



# Observing Shabbat

BARRY CYTRON

“*Shalom, shalom to those far and near.*” With those words from Isaiah, Professor Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary, would regularly welcome our 1960s student body to the opening fall convocations. Somewhere towards the end of those annual remarks, he would inevitably remind the men (women could only enter rabbinic training there two decades later) that our enrollment required us, from day one, to lead a pious and ethical life worthy of being considered *rav b’yisrael*—“a rabbi of the people Israel.”

Some ten years later, Rabbi Finkelstein’s words would suddenly come back to discomfit me. By then, I was serving my first congregation in Des Moines. My aging, widowed mother had just moved from Saint Louis, taking up residence in a nearby apartment. I had driven over to fetch her for Shabbat dinner with our young family. By meal’s end, darkness had fallen, and I needed to be on the way to Friday evening services. Previously that had always meant walking, never driving the quarter mile to the synagogue. But my mother was not up to that stroll, much less the lengthier trek back at worship’s end to her own apartment.

As I realized that I was about to do something—use an automobile on Shabbat<sup>1</sup>—that I had not done in over a decade, I felt nearly frozen. The chancel-

<sup>1</sup>The Bible enumerates a limited number of proscribed activities, and in Rabbinic Judaism that brief list was significantly enlarged. The ban against lighting fires (Exod 35:2–3) came to be understood as prohibiting the use of the combustion engine and thus automobiles. As Americans migrated to the suburbs in the 1950s, my denomination,

*Over and again, the text of the Hebrew Bible calls the people to render justice through the vehicle of memory—theirs and their forebears. Over and again, we read these words in the text: “Remember that you were a slave!” What might it mean in our contemporary American culture to “remember” the Sabbath?*

lor's linkage of prophetic words to an admonition about suitable religious and ethical behavior unexpectedly welled up within. Was Dr. Finkelstein's Isaiah citation about those "far" away a veiled reference to what I was about to do? Was I at risk of wandering afield from the "right" path? Was it possible to embrace both correct "ritual" observance and right "ethical" living, to balance appropriate Sabbath observance with filial loyalty?

It might come as little surprise, perhaps, that I opted for the latter. In the years that followed, congregational exigencies, even an occasional family emergency, would necessitate my need to adjust that rabbinical school warning to a professional and personal life occasionally requiring compromise and adjustment. But more than just life's interventions required a reconsideration of what proper Sabbath fulfilment, and therefore the Sabbath itself, meant in my life.

#### JESUS AND THE SABBATH

Study of Scripture, in this instance another's Scripture, also had an impact. Soon after that momentary "crisis of conscience," I began pursuing part-time doctoral work in modern Jewish-Christian relations. That required, I am now sheepishly embarrassed to say, seriously engaging the New Testament for the first time, something my rabbinical training had inexplicably *not* included.

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Our professor led off with the Gospel of Mark, and by chapter two I was pondering those forceful words of Jesus: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). My initial response to that assertion was, I now see, understandably defensive. The rabbinic tradition, I wanted to aver, clearly understood that priority Jesus was championing. What about *pikuakh nefesh*? What about *that* Talmudic principle that insisted that not only Sabbath restrictions, but virtually any other legal constraint must give way to save human life?

There was hardly a need for me to tender any plea. Professor Solomon defused the tension from the start, as he explicated the text, placed the Gospel of Mark in its historical setting, and argued the case for distinguishing Mark's Jesus from the Jesus of first-century Palestine. We must, he continuously urged throughout the course, understand the historical challenges the gospel writers were facing, and the political and religious arguments they were advocating. We might not ever know exactly how Jesus felt about every facet of Sabbath observance, for example. But he cautioned us not to equate what a Gospel author might attribute to Jesus with how the historical Jesus might have chosen to live his faithfulness. Many of to-

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Conservative Judaism, issued a ruling permitting use of the automobile to travel back and forth to the synagogue for Sabbath worship. But during my early years in the rabbinate, it was an unwritten rule that rabbis wouldn't, and indeed shouldn't, avail themselves of that leniency.

day's scholars and writers, he often emphasized, see Jesus as securely within his community, not a defiant, rebellious alien from it.

