

Kol Nidre 5773

September 25, 2012

This past February, the Tel Aviv city council approved a plan to operate public buses on Shabbat for the first time. As many of you know, in Israel buses do not run in the major cities on Shabbat, Haifa excepted. The proposal required approval from the Transportation Ministry which the Netanyahu government did not give, and therefore the status quo was preserved. But the city council decision, supported by the mayor, is evidence for the strong support among many secular Israelis for public transit on Shabbat. City Councilwoman Tami Zandberg of the left-wing Meretz party said the following: “This is an historic step for the secular public in Israel, and in Tel Aviv in particular. For years, the secular public is being held hostage by hareidi politicians who want to continue to restrict the freedom of movement of millions of people every week for 24 hours.” In fact, Meretz has been attempting to privately provide free bus service on Shabbat in Tel Aviv and other places to make their point.

Now, normally I know how I feel about such matters. One of the vexing problems of Israel for so many of us is K’fiyyah Datit, religious coercion. In an Israel where non-Orthodox Jewish streams are officially 2nd class citizens, people like me are constantly making statements sounding much like Councilwoman Zandberg. However, in this case I have very mixed feelings, as I in fact taught at the JCC some months ago. For those who have experienced Shabbat in Israel, it is a very powerful feeling to see a society that runs on Jewish time. Many a USY or Young Judaea staff member has proudly emphasized the fact that Israel is a Jewish state by pointing out that even the buses don’t run on Shabbat. It is something that

helps give Israel its Jewish character. Now, clearly at a certain point the idealized Israel of world Jewry has to give way to real Israel, where secular Israelis are simply annoyed that they can't get easily to the beach or to those stores which are open on Shabbat. But the truth is Shabbat is a larger issue, because the idea of Sabbath is something that western-style democracies in principle see as a good idea for society, regardless of one's religious proclivities. It is a place where the lines between secular and religious are not so clear. And that is true not only in Israel, but in America and many other countries as well. But Sabbath is an idea that is in the process of being lost.

The Torah calls Yom Kippur Shabbat Shabbaton, a Sabbath of complete rest. It is the only holiday so designated. Despite the prohibition of work on the other festivals, Yom Kippur is the only day whose restrictions are just as strict as on Shabbat. And historically, large numbers of Jews in our world take that seriously, taking off from work and limiting commerce even if they are not strictly observant. In Israel almost everything shuts down in Jewish areas. It is the one day the main Israeli networks do not broadcast. In the United States the only day that comes close to that, allowing for differences between Jewish and Christian practice, is Christmas. But in America, Israel, and throughout the world, people are in desperate need of Sabbath, to get a real break more than once a year.

The trend is always towards greater convenience, greater availability. Thirty years ago a 24-hour market meant a 7-11 or Wawa. Now there are so many more big grocery chains that boast they are open 24-7, and make their employees work accordingly. The number of days kept as real holidays is going down. When I was a kid, grocery stores were almost always closed on Thanksgiving and other major holidays. Now they are open. On Memorial Day and July 4 they often have only minor changes to their schedule. In America, observance of the Christian

sabbath has faded with every generation, with the exception of it being a day for church for many people. Blue Laws are regarded as a holdover from another era, and something that interferes with a city's economic viability. And there is a disturbing trend towards lack of respect for people's commitment to sabbath. In New Jersey, the courts upheld a Christian bus driver's firing for insisting on Sundays off, saying making accommodations would create undue hardship for New Jersey Transit. But the need for society to have one day set apart for rest, and particularly the burden on workers -- invariably poorer ones -- who are expected to work 7 days a week to feed our need for convenience, are still issues crying out for the answer Sabbath provides. A strong work ethic is a positive attribute, but most of us probably know people in high-powered professions who never totally disconnect, who check their laptops even during vacation. Studies show that such people are more susceptible to stress-related illness. 24 hour businesses take a toll on their night employees, as scientists have found a link between working the night shift and diseases as serious as cancer. Sabbath -- or at least some sort of down time -- is not just a luxury; it is a necessity.

For Jews, a very strong tradition of the centrality of Shabbat came in conflict with America from the very beginning. The saga of the religious East European Jew whose employer tells him, "If you don't come to work on Saturday, don't bother coming in on Sunday" is well-known. Actually, Shabbat has come back in many ways. There are plenty of observant professionals who feel perfectly comfortable saying they do not write or drive from Fri. night to Saturday night, including the White House Chief of Staff. But now there are new challenges. Many Orthodox teens keep what they call "half-Shabbos," where they observe all the rules of Shabbat except for texting each other, which they continue to do constantly. Some of that is rebellion, but some of it is how impossible it seems

even to kids from religious families to put away their smart phones for 25 hours. Ironically, this comes as the Conservative movement reaffirmed our commitment to Shabbat with a responsum saying that although one can turn electric lights on and off on Shabbat, computers, cell phones, and even e-readers are still forbidden.

And this aspect of Shabbat, a rest from technology, is the one that is becoming more and more attractive to so many people. The “Sabbath Manifesto,” rooted in Judaism but geared for a larger audience, attempts to get people to observe 10 principles for some period of time each week: “Avoid technology, connect with loved ones, nurture your health, get outside, avoid commerce, light candles, drink wine, eat bread, find silence, give back.” The Manifesto says it has been “slowing down lives since 2010,” and sponsors the “National Day of Unplugging.” It offers for sale something called a “Phonekerchief.” “Send the right signal by giving dinner partners your undivided attention with this innovative, service-blocking hanky made with silver fibers that effectively block incoming calls and texts.” On the Phonekerchief is the legend “My phone is off for you!”

Conservative Rabbis have been preaching in vain about the importance of Shabbat for a hundred years now. We all know full well you cannot change an entire culture with a sermon. But there are some things so important that it is better for rabbis to sound foolish than to give in to the inevitability of popular practice. So on this Shabbat Shabbaton please make room for Shabbat somewhere in your life. Dedicate Friday night to some version of the Shabbat rituals and a meal with family or friends, ideally with cell-phones off. Participate in the National Day of Unplugging on the Shabbat of March 23-24 of 2013. Agudat Achim will have Shabbat lunch and board games available to help you put technology aside for a couple hours. Stand up for the right of Jews, Christians, and people of all faiths to observe their sabbath and holy days without fear of losing

their jobs. Let us not let economic arguments or convenience cause society to further erode the right of workers to have at least one day off a week. And please do not discourage young Jews who become turned on to the idea of Shabbat from observing it even if it messes up your Saturday plans. Shabbat is not simply a collection of arcane regulations, but an idea that Jews gave to the world and that our non-stop world needs more with every passing year.

So I cannot rejoice at the move in the State of Israel to apace the erosion of the Sabbath that has happened in America and other countries. I cannot see Shabbat buses as a victory over the tyranny of Haredim. Because while the totality of Shabbat law should not be forced on anyone in a free country, it is also something that individuals cannot observe or enjoy without some help on the part of society. May we as Jews -- especially Conservative Jews -- fight for both the observance of Shabbat and the rapidly fading notion of Sabbath in America. Though there are many who see emphasis on sabbath as a turning away from modernity, a Quixotic attempt to roll back the clock, we should rather reflect on oft-quoted words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money...is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man's progress than the Sabbath?