



Mordechai Arad



Mordechai (Motti) Arad was born immediately after the Second World War to a Polish Jewish family who lost everything during the Holocaust. His parents emigrated to Israel where they

settled just as the State of Israel was being established. Educated in a Jewish Orthodox family and a former Yeshiva student, Dr. Arad received his Ph.D. in Talmud from The Jewish Theological Seminary in 2000. He is teaching Rabbinic Literature at the Schechter Institute, as well as at the David Yellin Teacher's College in Jerusalem, and is serving as a visiting Talmud professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. His main interest in research is the attitude toward the Other in Rabbinic Literature. His book *Desecrators of the Sabbath With Parhessia* will be published in 2006.

S *Shabbat Shalom:* You have written a significant dissertation on the Shabbat in relation to the separation of Christianity from Judaism. What took you to that topic?

Mordechai Arad: After twenty years of farming on the kibbutz, I decided to spend the rest of my adult life in Jewish studies. What brought me to this issue of looking at Shabbat as the central focus of my research is the fact that as the head of the wine-producing sector of my kibbutz, which was not an Orthodox kibbutz, we were once asked to come to the winery. When we met, the Rabbi of the winery asked us if we wouldn't mind getting some overseer from the Rabbinat to come while we were picking the grapes. When I checked into it, I understood to my alarm that basically according to *Halachah* [the norms of Jewish tradition], Jews who are not keeping Shabbat to the fullest are not considered fully Jews. Here, all of a sudden, I, as a Jew, am considered to be non-Jewish! This shows how deeply Shabbat observance was considered a signifier of being Jewish. So it made me go back and study, and my dissertation is on that.

Shabbat Shalom: And what was your conclusion?

Arad: One thing that came across very clearly was

that there was a ceremony for people who decided to distance themselves from the Jewish community, and it was by breaking the Shabbat in a brazen way, like demonstrating, and thus saying by one's actions that "I do not belong to you anymore." This was usually done by riding a horse in front of the synagogue on Shabbat. In the sixth century, an independent source (Damascius, a neo-Platonist in Alexandria), not necessarily talking about Christianity, mentions two people, one of them a Samaritan, the other one a Jew, who renounced their religion and joined the Neo-Platonist group. When he talks about the Jew, he says, "Xeno, an Alexandrian, and born a Jew, renounced in public the nation of the Jews in the usual way, riding a white ass through the so-called synagogue on the day of rest." So in the sixth century outside of Israel, it was already known as something the Jews usually did when they wanted to renounce their religion. What caught my eye in this is that we have a group of such stories in the Talmud; one of them was about an agnostic Jew; another one seems to have been about a Christian Jew, and other stories as well—all of which tell the same "ritual" of riding on Shabbat. The one that may concern us here is about a Rabbi by the name of Hannaniah, a nephew of the famous Rabbi Yehoshua of the early second century. Midrash Kohellet Rabba is trying to explain why this great renowned Rabbi had to leave Palestine and move to Mesopotamia. To explain, they tell a story about a spell that was put on him by Christians during his visit to Kafr Nahum, causing him to ride an ass on Shabbat.

When he came back and discussed it with his renowned uncle Rabbi Yehoshua, his uncle advised him to leave and go elsewhere because the spell was still on him.

***Shabbat Shalom:* You gave us a quotation from the sixth century. Can you tell us from your research when this phenomenon started?**

Arad: From the Jewish side, as long as the people who were Jewish Christians kept Shabbat, they were still part of the community. Even people who worked on Shabbat during the persecutions of Hadrian in 135, when keeping Shabbat was considered a capital crime, were considered Jewish as long as they kept Shabbat when not under duress. However, that time created real incentives for people to deny their Jewish faith, because Jews were not allowed to live in Jerusalem. We know that at that time the Church in Jerusalem transformed into one of the Gentiles. It is hard to believe that all of the Jewish Christians left Jerusalem, and we have no record of such a move; it is more likely that people first pretended as if they work on Shabbat, and gradually many of them were taken by the anti-nomistic ideology of Gentile Christianity. In any case, for a long while you would have neighbours, maybe even your brother, living in the same neighbourhood. The question became practical: How do you live with this person in the same court? Could you then somehow find ways to keep Shabbat when he's around? Or does his being your neighbour prevent you from keeping Shabbat? So this development is happening in the second and third centuries, and is crucial in the parting of the ways. But

only in the fourth century is the break complete.

