to the modernist Jewish community can only be productive for contemporary religious Jewishness. Out of their freedom, modernist Jews can reject or accept it. Those who reject it can continue to practice as they have. Those who accept it can now identify the

experience of ultimate meaningful existence, whenever and wherever it occurs, as a Jewish observance, the celebration of Shabbat. In the highly individualistic contemporary world, a detemporalization and despatialization of Jewish observances enables religious Jewishness to be fashioned by each Jewish person according to her or his lifestyle and needs. When religious observances are shaped by individual Jews as an expression of their personal rhythms we are no longer confronted with the devastating problem of arrhythmic and impotent Jewish observances owing to disharmony with the existential contexts. Every observance Jews keep will be rhythmic because each will have been fashioned in harmony with personal time, space, and conviction. This does not mean there will not or cannot be rhythmic and potent communal observances; life history celebrations show there can be. It does mean that such observances can only hope to succeed, as life history celebrations bear out, if the communal celebrations are in harmony with the personal rhythms of the individual Jew.<sup>6</sup>

*Alvin J. Reines*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> CCAR *Journal*, January 1967, pp. 28ff.

<sup>2</sup> In the Polydox Jewish and Polydox Reform Jewish communities, the "State-of-Being Shabbat" is already widely accepted.

<sup>3</sup> By the "modernist Jewish community" is meant Jews who accommodate traditional religious teaching to contemporary thought, particularly in rejecting the Bible as literally revealed by deity, and generally by devaluing traditional supernatural teaching.

<sup>4</sup> CCAR *Yearbook*, vol. XCV (Minneapolis, 1985), pp. 4ff.

<sup>5</sup> By "dominant religious community" is meant the religious community of a country to which the majority of its citizens belong and which exercises, therefore, a preponderant cultural-social influence. In ancient Israel, of course, Israelites constituted the dominant religious community.

<sup>6</sup> In point of fact, what the concept of the State-of-Being Shabbat does essentially is to change the Shabbat from a temporal religious event, that is, one that is celebrated according to an objective measurement of time, the Jewish calendar, to a life-history religious event, one that is celebrated according to the personal subjective time of the Jewish human existence.