

THE SHABBAT AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

by

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The following discussion about the form of Shabbat observance in the State of Israel addresses itself to the need for a revised life-style of the Jewish population of the State of Israel. That society has a political framework designed to enable it to grapple successfully both with the elements jeopardizing the existence of the Jewish people, and with the creative urges of its specific cultural heritage. Yet, in relying on that framework as if its very existence were the guarantee for sustaining both contents and absolute value, and by investing the State's institutions with the responsibility for all its functions Israeli society loses its spiritual values, its norms of morality, and the vehicle for expressing its experiences. Israeli social life is increasingly becoming one of consumption and entertainment, making it hard for one to specify not only what makes it Jewish, but what makes it cultural. The problem we would like to clarify is, therefore, what can be done to change this state of affairs, to enrich society by employing contents and means of expression embedded in its tradition? What can be done to make the State the framework for a creative society, and what can it – the State – do as such toward that aim?

Here, however, another problem raises its head, that of the mutual relations between sectors of the Israeli public whose attitude to Jewish tradition differs, the so-called "religious" versus those called "secular". Usually this question is dealt with either in its political or legal aspect, focusing on national unity and democratic principles respectively. It is not hard to prove, however, that the root of the question also touches on cultural values and life-style. This is true not only because the relations between the two sectors are themselves part of Israeli culture, but also because the relations between them depend on the different outlook of each sector on the common cultural heritage, even if only historically. The prevalent attitudes today are partial and narrow ones of the halakhic-religious elements on the one hand and the nationalistic elements on the other, presenting these elements not as complementary, but contradictory. As long as this approach prevails, the polarization will intensify. Only by enriching the attitudes of both sectors

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toward their heritage in its entirety, and thereby creating a tolerance of each group toward the life-style and outlook of the other, will it be possible to restrain this polarization process, and the inevitable rift which will follow in its wake. This is to say that the relationship between the religious and the secular sectors is defined by, and defines, the way of life of the Jewish society in Israel, and the two questions are in reality two sides of the same coin. Seen in this light, we can more precisely circumscribe the aforementioned problem of the ability of the State to serve as a framework for a unique social entity, since in the interrelations between the religious and secular sectors in an independent Jewish society there are political implications with which only a State is able to cope successfully. provided the educational and the political questions are not seen to be disconnected.

One may approach the discussion from two angles. On the one hand it may be seen as an overall problem of existence and one may try to analyze its causes; on the other hand one may focus on one particular aspect from which one may then proceed to other, related aspects. The academic discussion favours the first approach. but if one is after practical conclusions, the second way is to be preferred. The particular aspect which I would single out for analysis is the *Shabbat*, the foundation of Jewish life. The Shabbat creates rhythm and poles – the sacred and the profane, the days of action and the day of rest, daily life proceeding between these two poles in its set pace. It is an enduring element of Jewish society in Israel in all its segments and sectors. All – the ultra-Orthodox and the completely secular – express their feeling of Shabbat in some way. More than that – the keeping of the Shabbat is not something preserved for the single individual or group of individuals. The observance of the Shabbat depends on the consensus of a total public framework, as long as that public, composed as it is of different groups, sees itself as one whole. From all these aspects the Shabbat is a good starting-point for the discussion of principles aimed at practical solutions for a Jewish life-style in the State of Israel.

However central the Shabbat may be for a complete way of life, nevertheless our intention is to pose it as a touchstone for the attitude toward the common heritage in the different sectors. The opposition between the religious and the secular sectors is not only one of practical consequence, but of differences in principles and ways of thought, of the creation of a life-style for the individual and for the public body. If the desired solution lies in some kind of general consensus of the Jewish body as a whole, then a basic change in the approach and the attitude about the subject in its widest aspect is in order, and we shall have to try and arrive at this change, pointing to a way in which it can be realised. The ensuing discussion, in spite of its limited subject, is very ambitious in its principal object: to suggest a new possible way of thinking, different from that of the orthodox community *and* from that of the secular public – a way of thinking which

might possibly lay the foundation for a dialogue, even if that dialogue takes the form of a sharp debate, as long as the sides really start talking to each other, taking each other seriously.

The Shabbat is universally seen as an exalted ideal, a cultural treasure. It is also universally considered to be a *common* treasure, one to be shared by all simultaneously. This is where the consensus ends, however. The non-orthodox community takes up the idea and realizes it through halakhah. The orthodox community abides by the halakhah and through it realizes the spiritual idea. The non-orthodox thus put themselves in the position where they have to be selective – for them the halakhah is not the norm but, possibly, also the idea. The orthodox community, on the other hand, has to keep its Shabbat in proximity to the non-orthodox culture by which it is surrounded, and thus, perforce, becomes not only selective but very often militantly critical, trying to enforce halakhic norms on the general public. The effect of this is a tug-of-war between the non-orthodox who see as religious coercion what the orthodox see as the *sine qua non* for the Shabbat observance. The struggle too often takes place on the political battlefield with too little insight and respect for the point of view of the other camp. The danger exists that if there is no change, there will be a social alienation between the two camps enshrined in law. The other option, however, still exists, and is worth exploiting, were it only for the fact that neither side can successfully cope with its problems all by itself.

