

# Looking Ahead to Sustainability in Israel: Shabbat as a Resource

– Position Paper –

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*“To set apart one day of the week for freedom, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with other people and the forces of nature. Is there any institution that holds out greater hope for humanity’s progress than the Sabbath?” - Abraham Joshua Heschel*

## **1. Reframing “The Problem” of the Sabbath**

In Israel, the Sabbath is perceived as problematic: a battlefield between the individual’s autonomy and religious coercion, between the liberal freedom to be “apart from” and the societal compulsion to be “a part of.” But what would happen if we related to the Sabbath not as a nuisance, but as an opportunity, a solution in itself? We environmental and social activists do not consider consumer industrialized society to be the unparalleled pinnacle of human achievement, nor do we perceive the accumulation of capital and possessions to be the be-all and end-all.

The Sabbath, a day free of commercial financial activity, can offer a subversive “resource of resistance” to the dominant material culture. It implicitly conveys a trenchant criticism of the environmental and psychological costs of the consumer culture and of economic globalization, and highlight our shrinking psychological horizons in this society. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says above, the Sabbath is an idea “that holds out greater hope for humanity’s progress.”

We propose a different perspective on the institution of the Sabbath in Israeli society, a new approach towards transportation and commerce that will advance and reinforce local economy, community life, and social justice.

## **2. The Commercialization of Life, and the Erosion of the Israeli Spirit**

The Western consumer culture, as glittering and alluring as it may be, is a disturbing source of severe environmental problems, including waste, pollutants, and the depletion of natural resources. Moreover, a culture that is based on material consumerism as a leading expression of individual happiness holds damaging ethical, psychological, and political ramifications as well.

Advertising entices us to answer non-material (emotional, identity-based) needs with material goods. Indeed, according to recent surveys, 85% of the Israeli public cited shopping as their preferred leisure time activity. That ranks higher than reading a book, listening to music, or

enjoying nature. This is an indication of “the commercialization of life.” It results from patterns of privatization and economic globalization, as well as the spread of the market and its rules into areas of life that were once protected from it.

The consequence for society is that *consumption*, a basic action and means of survival for all living creatures, with opportunity for the higher ends that set human beings apart, becomes *consumerism*, an end in itself, an individual’s principal personal expression.

Many members of our contemporary society would like to extend commerce to include the day of the Sabbath, despite the traditional “status quo” that prohibits it. At risk is our leisure time. Our pace of life is changing: financial pressures and/or the desire to achieve professional success require an investment of long hours at work. The traditional “siesta” break between 2 P.M. and 4 P.M. has nearly vanished, and we are unable to devote as much time as we might have once done to friends and family.

Increased work demands generate pressure to extend stores’ hours, particularly on the Sabbath, the day customarily free of employment obligations. When shopping is done on the Sabbath, however, it takes the place of quality time with friends or family. When the day of rest, a central social institution, centers increasingly on acquiring possessions and other financial activity, it testifies to the narrowing of our cultural horizons.

In truth, the day of rest has the capacity to respond to the negative social and financial trends. Moreover, it is in the context of those cultural horizons, as matter of a total approach to production and consumption, work, and leisure, that the potential benefits of the Sabbath for society must be addressed.

### **3. The Sabbath as a Protest and as a Resource of Resistance**

One day of rest in the week, a break from work, is an essential ingredient of sane human culture. This point is well accepted in the area of *production*; that is, a weekly constraint on the pursuit of making a living creates a space for individual and community renewal. We must note that the human need for a break applies equally to production’s “partner,” *consumption*. A day of genuine rest is a day that is free not only from work (production), but also from shopping and consumerism. A day of genuine rest is a day on which market rules do not hold sway and do not control our actions. Instead, the day of rest acts as “protected space” – protected from financial needs – and places other values – family, community, nature and culture – above financial activity.

It should be noted that the seventh day, the Jewish Sabbath, does not override the Christian day of rest on Sunday or the Muslim day of rest on Friday. In this area, as with many other topics, we must recognize difference and multiculturalism in the various sectors of Israeli society, and advance them. Protest, even if only symbolic, by means of one day of respite each week, demarcates the place of the market in our lives, could be highly meaningful for individuals, and could have far-reaching impact on society.

#### **4. The Sabbath, Globalization, and Justice**

My consumption in my leisure time is other people's work, at the expense of their own leisure time. Many people who staff shopping malls and serve the public who seek entertainment and shopping as part of their "rest" belong to socioeconomically disadvantaged classes, with fewer options of how, where, and when to make a living. The day of rest therefore carries a positive aspect of social justice. The big profits from trade in the major stores do not go to the employees, naturally, but to the giant corporations who push to open their stores in shopping malls on the Sabbath.

Thus, financial globalization contributes to the destruction of local cultures. Multinational corporations establish their giant stores, with power and global capital, and they try to change the local rules of the game. They sell at impossibly low prices, which they can finance easily; they stay open at night and on the Sabbath; and they do it all – so it would seem – for the benefit of the consumer. But the underlying corporate objective is to destroy local competition. A desperate struggle ensues, as local businesspeople fight for their livelihoods, against the megastores who bleed the profits from their towns and neighborhoods.

