

Shabbat in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—No Time to Rest

All flesh is grass, all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field...  
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand forever  
(Heschel 40).

These words, from the book of Isaiah, beautifully reflect Judaism's focus on time over space. There is perhaps no better demonstration of Jews' belief in the sanctity of time than Shabbat. Unfortunately, sanctifying the greatness of G-d in time through the proper observance of Shabbat is far from simple. Especially in today's world marked by technological innovation and fast-paced culture, external pressures abound that impel us to prioritize the *things* that occupy moments in time, rather than the meaning of the time itself. In this essay, I explore the following questions: How can we continue to honor Shabbat and the eternal glory of G-d in time, given the influences of modern society? Which elements of Shabbat observance are amenable to change? And of course, do changes in Shabbat observance successfully contribute to our fulfillment of Shabbat's underlying purpose?

Before we analyze the fulfillment of Shabbat's purpose, let us first recall its textual roots and philosophical underpinning. According to the Torah, Shabbat has two key themes. The first theme stems directly from the first reading of the Ten Commandments in Exodus. We learn that, "[In] six days G-d made the heavens and the earth... and he rested on the seventh day" (*Sinai Scholars* 54). Therefore, we too should rest on Shabbat in honor of the miracle of the Creation G-d performed. The second theme derives from the repetition of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy. Here we are told, "You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and G-d has taken you out from there with a strong hand... therefore G-d has commanded you to make the Sabbath" (*Sinai Scholars* 54). According to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, this theme indicates that G-d is

“involved in the affairs of man” (*Sabbath—Day of Eternity*) even after the initial Creation. In fact, G-d is constantly influential in the events of our world. Creation was but one moment in time, as was the exodus. G-d transcends time. As a result, the underlying purpose of Shabbat can be summarized as the sanctification of time. For if we cannot distinguish G-d’s presence in one moment from His presence in all of eternity, our sanctification of a single moment or day is akin to sanctifying G-d’s presence and greatness as a whole.

This purpose of Shabbat has been reiterated in modern times by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel further argues, “Technical civilization is man’s conquest of space” (Heschel 3), and is therefore directly juxtaposed to Shabbat’s sanctification of time. As humans grow ever more concerned with producing tangible goods and services, and the “mind’s preoccupation with things of space” (Heschel 4) grows, Heschel questions what will remind us to revere time. His answer is Shabbat. Moreover, he explains the mechanism by which we are led to fulfill Shabbat’s purpose. This mechanism is grounded in a series of “abstentions” (Heschel 15), codified in a body of Jewish ritual law called *halacha* (*Sabbath—Day of Eternity*). The issue then becomes, how does *halacha* work? Where does it come from? And how should it be interpreted given modern realities?

These are huge questions that I will not fully explore here. However, a basic understanding of *halacha* as it pertains to Shabbat is integral to finding meaning in Shabbat observance. Importantly, people often misconceive Shabbat as a day of “rest” in the way many envision rest today. Rather, the idea of “rest” that underlies the *halacha* stems from G-d’s rest after Creation. Of course, G-d did not rest because he was tired or exerted too much physical effort. Thus, the abstentions detailed in *halacha* do not concern the physical effort required to perform a given task. Instead, G-d rested because he lost interest in the world He created.

Similarly, *halacha* dictates that we too must detach ourselves from the world, as well as from any work that reflects our mastery over it by means of our intelligence and skill (*Sabbath—Day of Eternity*).

This distinction between *halacha*'s idea of “rest” on Shabbat and a typical conception of rest today is critical for many reasons. For example, one might argue that modern technology like cars and computers can actually save us time, thereby granting us more time to connect to G-d. While this may be true, the very act of operating a car or computer demonstrates man's mastery over the world of space, and thus diminishes the very role of time we seek to sanctify. As a result, *halacha* forbids the use of such technology on Shabbat. In doing so, it redirects our focus from exploiting space for the sake of time, to recognizing the eternal beauty of time itself.

Of course, *halacha* cannot be so easily interpreted for all elements of modern technology and culture. There are indeed many instances in which ancient *halacha* can be reinterpreted, in order to incorporate modern realities that might not detract from the fulfillment of Shabbat's underlying purpose. In the remainder of this essay, I examine two elements of modern society—one technological and one cultural—that are closely tied to the interpretation of *halacha* and qualitatively impact the observance of Shabbat.

The technological element that I would like to focus on is electricity. Electrical engineering truly began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and has offered countless essential tools to modern life (*Electricity*). Despite these practical daily benefits, rabbis were forced to consider the use of electricity in the context of *halacha* regarding Shabbat. Does the operation of electric devices contradict the purpose of Shabbat as we understand it?