Judith Shulevitz, as one example, says it this way in her well-regarded *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*: “When it came to the Sabbath, the historical Jesus would have had reform, not revolution in mind. He was a Reform rabbi, not a Jew for Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> My first teacher of New Testament didn't quite sum it up that way, but I suspect he would have agreed. And that surely is how Walter Brueggemann sees and says it, too, in his lovely 2014 monograph *Sabbath as Resistance—Saying NO to the Culture of Now*: “By appealing to Jesus, I do not suggest Christian preemption of this defining Jewish observance. Rather Jesus fully understood and commended the practice of his Jewish inheritance, which invites to restfulness.”<sup>3</sup>

In the years that followed that first encounter with Mark's Jesus, I have come to appreciate the challenge it presented to me. I suppose it was just that engagement with Christian Scripture that led me to accept the invitation by the editor of *Word & World* to contribute to this issue. That offer prompted me to reconnect with the Shulevitz volume, which I had read soon after it appeared. And when I then discovered that Brueggemann, whose biblical studies I have regularly found both stimulating and illuminating, had recently completed a study on the Sabbath, it seemed an especially attractive gift for the assignment.

#### BRUEGGEMANN AND SHULEVITZ IN DIALOGUE

What, I wondered, might a dialogue between these authors look like? What might an American Jew, one who acknowledges, almost from page one, both her attraction to, and vacillation about, the Sabbath, have to say to a renowned, committed churchman? Does a writer known, not for religious subjects, but for literary and cultural criticism in places like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, have anything in common with a celebrated Christian theologian and biblical scholar? And what might they each have to say to *us* about the meaning and vitality of the Sabbath, *us* in our frenetic, frequently isolated, albeit “virtually” connected, lives?

Though both authors are setting out to make a case for the Sabbath, their clear-sightedness requires them to begin with the perceived negatives of the rite. These are the particular “noes” that once seemed to define Sabbath behavior for many, and which today seem especially odious. Both writers are intrepid enough to face these head-on, as they champion their joined cause, one perhaps best described as “the rebirth of Sabbath consciousness.”

From the opening pages of his book, for instance, Brueggemann addresses the astringent aftertaste of those Sabbath restrictions from his youth. Today, those

<sup>2</sup>Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010) 92.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014) xv.

seem illustrative of a largely bygone American era of villages and farm towns, when the word “forbidden” was slapped across so much of Sabbath Christian life. Those inclinations outlawed—card playing, movies, listening to the radio, and, of course, shopping—seem bland enough, not all that essential to a happy youth. But their denial must have stung many.

And there was more! Poignantly, Brueggemann writes of debates that unfolded in those rural communities so heavily reliant on the weather’s magnanimity. It was a time when community and church were routinely fused together, and also when making ends meet and honoring the faith might not infrequently collide. A huge, early storm could easily threaten to devastate an entire summer’s crop and thereby one’s total livelihood. Under such conditions, did Sabbath restrictions still prevail? If, on some storm-foreboding Sunday morning, a farmer opted for his tractor over his pew, would he face the opprobrium of the faithful? As I read Brueggemann’s reminiscences of such religious struggles, I wondered about those country preachers in his town. How were they both reading and teaching those words of Mark about the Sabbath being made for human life?

The institutional embodiments of those restrictions, commonly called *blue laws*, remain embedded in many jurisdictions across the nation. My own state legislature, Minnesota, recently defeated an attempt to extend liquor sales to Sundays, where they are currently *verboten*. While economic voices, not religious ones, were predominant in that debate, the shards of earlier Puritan-type restrictions can still be detected whenever such laws are contested.

Remnants of that early American age are sensitively excavated by Shulevitz, who devotes an extended discussion to the English and American Puritans, as well as efforts of Sabbatarians in sixteenth-century central Europe to rekindle biblical living patterns. In so doing, she helps us appreciate that alongside the austere Sabbath these communities promoted, solemnity may not have been, in and of itself, the primary intention. Rather, the aim appears to have stemmed from a profound search for an ordered community, for cohesion in a time of divided loyalty and ideological warfare. For many, these ritual patterns were an earnest effort to model a communal vision, to shape a fixed, piously laden life that the community could coalesce about.

I was sure, mistakenly as it turns out, that in reading these discussions of the Puritans, H. L. Mencken’s famously impish quip about that religious sect would be invoked—“Puritanism: The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”<sup>4</sup> Neither author chose to, and maybe for good reason. While they are clearly not advocating imposition of any of these abandoned strictures, both Brueggemann and Shulevitz seem acutely aware that something substantial has been lost with the vanishing of the unified life pattern that these communities once

<sup>4</sup>H. L. Mencken was a famously antireligious (and some say, anti-Semitic), quite renowned satirist of mid-twentieth century America. The quotation may be found in his collection *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1949) 624.

displayed through their Sabbath ritual life. That might best be observed in a fascinating aside that Shulevitz cites from some quite unlikely informants.