The corporations are conning us. They have us convinced that, in the name of "the freedom of the individual," we must fight for the questionable right to forego our only day of rest, to get stuck in traffic jams, and to stand in line to "export" our money to the corporation. Better to invest our money locally, for the good of the Israeli market, which badly needs our support. We are increasingly forced to adapt ourselves to the corporate agenda, instead of fighting for a system that tailors itself to us and to human needs. Appropriate design of the Sabbath can act as a means for strengthening the community, and the local economy.

#### **5. Searching for Lost Time**

The institution of the Sabbath should be viewed as an attempt to plan and structure time. Planning, as is the case with urban planning, sets boundaries, and creates identities for the planned entities by making distinctions. Planning is governed by rules that exist to protect the needs of the general public; they regulate and channel the market forces. When business elements take advantage of the rules of planning, they generally do so in ways that serve their own narrow and greedy interests. Planning policy defines and protects different qualities for different places. Just as it is inconceivable that a society would exist without those distinctions, so should the same concept apply to time. That is, the idea of setting boundaries around a day, and defining the activities of the day as a means of promoting a particular atmosphere, is a means of combatting the "homogenization" of time. It is an attempt to instill certain qualities in the week that would not exist otherwise.

Lest you suggest that people want to "be like America," that what is good for them will of course be good for us. But why does our oracle only come from across the ocean, and why is progress viewed in such a narrow and limited way? In Europe, there is a growing demand to protect traditional ways of life against Americanization (such as: length of the work day, weekends). The European impulse is not because of a divine decree, but as a response to ongoing deteriorating quality of life.

The Sabbath is like a nature reserve of time. Just as a nature reserve has a fence, and constrains human activity as a means of establishing a particular way of life to exist in the special domain, the Sabbath is an institution that contributes to the creation of a different domain, with a particular, rare quality: a break from the ongoing and destructive pursuit of material “progress.” Destroying this unique “space” in time through ceaseless commerce is like building Disneyland in the Ramon Crater (Israel’s “Grand Canyon”), or putting a shopping mall on the peak of Mount Meron.

## **6. The Sabbath, Freedom and Consumerism as Coercion**

In a liberal, democratic society, the principal value of freedom means freedom for the individual, and it is defined in negative terms: “freedom from...” – from outside constraints, from coercion, from arbitrary prohibitions. Restricting ourselves to this narrow sense, we lose the positive sense of “freedom to...”: to add create a positive framework, to add positive content to an already established framework.

A civil vacuum is created; that is, not only is a common social policy absent, but also intelligent and critical thinking by individuals, as well as shared dialogue, are absent. Not surprisingly, this emptiness is eventually filled with commercial/financial content, rather than withstanding the market forces and the messages conveyed by advertising and marketing. A desirable ethical value of the good life is replaced by the implicit agreement that happiness is achieved through wealth, and that the pervading understanding of freedom is the freedom to consume.

But in a commercialized society, where much of the media is controlled by for-profit elements, where the only freedom in the free market is the right to pursue capital, which advantages wealthy people, where advertisements everywhere help shape the public consciousness and civil behavior, consumerism is not an expression of freedom. On the contrary, unrestrained participation in the consumption culture, with all its trends and messages, is the real coercion.

The freedom of the consumer to consume, whenever and wherever he or she wants, without outside constraints or circumstantial considerations, is imaginary freedom. It is destructive to the world and to society. Putting boundaries on systems such as the market and its power, whether in terms of time or by means of other social mechanisms, is an expression of people’s freedom; it restores the cultural and social room for maneuver.

## **7. In Conclusion – Public Debate Leading to New Policy**

Such an analysis of the Sabbath suggests a different policy from the current status quo, and there are proposals available. The current reality is highly problematic: municipal bylaws keep the hours of small businesses in the city centers in check, leading to the opening of shopping centers and strip malls outside of towns. Public transport does not operate, and dependence on private vehicles is increasing, though 40% of Israelis do not own their own vehicle. One suggestion to address “the Sabbath problem” is the approach of Judge Ruth Gabison and Rabbi Yaakov Meidan, where compromise was achieved through painful concessions on both sides. In rough terms, they recommend, “culture yes, commerce no.”

We propose something different, because we do not view the Sabbath as a problem, but part of a solution for all the aforementioned problems with the culture of consumption. An appropriate arrangement for the Sabbath will not entail painful concessions. Rather, it will benefit everyone.

We suggest an Israeli Sabbath that incorporates the following components:

- Leisure: in favor of cultural freedom and against the commercialization of rest (this may include the development of a full two-day weekend).
- Transportation: (1) closing certain city streets to traffic, and restoring the urban space to its residents; (2) an alternative, compact, public transport system, exclusively for the purpose of operating between communities and entertainment and leisure venues.
- Commerce: complete prohibition of open shopping malls, power centers, and all chains and stores owned by non-Israeli, or non-local companies (promoting activity that enhances the human community encounter, strengthens small communities, and incorporates tourism in the periphery).
- Process: Decision-making on the lowest possible local level, while maintaining extensive informed and deliberative public debate.

The Sabbath can be a symbol and an expression of a less material and commercialized society, a society in which human values are more important than market conditions, and a society that maintains the unique qualities of planned time as an essential component of its members' quality of life, no less than planned urban spaces enhance the public's quality of life. This is, of course only the beginning of a public debate which has hardly begun to take place.