In order to answer this question, we must first comprehend the source of *halachic* judgments and reasoning. Although we know that the purpose of Shabbat is to honor G-d

through the sanctification of time, we have not yet delineated what specific abstentions the Torah commands Jews to observe to fulfill this purpose. The Torah lists thirty-nine forms of prohibited work on Shabbat, all of which “were understood to have been involved in the construction of the Tabernacle” (Dundes 28). All modern *halacha* regarding Shabbat, including the idea that we must abstain from demonstrating our mastery over the world of space, derives from these thirty-nine prohibited forms of work.

One of these thirty-nine forms involves the kindling of fire (*Sabbath—Day of Eternity*). According to Raphael Patai, “To turn on an electric light on Shabbat was declared essentially the same act as lighting a candle” (Dundes 31), which involves the forbidden kindling of fire. Such reasoning led rabbis to prohibit the direct operation of basically all electrical tools on Shabbat. However, rabbis permitted the use of “automatic electric timing devices” (Dundes 31), which could be set before Shabbat to operate electrical tools during Shabbat. With such timing devices, Jews could take advantage of the benefits of electricity during Shabbat, without technically breaking *halacha*.

The Shabbat elevator is a perfect example of an electrically-operated machine that has been manipulated to make it kosher for Shabbat. Essentially, a Shabbat elevator is programmed before Shabbat to automatically stop at every floor, or every number of floors, so that Jews can ride the elevator without pressing any buttons (technically “operating” the elevator). Although the use of a Shabbat elevator has been deemed *halachically* sound by numerous reputable rabbis, one may still question whether it reflects the spirit of Shabbat. For example, Alan Dundes argues that the Shabbat elevator, as well as other innovative maneuvers that legally allow Jews to experience the benefits of electricity on Shabbat, is merely a circumvention of *halacha* that need not protect the fulfillment of Shabbat’s core purpose (32).

If the reinterpretation of *halacha* regarding electricity displaces the sanctification of time on Shabbat with the disguised mastery of space, then there is a strong case that such reinterpretation actually detracts from the objective of Shabbat. However, merely because numerous rabbis have deemed electrical timers and Shabbat elevators *halachically* acceptable, does not mean that Jews *must* use them. For example, if Jews feel that the use of such devices diminishes their fulfillment of Shabbat's purpose, they may hold themselves to stricter standards and forego such electrical devices. To make this decision, it is imperative that Jews ask themselves, "Do I *need* to use this electric device for my survival or the basic fulfillment of Shabbat?" Judaism clearly states that, "Even when there is the slightest possibility that a life may be at stake, one may disregard every prohibition of law" (Heschel 17). Thus, the use of a Shabbat elevator, or even a regular elevator, is both legally and spiritually encouraged if necessary to save a life. However, the use of the same Shabbat elevator merely for comfort may be legally permissible but spiritually questionable.

In addition to this idea of circumventing Shabbat's true purpose, there is another problem with the frequent reinterpretation of *halacha* in response to technological developments. Namely, each reinterpretation of one element of *halacha* has far-reaching consequences that may affect other elements of *halacha*. A simple example of this phenomenon relates to the use of electric timers on Shabbat in Israel.

The initial approval of electric timers on Shabbat spurred a large controversy in Israel regarding Israeli power plants. The controversy can be easily illustrated with an example. When someone uses an electric timer to turn on a light during Shabbat, electricity from a regional power plant is consumed. In Israel, Jews own many of these power plants, and therefore profit from the consumption of their electricity. Of course, such economic business is not allowed on

Shabbat. In addition, “one may not benefit from an action performed in violation of Shabbat” (*Electricity on Shabbat in Jewish Law*). Thus, the person who uses the electric timer should not be able to benefit from the resultant electricity, because that person has caused the Jewish power plant owner to violate Shabbat.

Some rabbis have solved this dilemma by deeming electricity generation a matter of *pikuach nefesh*—saving lives. Because electricity is required to run life-saving machinery in hospitals on Shabbat, and it is impossible to distinguish between the electricity going to a hospital from that going to a residence, the Jewish power plant owner does not break *halacha* (*Electricity on Shabbat in Jewish Law*). Therefore, the use of electric timers does not inspire the violation of Shabbat.

Although this particular situation appears to have a logical solution, it serves as an excellent example of the by-products of *halachic* reinterpretation regarding modern technology. Even if leading rabbis and scholars debate an element of *halacha* for centuries before instituting a change, it is very difficult to prevent *halachic* conflicts because of the pervasiveness and power of modern technology. Moreover, it is impossible to know what technological innovations the future will bring, and what types of actions the reinterpreted *halacha* might permit with such future technology. With this in mind, it is especially important that individuals consider whether their actions support the true purpose of Shabbat, particularly when dealing with issues related to modern technology and *halacha*.

The second modern element that I would like to examine is cultural and significantly more abstract. This element concerns Shabbat and egalitarianism. More specifically, it considers to what extent the Shabbat experience should vary for Jews of different social classes.