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In surveying today's secular Israelis—42% of Israeli Jews self-identify as “secular”—she finds many of them notably, and unpredictably, lamenting that the society's overwhelmingly irreligious bent has led to the Sabbath no longer serving as some form of common social denominator. Now that the once-storied civic Sabbath, with shops closed and transportation largely stilled, is no more, heading to the mall has become the defining activity of the day. Shulevitz notes that an increasing number of these secular intellectuals speak openly of the need to shape an alternative to the consumerism that so stamps the current Sabbath. To be sure, when Puritan-like restrictions dominated, these same individuals would have rued them. But those having been lifted, many yearn for something, anything, even the faintest semblance of a more uplifting and unifying “public culture.” Exactly what that would look like, much less how it would come to be lived, Shulevitz acknowledges, remains unclear even to its most ardent proponents.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE COMFORT AND CHALLENGE OF SABBATH

Perhaps a possible hint to what that once meant might be found in an essay written some years ago in the book review section of one of Israel's leading newspapers. I had filed it away when first reading in *Haaretz*, and had shared it with my older brothers because it touched a deeply personal recollection all of us carry of our home Sabbath. The newspaper had reported on the eminent Hebrew poet Chaim Nahman Bialik, who received the traditional religious upbringing typical of Jewish communities of nineteenth-century Ukraine. As a young man, Bialik broke with such piety, while remaining, as it turns out, inscrutably attached to its emotional tug. It was just that attraction which must have emerged when he settled in 1924, towards the end of his life, in Palestine. By then, he was already a widely famous literary figure, and perhaps sensed that others might be looking to him as a model for the burgeoning Tel Aviv Jewish community. Though Bialik was no longer personally observant of any Sabbath restrictions, he was insistent that those strictures not be publically ridiculed or rebuffed. In a memoir that he demanded be released only after his death, he acknowledged that, among other Sabbath violations, he smoked a pipe on the Sabbath. But only in private, he admitted, never in front of others! He says it this way:

<sup>5</sup>Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 46.

Mind you, I make a total distinction between what a person does in public and what he does in his own home. If someone were to smoke at my “*Oneg Shabbat*” [the name Bialik bestowed on communal gatherings he created on Shabbat afternoons, when friends and colleagues came together to study, sing, and participate in cultural discussions] we would grab him by the neck and fling him out. What he does at home is his own affair. There he is at liberty to behave as he likes.<sup>6</sup>

This particular recollection, which admittedly can be read in conflicting ways, pierced when I first read it. My father, like Bialik, had been born in Eastern Europe. As a teenager, he had made his way with his rigidly orthodox family to Saint Louis. One of my earliest remembrances was of my father speaking about that traditional home, one which he simultaneously cherished but not to such an extent that it would come to define his life.

As a twenty-something, my father opened a modest dry goods shop. Saturday was the busiest day of the week in that working class, largely non-Jewish neighborhood where the store was located. Having to travel by trolley (he never drove an automobile), fire up the coal furnace, write orders, and handle money—all those traditional Sabbath violations my father made peace with. But there was one thing he *never ever* would do on the day. Neither during those long Saturdays at his store, nor on the Friday evenings spent with our mother and we three boys at home, did my father ever smoke his pipe. At other times of the week, by contrast, he could barely be parted from it. It was only later in life, as we reminisced following his death, that we three sons finally realized this idiosyncrasy of his. When I sent my brothers a copy of the essay about Bialik, they immediately understood the connection. Like Bialik, our father was not to be strictly bound by the constraints of tradition. But mysteriously, like him, our father somehow couldn't let go of them, either.

In the last years of my father's life, once fully retired, he found increasing comfort in synagogue attendance, both on weekdays as well as the Sabbath. It was not that he returned completely to the ways of his upbringing. But the Sabbath, and its resonances, seemed increasingly to matter. Sitting beside my mother, greeting friends and praying the words he had learned as a child, touched deeply. And he seemed intent on living the Sabbath once again, though fashioning it to his American, 1960s suburban existence.