***Shabbat Shalom:* I can understand from what you say that the more Gentiles entered Christianity, the more they broke the Shabbat, because the first century was a Jewish congregation. The Church was Jewish.**

Arad: Exactly, at least it is so in Palestine.

***Shabbat Shalom:* After the destruction of Jerusalem and the second century, more Gentiles came, and more broke the Shabbat.**

Arad: Let me refine it a little bit. I would say the following: Palestine has a mix of people. You have pagans here, you have Samaritans here, you even have the remains of the Second-Temple-times sects like the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees—the Rabbinic Judaism that developed into Tanaitic and Talmudic Judaism. Now Jewish Christianity seems to be the closest to the Pharisees, that is, to Rabbinic Judaism. Let me give you an example from my research on baptism and Shabbat; the Qumran community would never consider baptising on Shabbat, but the Rabbis did. To my opinion, the Rabbis gave permission to a popular custom which stemmed from the idea that since it is the day of God and the holy day, this was considered the best time to be ritually immersed in the *mikve*. Now, some of the debates that Jesus had with the Jewish intelligentsia were on these issues. What was the meaning of what he was doing on Shabbat? And he was trying to defend himself. He was only healing; he was only helping—he was fulfilling Shabbat. He was not trying to

say, “I am the master of Shabbat, and I can change it.” He never said anything like that. He was defending himself, that he was basically the real interpreter of how to keep Shabbat, which is a Rabbinic concept. Rabbis use the same kind of ideas except that they may have differed from him. So, yes, the groups that were in Palestine—the Samaritans, the Sadducees, the Rabbis—were strict on Shabbat; and there is no reason to believe that Jewish Christians were different from other Jewish groups: they were strict on Shabbat.

Later on, it seems that the issue of Shabbat took over even more so than circumcision, because Shabbat was an overt thing. You could see if a person was keeping Shabbat or not, more than if he were circumcised or not, because every week it would have an effect. So Shabbat observance became basically the major issue of contention. That changed with Gentiles joining.

Shabbat Shalom: What lesson could Christians and Jews learn from your study and research?

Arad: I would say first of all that the parting of the ways was late: not before the fourth century are we talking about separate communities. So I would say that both groups, Jews and Christians, have to be more humble about their place. It seems like it wasn't so clear until the fourth century who was who. There were God-fearers, you know? There were so many ways for those who believed in this God and saw the Bible, the Old Testament, as their source of inspiration. How exactly each group handled their lifestyle was very open. We saw it in the Second Temple time; and as I just explained, even in the time of the second and third

centuries, as long as people kept their very basic lifestyle in which Shabbat observance seemed to be very central, they were included in the fold. They were not thrown out. Only in the fourth century, it seems like more for political reasons each group wanted to say, “No, we are different than the other group,” and thus they made a point of not having the holidays and the weekly meeting day at the same time.

Shabbat observance became basically the major issue of contention.

Shabbat Shalom: What can Christians and Jews learn from this study? You said that each one of them has to be humble. Do you have something to add?

Arad: I would say that Shabbat was considered God's holy day for all God-fearing groups during Second Temple time. Shabbat—not anything else. In Acts, it was not about the importance of Sunday, and I believe that this is an issue that needs to be discussed some other time. Rather, the deliberate desecration of Shabbat marked the break. In other words, it's not because Sunday somehow gained some importance. Rabbis did not have a problem with some of the fold having another meal or doing something else on Sunday. As long as they didn't break the Shabbat, they could be considered one of the fold. So it seems that only when somebody said, “No! Not any more Shabbat,” was there a real break; and this points to the Nicea Convention of 324. I don't think that before then there was a real break. I would end by saying that it seems that even when there

were breakers of Shabbat because of persecution in the second century and even earlier, the people who did that were not considered completely apostates. They would have to wait and see how they behaved when the persecution was over, so a distinction was made between people who broke the Shabbat because of necessity and people who broke the Shabbat because of their ideology.

