

What is Shabbat?

Shabbat is a sanctified day observed from Friday to Saturday evening. It is one of the oldest and most important- and influential- of Jewish observances.

The liturgy observed on Friday evenings tells us that it is a remembrance of our going free from slavery (yetziat mizrayim) and a of the work of creation (ma'aseh b'reishit). In that elegantly simple yet profound phrase is a summary of both the spiritual and socio-political aspects of Shabbat.

Going free from slavery is not just about being freed from Egyptian oppression. For the ancient Jewish imagination it also meant going free of oppressive hierarchical and tyrannical societies, which the society of the Torah was supposed to be an antidote to.

This was enacted and symbolized by Shabbat, the radical commitment to giving everyone one day of rest and freedom from their often oppressive roles in society. The original Shabbat regulation extends this freedom to slaves, animals and foreigners- the most disadvantaged members of society who were not usually accorded such privileges. It was also linked to the freeing of slaves and forgiving of debts every seven years, the return of land to its original clan owners every 50, and the “Shabbat of the earth” on every seventh year when even the earth would rest from human work. All of these are linked together in The same impulse of “freedom from slavery”.

The spiritual aspect of Shabbat is expressed in remembering the divinity of creation. Though we are made as sub-creators in the divine image, on Shabbat we rest from creative labour and simply enjoy what already is. As one Hasidic Rebbe taught, on Shabbat we pretend for a day that the Messiah has already come.

In practice, this means in some way ritualistically acknowledging the day, and traditionally it also meant refraining from all creative labour. In biblical times this meant not traveling, doing business, or doing agricultural work, and seems also to have meant not lighting fires. By the time of the Mishna this was extended to the famous list of “39 forbidden labours,” which were based around the work of the Temple as the archetype of human creative labour. This was elaborated into the complex and detailed discipline of so-called “Orthodox” Jews today. The majority of Jews, as we know, focus on sanctifying the day and enjoying community and, for some, freedom from wage labour. We may also observe some of the traditional rules as a way to enhance the meaning of the day.

What is essential in its celebration?

For most Jews, what is essential is sanctifying the day through a ritual dinner Friday evening. In today's class we are going to focus on the elements of that dinner and suggest a few ways to deepen our practice of Shabbat day as well.

Erev Shabbat: Its Purpose, History and Structure

Erev Shabbat originated in the need to announce the beginning of Shabbat and to ritualistically sanctify it. Some would go to the synagogue to say the evening prayers, which at some point in Mishnaic times began to include a blessing to announce and sanctify the transition. Meanwhile, at home, candles would be lit for the last allowable time (thus providing light once it was dark and fires were forbidden). Cooked food would be kept warm for the last warm meal until Shabbat was over. The focus on home rituals for Shabbat and their importance was part of the massive re-imagination of Jewish life that took place after the destruction of the Temple, when the Rabbis declared each Jewish home a Temple and the dinner table the altar of that Temple.

Variations

In the 16th century a group of Kabbalists in Tsfat created a ritual called Kabbalat Shabbat to welcome "the Shabbat Queen " or the Shekhinah, enthroned and glorified in the Shabbat observances. For those who go to synagogue on Friday observances now include both the evening prayer (Ma'ariv) with its blessing of Shabbat and the Kabbalat Shabbat ritual, with its famous song "Lecha Dodi" and its ritualized bow to the entering Shabbat Queen.

The traditional home ritual starts with the lighting of candles just before Shabbat begins. People often then gather for a meal which begins with the Kiddish, or "Sanctification." The traditional order is that one recites a blessing over the mitzvah of lighting the candles, then blesses one's children. One then welcomes the angels who come to celebrate the Shabbat with those gathered, and then the men present recite a poem (Eishet Chayil, literally "Warrior Woman") praising the woman of the house, who presumably, in patriarchal settings, had cooked the meal and prepared

the house for Shabbat. One then recites a blessing over wine, sanctifies the day, and then blesses the bread for the meal. In Ashkenazi Europe the Eastern European bread, “Koilach”, was given symbolic significance and became an essential part of the ritual, now called “Challah” after the bread offerings in the Temple. This has spread throughout much of the Jewish world in recent centuries.

The meal is then celebrated, punctuated by “Zimrot”, or Shabbat songs and niggunim. The meal ends with Bircat HaMazon, the blessing over the satisfaction of hunger and the pleasure of the meal, and then, traditionally, more singing! If someone is present who is able to give a *vort* or *dvar Torah*, a brief teaching from the Torah, then that happens as well.

Today many people simplify the meal to candles, blessing of the children, blessing of the wine and blessing of the bread. The blessing of the sanctification of the day should not be forgotten if one wants to align with the tradition while simplifying things. Below we’ll outline a simple Erev Shabbat liturgy in Hebrew and English with some variations that might suit your family.

Two issues face many people today when using the traditional liturgy. The first is the masculine tense of the God-language, and the other is the God-language itself. I’ve provided alternatives, some of which use feminine god-language, and some of which don’t use god-language at all.

Bircat HaMazon

Kids, Engagement and Shabbat Ritual

The blessings are an excellent route for engaging children in Shabbat. They can be taught the blessings, or invited to “repeat after me.” Translating them into English is often important so kids understand their meaning, and this is best done in your own words, expressing the way your family understands them. Another possibility is to invite kids to bless the wine, Shabbat, and bread in their own words, expressing gratitude in their own way.

Teaching children not to drink the wine or eat challah until the blessings are recited is a great exercise in mini-discipline and values before consumption, but it’s often best to keep the over-all length of the blessings and contemplations short when children are present. Many of the great Rabbis of the past were known to keep their own blessings and prayers short, especially when other people are hungry.

Resources

<https://opensiddur.org/shared/prayers/solilunar/shabbat/erev-shabbat/>

<https://ritualwell.org/shabbat>