Heschel writes that Shabbat “is a day of independence of social conditions” (30), bringing one away from the world of things and into the world of time. He implies that such independence exists more on a philosophical and spiritual level than on a physical level. While Heschel’s idea is quite idealistic, many people today examine such issues from a realist perspective. As a realist, one would focus on “independence of social conditions” on a physical level as well. A realist might argue that the sorry state of a person’s physical reality might prevent that person from achieving the philosophical independence of social class Heschel describes. Therefore, physical reality might impede that person from focusing on the sanctification of time and fulfilling the purpose of Shabbat. I examine how *halacha* addresses such a realist perspective and how reinterpretations of *halacha* have affected the notion of an egalitarian Shabbat.

Let us begin with the examination of how reinterpretations of *halacha* have impacted egalitarianism on Shabbat. One example that makes a clear statement on this issue is the introduction of the *eruv*. An *eruv*, or “sanctioned extension of domestic space” (Dundes 37), is an enclosure that permits Jews to carry objects on Shabbat within its boundaries. Dundes describes the testimony of one woman that outlines why “the construction of an *eruv* immeasurably improved the quality of her life” (46). Among other things, an *eruv halachically* permits infants and disabled people to be wheeled to synagogue by other Jews on Shabbat, allowing more mothers to participate in services. In addition, an *eruv* permits Jews to carry keys or other belongings outside of the physical boundaries of their home. Without an *eruv*, a key would have to be worn as an article of clothing in order to be carried outside (Neuwirth 230).

The connection between an *eruv* and egalitarianism is that the construction of an *eruv* is expensive, and therefore, only larger and wealthier Jewish communities can afford one. Given

the woman's testimony above, and the general convenience an *eruv* provides, one could argue that communities with an *eruv* can enjoy a qualitatively different Shabbat experience than those without. Of course, merely because Shabbat experiences differ does not imply that one is better than another. Perhaps these different Shabbat experiences are only minor elements of the physical experience, but have little effect on one's spiritual experience. To understand the significance of such differences, we must identify how Jewish scholars have historically addressed the issue of egalitarianism on Shabbat.

A closer look at the *halacha* and historical Jewish works indicates that Judaism does not hold the modern realist view on egalitarianism. For example, Maimonides clearly acknowledges that different physical Shabbat experiences are both expected and acceptable. He explains that devoting more financial resources to Shabbat preparations is praiseworthy, but "even if one stews food or the like in honor of the Sabbath, this is considered to be Sabbath delight" (Maimonides 344). Thus, even the poor can completely fulfill the purpose of Shabbat, despite their limited means.

The question then arises, should wealthy Jews still donate to poorer Jews, in order to afford all Jews exactly equal Shabbat experiences? Although *tzedakah* is a Jewish *mitzvah*, the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch states that a Jew must not donate more than twenty percent of his money to *tzedakah* (34:4). Therefore, it is not imperative that all Jews experience Shabbat in precisely the same way, although it is extremely important that every Jew has the basic necessities (food, wine, shelter, etc...) to celebrate Shabbat. This entails that the inter-communal differences such as the presence or lack of an *eruv* should not undermine an individual's ability to achieve Shabbat's objective.



Rather, what is most significant is what one does with the means one has. For example, if a poor Jew invests a significant proportion of his money in purchasing relatively higher quality wine and food for Shabbat than normal, he honors the day with the resources he has. On the other hand, if a rich Jew buys the exact same fancy wine for Shabbat as he does for the weekdays and consumes the wine in exactly the same manner as always, he does little to sanctify the time of Shabbat, although the wine he drinks may be more expensive than the poor man's wine.

Clearly, the application of a modern cultural realist perspective to Shabbat does not capture the underlying purpose of the day. While it is important to consider how physical poverty might affect a Jew's spiritual and mental outlook during Shabbat, it is evident that only basic physical provisions are necessary to completely satisfy Shabbat's loftier objective. Surely, any Jew lacking such basic provisions deserves assistance from the community. However, assuming all Jews have these bare necessities, the question of egalitarianism becomes purely spiritual in nature. For example, Jews must question whether the luxuries of an *eruv* or other "Sabbath subterfuges" (Dundes 32) detract from their spiritual experience of Shabbat, even if they offer a slightly enhanced physical reality. Spiritual fulfillment of Shabbat transcends and outweighs minor differences in physical comfort.

In conclusion, modern technology and culture can present challenges that divert our focus from the true purpose of Shabbat—the sanctification of time. I have explored the development of electricity as an example of modern technology, and the notion of egalitarianism as an example of modern culture. Electricity introduces multiple controversies and its repeated incorporation into *halacha* can distract Jews from Shabbat's underlying purpose. Egalitarianism can impede our fulfillment of Shabbat only if we understand it as physical egalitarianism, rather than spiritual egalitarianism. Ultimately, these examples suggest that the key to meaningful

observance of the ancient ethics of Shabbat in a modern world resides in the cultivation and maintenance of a strong and disciplined spirit. Technological and cultural changes, like the grass and the flower, will come and go, “but the word of our God shall stand forever” (Heschel 40).

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