Shabbat Shalom: In that time of separation of Jews and Christians, was it possible for a Jewish Christian—that is, a Jew who believed in Yeshua, kept the Shabbat, and submitted himself to the Torah—to remain in the synagogue?

Arad: This is a very important issue that needs elaboration along with other questions, because we know about the so-called *Birkat haminim* [the curse against the heretics] that was in the *Amidah* [one of the most fundamental prayers in Judaism]. It's also mentioned by the fathers of the Church who blame the Jews for cursing three times a day; and in fact, you find an old text fragment in a *Geniza* in which the *Amidah* had the words “Nazarites”—which is the Hebrew name for Christians. So obviously at some point they were cursed in the synagogue. The question is, What was the impact of that? We do find in the second century a text (*Tosefta Shabbat* 13:5) that tells us of hatred, of animosity, of tension between the groups. The question is, Who are those groups that the Rabbis had in mind? If we take a minimalist approach, it would seem to be the people who knew God and denied Him. In other words, Jewish Christians who stopped keeping the Law of God and denied Him. “They're worse,” said R. Tarfon at the end

of the first century, “than pagans who never knew God and denied him.” As a result, he would say, “I would flee to a temple of pagans and not go to these people’s houses.”

We do have records of a bishop and a Christian community in Lod where Rabbi Tarfon resided. It seems that the Christian community there was of the type of Gentiles. But to answer your question, What about Jews who just believed in Jesus as being the Messiah and wanted to stay in the Jewish fold? You know, like other Jews and like today you have Lubavitch Jews who are Jews and believe that the Messiah came in the figure of Schneerson. Later on, Rabbi Akiva said the same thing about Bar Kochba, that he was the Messiah; so it was not unusual to find or to look for figures, charismatic people, as being potential Messiahs. How would a Jew consider somebody like that? My answer is, “No problem, as long as you do not change the Law, the rules of the game.” So I would say, in my opinion, as long as people did not move, either because of force and more so because of ideology, into the non-observant group of Christianity, they would not have a problem staying. Maybe they would have a problem becoming a prayer leader, but not a participant.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Now, you know the Noachic laws. Can you tell us if you have found some evidence that the law of the Shabbat was part of the Noachic laws?**

Arad: The seven Noachic laws. That’s an amazing question . . .

***Shabbat Shalom:* Because the Shabbat is already found in Genesis.**

Arad: I understand what you are saying.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Some people—for example, the Adventists—say the Shabbat belongs to those kinds of laws because it was first given to Adam, and not first to the Jewish people at Sinai. And the Jews today say, “No, the Shabbat is only for Jews.”**

Arad: That’s a wonderful question. I wasn’t prepared for it, but I like it. I would say the following: Rabbinic literature talks about the Noachide laws in the tractate of *Sanhedrin* (56a-b). That’s where they try to make distinctions between groups and how we should relate to them. The Gentiles, according to that tractate, can have a share in God (salvation as you would call it) if they keep the seven Noachic laws. Now, in Rabbi Akiva’s thinking, which became dominant in Tannaitic texts and later became basically the Mishnah, and in the Talmud that followed, there was no place for somebody who did not integrate himself into the Jewish fold through the practice of circumcision and total conversion to keep the Law including that of Shabbat. So the seven Noachide commandments spelled out in the Talmud as the prescription for a righteous Gentile do not include Shabbat observance. It is interesting to note however, that it is entirely the thinking of Rabbi Akiva’s academy; but their opponents—Rabbi Ishmael’s academy—said that a Gentile who decides to keep the Law is better than a priest who does not. They may have rejected the entire notion of a separate list for Gentiles. Rabbi Akiva’s position is not biblical. It is a late development in Rabbinic thinking, as part of the breaking away of the groups that started, as I said, in mid-second century.

***Shabbat Shalom:* From your studies, what was the most crucial and decisive element in the separation? The rejection of the Shabbat or the adoption of the Messiah of Nazareth?**

Arad: I think I have already addressed that, but let me put it another way. It wasn’t theology, so much as Law, that separated Jews. In Second Temple times, you would have many disputes on almost everything. As long as they had the same calendar, it was fine. When is it impossible to keep together? When one is saying that Passover is on this day, and another one is saying on that day; Shabbat was one day they couldn’t change. As a last resort, you couldn’t play with Shabbat. It is a day that goes back to creation time. Nobody would say, “No, Shabbat is tomorrow.” You could say this about other holidays, but not about Shabbat.