Turning our attention first to the non-orthodox community, the question to ask is: if the Shabbat is to be a day of rest, one free of work obligations, what are the labours termed “indispensable” which are to be allowed on the Shabbat? This may seem to be a mere technical problem, but it is not. Whoever favours the socio-economic framework of life which forms what we know as modern western culture, will consider the collapse of a factory or as a whole branch of industry enough cause to make work on Shabbat “indispensable”. Those with a negative attitude toward that same constellation, will consider those labours superfluous. Yet here, it seems, is a meaningful meeting ground between the two camps, for even those clinging to halakhah live in a modern socio-economic set-up, irreversible except through a total revolution in western culture. Some activities it would be disastrous to stop on Shabbat – communications for instance. Would the halakhah be willing and able to allow the operation of the media, with certain restrictions, on Shabbat? Without trying to provide an answer to this problem, it would constitute a positive approach if the orthodox establishment would stop fighting the operation of the media, suggesting, instead, guidelines in its operation to suit the spirit of the Shabbat. By the same token it would be more desirable to have public transportation on Shabbat, but restrict both it and private transportation to the main arteries of traffic, leaving the residential areas where the synagogues are situated, in real

“Shabbat Peace”. It might even be feasible – making the necessary financial adjustments – to provide *free* public transportation on Shabbat; free concerts, and theatre performances, lectures, and walking tours. This would make the day of rest a day of relaxation, not in the negative, but also in the positive sense. Even though part of the activities provided would be in opposition to the halakhah as it stands today, they would not carry the same stigma of deliberately perpetrating transgressions, embittering both sides as they do now. Not being on a commercial basis, they would be in the spirit of Shabbat; would this not be preferable from the halakhic point of view?

However, the main idea of Shabbat is not rest, and even less pressure. Holiness is the essence of the day. Having approved of those pleasurable activities which are a transgression in terms of halakhah – so will run the argument – you have taken away the essence of Shabbat, sanctity, and have replaced it with rest and pleasure for their own sake. Here then we have passed into deep waters where we will find no general consensus between the orthodox and those who honour the Shabbat as a holy day without being orthodox. Those willing to make an intellectual effort will have to admit that there is no single solution to the way in which holiness is expressed. However, the gap may not be as wide as would appear at first glance. Proof of this is that the majority of the Jewish public in Israel willingly accepts many of the limitations imposed on it for the sake of creating a common public framework with the religious sector, and this willingness would not exist without a certain measure of appreciation of the matter for which they are asked to be considerate. This willingness to be considerate on the part of the non-orthodox may imply not only an expectation of reciprocal tolerance from the orthodox, but also the wish to be influenced and to learn, as long as the attitude is one of understanding. Here we are, of course, not talking of legislation, but of education, even though the legal framework suggested above would make educational influence more acceptable. But an indifferent, closed community, not concerned with those whose Shabbat is different, will never be able to be of any influence.

The sanctity of the Shabbat has negative and positive implications. The negative one is the checking of man's dependence on work involving subjugation of nature to serve his needs. To divorce himself from work, from the furtherance of his talents and ability in the effort to subjugate nature, to sit back and reflect on the purpose of life and of man, that is the first step in sanctification. Without this, our lives swing like a pendulum between work and entertainment (the use of the fruits of our work): a closed circle, excluding the main spiritual asset man has, that of being conscious of his life's meaning. The positive implication of the Shabbat sanctity is the turning to God. Man escapes the bonds of working for his physical well-being and enters the bonds of worship. To what extent this aspect holds true for the non-orthodox, there is no way of telling. But certainly the ne-

gative implication mentioned before will lead to some sort of positive implication, and let that suffice for the moment.

And now for the practical applications: to preserve the sanctity of the Shabbat it goes without saying that the traditional ceremonies should be observed, the preparations in due time for the Shabbat, the lighting of the candles in time, prayers in the synagogue, the blessings before and after the meal, and the *havdalah* (lit: distinction; marking the end of the Shabbat and the beginning of a new week). Prayer, the reading of the Torah, the sermon in the synagogue, all are part of the Shabbat. Not everyone easily finds a synagogue suited to his needs, however, and the setting up of new synagogues is to be encouraged. Even those who do not attend services can spend part of the day studying the sources, either alone or in groups.

From the foregoing it may be concluded that there is no Shabbat without a community. Shabbat is expressed in the family, the community, the people. This again points up the fact we have touched on before: the orthodox community lives detached from the surroundings, not willing to see the desecration of the Shabbat by others which enables it to keep every letter of it; the non-orthodox feels himself alienated from the community and thus *lonely*. Thus we have come round again to the same problem with which we opened this discussion – not now on the level of law, but on the inner level of belonging, which can be attained only by education. The problem of Shabbat will not be solved if the individual does not discover his forgotten alliance to family, community, and people. Finding those ties lies in keeping Shabbat itself. Could that not serve as a harbinger of better times?

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