In many ways, my father's personal journey through Sabbath practice confirms an intriguing insight made at an interfaith symposium in the late 1980s. It was a time of quite robust interreligious study, and a wide range of Jewish and Christian scholars had been invited to an extended dialogue about the Sabbath. Lawrence Hoffman, an expert on liturgical practice in both faiths, had been asked to address the impact that “modernity” had made on Sabbath observance. He began by noting the sharp contrast in the ways religious leaders once called the faithful to Sabbath life, and how they did so today:

<sup>6</sup>Shmuel Avineri, “Spending Shabbat with Bialik,” *Haaretz*, August 17, 2001.

We learn how different ages characterized the Sabbath observance by attending to the kind of hortatory language that the Sabbath's supporters used in urging its observance....From the rabbinic period until the Enlightenment the Sabbath was discussed in terms of *Limits*, a map of reality that categorizes everything as a case of "should" or "should not." With the Enlightenment, discussion switched to the game of *Truth*, whereby things are true or false, not "should" or "should not." But Modernity has steadfastly remained as impermeable to arguments from limits as from truths. Thus we have invented a third vocabulary for keeping Sabbath: Sabbath as an issue of *Meaning*, whereby things are now either meaningful or empty.<sup>7</sup>

The hortatory arc that Hoffman identifies can certainly be detected not only in personal narratives like my father's but very much in the terrain trod by Brueggemann and Shulevitz. While both begin by addressing those Sabbath *Limits*, the heart of their books is aimed at finding contemporary *Meaning*, at advocating a reengagement with the Sabbath for our twenty-first-century life. As both authors see it, both externally and within, both in our corporate lives and inside our souls, we are urgently in need of what this day of interlude can offer.

As I read Brueggemann's little essay (it's less than 90 pages), I kept checking my calendar watch. Where exactly was I? Was I reading this book in the twentieth century, or the seventh pre-Christian one? Was I reading about the injustices inflicted on the widow, orphan, and alien, as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah might have had it, or about the outrageous income inequality and broken livelihood opportunities of the vanishing American middle class in 2016? It is a reflection, not only of Brueggemann's biblical expertise but of his keen contemporary sensibilities that the reader is led to realize, once again, just exactly how brilliantly prescient, and current, those prophets were.

## HEARING DEUTERONOMY

Those prophetic voices, as he shows, were either reflective of, or summing up (depending on the time frame one assigns to the Hebrew biblical authors) the words of Deut 24:

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Re-

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Upholding the Sabbath Day: The Jewish Sabbath Faces Modernity," in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., and William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 210.

member that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Over and again, the text of the Hebrew Bible will call the people to render justice through the vehicle of memory—theirs and their forebears. Over and again, we read these words in the text: “Remember that you were a slave!” By most counts, that recurring exhortation occurs some thirty-six times in the Pentateuch.

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The authors of Deuteronomy not only reiterate that phrase continually; in their retelling of the Sinai experience, they shift the justification for the Sabbath. No longer, as in the Exodus rendition of the Ten Commandments, is the Sabbath symbolic of God’s having “rested” after creation. Now the day is to be honored as a commemoration for liberation, as the ritualized recollection of freedom. To Brueggemann, that association of the seventh day with economic and political rebirth is ingeniously realized in one of the moving farewell addresses of the Bible’s *Great Liberator*:

Moses [here] enunciates the most radical extrapolation of Sabbath in the entire Bible. Every seven years, in an enactment of “the Sabbatic principle,” Israel is enjoined to cancel debts of poor people. The intention of this radical act of “seven” is that there should be no permanent underclass in Israel. . . . In this interpretive tradition, Sabbath is not simply a pause. It is an occasion for reimagining all of social life away from coercion and competition to compassionate solidarity. Such solidarity is imaginable and capable of performance only when the drivenness of acquisitiveness is broken.<sup>8</sup>

As these words suggest, the Brueggemann volume is a formidable indictment of contemporary American life, of our economic disparities, of our commodification of life and our materialistic orientation. He hopes that a renewed commitment to Sabbath will allow us to look into the mirror of self-judgment, force us to confront how technology, how “things,” have come to dominate our lives, and the ways we are constantly “multitasking” so as to have more and do more. As I read his spot-on arraignment against the ways we now “serve” those instruments (tools,

<sup>8</sup>Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 44–45. In his *The Seventh Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 7, sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel also suggests that the concept of the Sabbath is closely intertwined with the social and communal practice of land rest and release of debt found in other biblical passages. His book is a *tour de force* about the meaning of “the week.” Among many fascinating asides, he highlights the efforts of some notable “enemies of religion” (such as the secularists of the French Revolution, or the Communists in the 1930s Soviet Union) to abolish the seven-day week, and with it the Sabbath and its communal and familial significance. See in his book, on pages 30 and 40–41, respectively.



apps, devices, dollars) that we mistakenly think serve us, I recalled two fascinating tidbits from recent news reports.