***Shabbat Shalom:* In the light of this study, do you think that Christians should observe the Shabbat if they want to be faithful to Yeshuah?**

Arad: Who am I to tell people? Who am I? As I said, we have to be humble, I believe. I would not tell my own kids how to live their lives. I would rather say that anybody who observes Shabbat and walks in the streets of Jerusalem in some areas where people are still keeping Shabbat feels the serenity and the calmness that overcomes you. It takes you away from the daily concerns, from dealing with yourself, letting go of everything, and just giving yourself space. I don’t think that Sunday became such a day for Christians. When I watch, it seems people need some prohibitions: to put down lines—“No” or “Yes”—in order for that to happen. I cannot see that Sunday

could become something like that, and there is no need for a fight between these two days. I would say, Why not bring Shabbat back . . . Why is there a need to take it out of the Bible, to erase it? I don't see how it has to compete with ideas of the resurrection and other issues of theology. I don't understand. We are now beyond those times where everyone had to say, "I have the only right way, and you should shut up or else." We are in other times.

Shabbat Shalom: How do you perceive Christians who keep the Shabbat?

Arad: Let me put it this way. In my opinion, the fourth century was a time of the hardening of lines that had an effect for maybe fifteen hundred years or until modern times. This idea of, "No! I have the right answers, and you do not; and until you do the way I do, you cannot have salvation." Each group was using more or less the same terminology. As modern people, the fact that I'm sitting here with you, a Jew, a Christian, I don't see the need for such strict lines dividing people. People today do not let themselves be divided like that—by denominations, by decisions of a Pope or a group. We are in a different time, and I believe the mind of the modern person, because of automation, because of privatization, because of what is happening, is also different. I lived on a kibbutz for twenty years, and the kibbutz ceased to be a kibbutz. I still long for that time of community, of *hesed*, of fellowship, and of Shabbat and its original ideas. I mean letting even your animals, let alone your slaves, let alone your own fellows, have a rest. These ideas need to come back. I think, for that reason,

Shabbat has no competition with other days. I don't see a reason why it needs to be settled between a Christian and a Jew like we did after Rabbi Akiva.

Shabbat Shalom: What can Christians learn from Jews about the Shabbat?

Arad: Today, not much, I believe, because what happened in Judaism is in my eyes terrible. I guess this is what's happening in every religion. You become more and more involved with the details; this I believe is paganism. It's the things, the doing, and leaving out the spiritual side. As I said, I was a kibbutz member. Degania, the first kibbutz, was established in 1908 on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Now the people who came to Degania were rebellious Jews. You would not consider them Orthodox Jews. They left their *yeshivot*; they left the Galutic Jews. They didn't like the idea of the traditional bent over Jew. They created the *Sabra*, the new Jew. When it came to Shabbat, Shabbat had a tremendous effect on people. Their religion was basically work, work, work, building the country anew. Shabbat was the only time off. People would walk to the Sea of Galilee, have a great time just immersing themselves into that quiet sea, and singing, lots of singing. The only white shirt they must have had, they wore on Shabbat. They had nothing much to eat, but whatever they had, they had on Shabbat; and Shabbat was a real rejuvenation of the soul. And this is mentioned again and again by them. But, of course, the Rabbis condemned them as breakers of all the laws. I do not care for that strict approach.

Shabbat Shalom: Can we focus on the biblical Shabbat?

What can Christians learn from the biblical Shabbat?

Arad: I would go back to the basics: not to make your living. According to the principle of Isaiah 58, you stop walking around, doing your business on Shabbat, talking idle things, but attend to your soul and celebrate Shabbat again as a day of rest and recreation. For example, one thing that I have an issue with Orthodox Judaism today, and my parents who were Orthodox understood it, is how could I, on the only day that I had free time, not travel to see my children? That's the only time that I can see them. Is travelling considered wrong then in our day because you ignite something? *Halachically*, I understand the problems with this. But I see the changes, the tremendous changes of the human condition today, so we have to make some adjustments to *halachah*; but if you keep the basics, not to work, not to worry about money, not to consider yourself the center of things, but rather let go of everyday life and concentrate. Thinking of other people—equality, the issue of social justice that is also very much connected with Shabbat from Deuteronomy 5:13. These ideas have to be central. This is something the modern world needs to learn, especially in post-modern times when so much has been taken away from human dignity and value.

Shabbat Shalom: How important is Shabbat for the Jewish identity?

Arad: Well, of course, in my opinion, it is crucial. One of the only things that we may have an agreement on among groups here in Israel in our day is the issue of Shabbat. Maybe you heard about Professor Ruth Gabizon and

Rabbi Meidan trying to come to some joint agreements on how Jewish public life should go on. I, for example, have a problem seeing people eating bread in the streets on *Pesach*. But going back to Shabbat, the same idea. I come from a kibbutz that, because it didn't have many resources, opened the grounds for selling things on Shabbat. Exactly what Nehemiah 13 said not to do. So, I felt betrayed because ... just to make another buck or two. No. The Rabbi and Ruth Gabizon, a pronounced secularist, came to an agreement that Shabbat would be enforced as a day of rest in Medinat Israel, and that means that no person would work on Shabbat. That will have a tremendous effect on the public atmosphere in Israel.

Shabbat Shalom: What is Shabbat for a Jew?

Arad: Shabbat for my parents was a time when my father forgot that he had nothing much in his pocket, because he didn't carry his wallet on Shabbat. He would dress up, and his face would light up. He would forget the trouble he was given in the office by his boss and everything. He was a prince basically. With the little money they had, he built the synagogue in Ramat Gan and was one of the founders of that synagogue. Shabbat was the time when he became a prince. So this is a time of recreation, of rejuvenation, of getting energy—new energy to face the hardships of life again. Now, I don't think that this is something obsolete. Someone said that more than Jews kept the Shabbat; Shabbat kept the Jews. We have this statement, and I really believe it. I think that more than circumcision and more than anything else, it was the weekly rhythm and the Shabbat that kept

us alive as a community; we came as a community and as individuals, and the Shabbat preserved the dignity of the people. It was one day that you were not oppressed by others. So nowadays, it's a different time. We are now a majority in the country. The challenge comes from the opposite. Do you still need it? I say today you need it even more because of all of the temptations: "Here is some more time that you could use and make

The Shabbat is the only time given in the Ten Commandments.

another fortune." There is this temptation, but this takes away from the humanity of people. So Shabbat is absolutely essential.

Shabbat Shalom: What makes Shabbat a special experience for you personally?

Arad: Everything I mentioned so far. For me, it's always a time when I recall going with my father to the synagogue early in the morning. I still have the taste of the fish that my mother used to prepare—gefilte fish every Friday. The light would stay on because nobody would turn it off, so I had to find a way to fall asleep. Later on, we used a device that was electric—*shaon Shabbat* [the watch of Shabbat]. Until then, we were so careful about many things. So I long to go back to childhood. For me, Shabbat always brings back mental pictures like that, you know, in addition to study and a great time—great time.

Shabbat Shalom: Why does this day have to start at sunset on Friday night and finish at sunset on Saturday night? Is there a theological, spiritual reason? Or perhaps historical reason?

Arad: Well, I didn't spend too much time researching that. The Bible says, "*Meh erev ad erev*" ["From evening until evening"]. It's explicit. And it was always kept this way. Usually a day started with dawn and ended the next dawn, but not when it came to Shabbat. Shabbat, I would say that because *va yehei erev, va yehei boker, yom ha shishi* ["And it was evening, and it was morning, sixth day"], and then *va yechulu ha shamayim veh ha aretz veh kol tsvaam* ["And the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed"]. So it sounds like the creation starts from evening to evening and so on. The day starts from the evening. But I wouldn't go that far. Because as a scholar I know that the question of when a day starts depended on a solar versus a lunar calendar, and what we have today is a combination of the two. It is biblical to start at Erev Shabbat and even add to it by quitting work and preparing for Shabbat on Friday.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the difference between the Shabbat and the other Jewish festivals?