Researchers have found that the average person checks his or her cell phone multiple times a day, ranging from once or twice daily to every few minutes. A 2015 Gallup poll found usage in this country akin to what surveys have found in other parts of the world—an average of about 85 times a day.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, this urge has come to afflict modern Jewish orthodoxy, too. On the Sabbath! Surveys in that community last year found that teenagers, and some of their parents, had succumbed to what they now call “half Sabbath.” Unable to deny the technological lure, as soon as Sabbath services are concluded on Saturday morning, many orthodox teens, and not a few adults, race to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.<sup>10</sup>

### RECOVERING SABBATH

Increasingly, as Brueggemann characterizes it in his book’s subtitle, we have surrendered to the “Culture of Now.” And what we need as a replacement, as Shulevitz has it in her subtitle, is “A Different Order of Time.” Inviting the Sabbath into our lives can augur that “release,” a passage to a more irenic sense of time and self to which both authors aspire.

Not having to check our email or the latest sales rack can certainly represent a form of emancipation. These authors, though, are after something far more exalted. For both, a heightened Sabbath consciousness can finally call us back to a life of fairness, harmony, and justice. For Brueggemann, that balance is unquestionably about a more cultivated “inward” life. But even more, for him it is about redressing the imbalances that stalk our civic and social beings, including our nation’s economic disorder and its pronounced twenty-first-century inequalities.

Shulevitz, too, sees in a recovery of the Sabbath a retrieval of our better social, communitarian selves. For her, that would also entail a heightened respect for our planet and its ecological system, of the sort that traditional Jewish practice had, intriguingly, come to mandate in such banned activities as driving. And beyond that more cosmos-oriented perspective is something even loftier that Shulevitz envisions in the Sabbath life. Those hours dedicated to *intentional interruption* might guide us to an authentic transcendence, to what some speak of as “a state of grace.” We might be led to the Ultimate One. Here is how she says it of the traditional demands of the day:

Being commanded strikes me as a succinct way of saying “being born into the world.” Being commanded means that customs come upon us from the outside, like the language we learn from our parents, and from the inside, like the still small voice of conscience. What others call God, I call ritual.... God, then,

<sup>9</sup>See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/184046/smartphone-owners-check-phone-least-hourly.aspx> (accessed March 21, 2016). Also see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3294994/How-check-phone-Average-user-picks-device-85-times-DAY-twice-realise.html> (accessed March 21, 2016).

<sup>10</sup><http://forward.com/opinion/178988/texting-and-the-power-of-half-shabbat/> (accessed March 21, 2016).

is the ungovernable reality commemorated by ritual. Ritual reflects the highly contingent anthropological, geographical, agricultural and historical facts that conditioned our neural pathways and tribal behaviors and the forms and customs that became religion, and that even now determine through force of repetition the way things ought to be.<sup>11</sup>

Many of us might not be willing to go along with her equating God with ritual. In the history of religion, too many adherents seem to have done just that. But she is right to see in ritual something far beyond mere habit or routinized action. Such was the characterization frequently given to it by the antiritualists in an earlier age of intergroup, interdenominational squabbles. In our time, when we hopefully have set aside such invectives, the value of meaningful ritual enactment might be worthy of a renaissance in all our communities.

Such a revival can take encouragement from Judith Shulevitz and Walter Brueggemann. Both render the Sabbath ritual fully, as a premier embodiment of their respective tradition's preeminent values. Ritual—not performed because of custom or routine, not simply done because “*oh, that's the way we do it!*” When realized not through rote, but with intention, when enacted with mindfulness, Sabbath observance can reflect and reinforce the most treasured teachings of the faith. Lived as these authors might hope, a Sabbath practiced with attentiveness to its ethical messages holds out the possibility of reshaping both our interior beings and our social lives, and thereby rehearsing through performance the finest within both Judaism and Christianity. ⊕

*BARRY CYTRON is Jewish chaplain and assistant director for Religious and Spiritual Life at Macalester College, Saint Paul, Minnesota.*

<sup>11</sup>Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World*, 212–213.