Arad: The Shabbat is the only time given in the Ten Commandments. You do not find any other day mentioned in the Ten Commandments, so it's very basic. That's one thing. The other is in *Kiddush* [consecration], when we make *Kiddush* on the wine, on every holiday; for example, on *Pesach* we say: *mehkaddesh yisrael ve a zmanim* ("Blessed are you God for consecrating Israel and the *zmanim* [the times]"). The idea in the *Kiddush* is that Israel is the one who decides on the times, on the seasons, on the calendar. The only time when we say *mehkaddesh ha Shabbat* ["Sanctify the Shabbat"] without mentioning "Israel" is on Shabbat,

because Shabbat is not dependent on a human decision. It is a day that we can go back to the first Shabbat. This is the basic idea. If we say it is holy, it is because you can trace it back. If you count back, you would go back to the first Shabbat. So this difference is very strong.

Shabbat Shalom: In Jewish tradition, is the Shabbat more important than the festivals?

Arad: Yes, of course.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you have some evidence of that in the Jewish tradition?

Arad: Of course. There's no question about it. We have more *aliyot* [ascents to the platform] to read the Torah on Shabbat than even on *Yom Kippur*. *Yom Kippur* has only six *aliyot*; Shabbat has seven. The debate is always, What happens when a day comes on the day of Shabbat? Sacrifices—are they to be allowed on Shabbat or not? In other words, there's always very great care in all the traditions. Basically, in all the debates in the Second Temple times, this was a point of contention—things were allowed or disallowed on Shabbat. Rabbinic Judaism took a lax or relaxed stance on it as opposed to other groups. I think, as I said previously, Christianity was closer to Rabbinic thinking than to other groups. But still, there's no question that Shabbat was kept both *halachically* and spiritually. Of course, festivals have their own meaning. Festivals depended more on where you lived. For example, if you talk about Passover, the *Haggadah of Pesach* has changed tremendously with the times and with where Jews lived and said the *Haggadah*. This is an issue by itself that we could go into. But festivals really changed tremendously with the people being a people in their

own land to moving outside, and with not having a temple or sacrifices anymore. Whereas Shabbat, even though there's also Shabbat sacrifices and so on, depended less on the temple or the country. It was basically universal. And it was easier as a result, I believe, to keep the meaning basically the same—both when there was no temple and not even a land anymore. People could move around and take the Shabbat with them. It was something connected more with the synagogue and with home. By the way, the synagogue in some places was called “the place of Shabbat,” the place where people meet on Shabbat. That's an interesting thing.

Shabbat Shalom: The feasts have certainly lost some of their meaning with the destruction of Jerusalem, because people cannot make their sacrifices, etc., but the Shabbat has not lost anything.

Arad: I agree. Shabbat was a signifier, a major signifier of the Jewish identity all along.

Shabbat Shalom: How relevant is the Shabbat today in our modern society?

Arad: In my opinion, even more relevant than ever because of what happens to the human condition. It brings back the ideas that come up in Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy puts an emphasis on dealing with the “other” in your environment, and I believe that the most destructive thing that has happened in our times, especially in Israel now, is the social gaps, the lack of feelings of solidarity that people have for one another. Ezer Weizmann, a former President who just died, really still belonged to a time of friendship. The old Israeli that we knew, the person who doesn't keep a distance but embraces you,

sometimes it may be overbearing, but I'm missing that. Nowadays, the modern person puts so much emphasis on just getting ahead and basically making money more than anything else. So Shabbat stands against all of these developments which in my eyes are a threat to the human condition.

Shabbat Shalom: What lesson can a modern man or woman learn from the Shabbat experience?

Arad: Maybe to give room to something that we ridicule, which sometimes we think is laziness or being laid back or nostalgic, things we were talking about. Maybe the important things in one's soul are not what we find in the six days of work, which are important by themselves, but we need the space that only a special day put aside can allow. I don't see anything that can compete with Shabbat. Maybe this is one thing that the Jewish people have given to the world. It's the idea of not having the time continuous—to have a week. This idea of the week is not in Babylon, is not in Egypt, and is not in any of the calendars. The idea of the week is a biblical idea. Breaking time into weeks and having one day set apart sounds anachronistic to a modern man, but I believe that this is a must if people are not to go crazy.

This interview was conducted by Richard Elofer and Coral Johnson.