

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Faculty Publications

---

7-1-1968

### Shabbath Shalom: How American Jews Keep the Sabbath

C. Mervyn Maxwell  
*Andrews University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Maxwell, C. Mervyn, "Shabbath Shalom: How American Jews Keep the Sabbath" (1968). *Faculty Publications*. 3833.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3833>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# “SHABBAT SHALOM!”

## OR HOW AMERICAN JEWS KEEP THE SABBATH

BY C. MERVYN MAXWELL

**F**IVE MILLION Americans are Jews. For numberless ages, Jews have regarded Saturday as the Sabbath. But what about today? Do modern American Jews still observe the Sabbath? And if they do, to what extent?

Deciding to answer these questions for myself, on a recent Friday night I attended a Jewish synagogue.

It was a fascinating experience. As in Bible times Jewish rabbis still officially consider the Sabbath as beginning at sunset on Friday and ending at sunset on Saturday. (Leviticus 23:32.) Their Friday night service welcomes in the Sabbath—as “the Queen of the Days.”

I arrived a few moments before eight at the modern synagogue a mile from my home in Lincoln, Nebraska. The lobby was generously sprinkled with little groups of people greeting each other. All the men wore light blue skullcaps, and I realized I would be expected to wear one, too. Going up to a genial gentleman in his sixties, I thrust out my hand and told him my name. He put out his hand in return and introduced himself; then, without further ceremony, nodded to a wooden urn across the lobby, saying, “You’re

very welcome. Find one of these, and put it on, and go right in.”

I followed his instructions, and wearing my little cap, wandered into the auditorium. There were pews, just as in a Christian church—enough, I estimated, to hold three or four hundred people. In the ceiling small blue lights outlined a Star of David. On the platform stood three large pulpits; and behind them, in the wall, a pair of recessed double doors supported wood-carvings of the tables of the law, the trumpets, the seven-branched lampstand, and other typically Jewish symbols. I guessed that behind these doors was the ark, the sacred closet in every synagogue where the hand-written scrolls of the law are preserved.

There was no organ or piano in sight. This, I remembered, was a Conservative synagogue and therefore contained no musical instruments of any kind. American Jewry is divided into three main movements: Orthodox (3,000,000 adherents), the most strict; Reform (1,000,000), the most liberal; and Conservative (1,000,000), somewhere in between. Orthodox services are conducted entirely in Hebrew and without accompanying instruments. Re-

form services are mostly in English and may use instruments. Conservative services are mostly in Hebrew and are unaccompanied, though they may include songs and a sermon in English.

People now began coming in, continuing their conversations in voices unabated at first, but gradually becoming more subdued. Of the about fifty persons present, only three or four were boys and five or six were girls. The rest were adults of various ages. The men and boys wore the light-blue skullcaps. All the ladies wore hats, though some of the girls had no covering on their heads.

The president of the congregation, a layman, greeted the people with the word *shalom* (peace) and the announcement that the rabbi would appear in one minute. A minute later the rabbi, a tall good-looking man in his thirties, stepped onto the platform from an anteroom, wearing a black miter on his head and a white stole over his shoulders. He invited the congregation to sing a welcome to the Sabbath angel.

I picked up what appeared to be a hymnal from the rack in front of me and discovered it to be a prayer book. The name of the congregation was im-

printed on the back instead of on the front, since this prayer book was in Hebrew (with English translations on the opposite page). As Hebrew is read from right to left instead of left to right, Hebrew books begin at the "back" and proceed to the "front."

The service progressed with the people singing various chants, mostly in Hebrew, though sometimes also in English. I found the sweet, pure tones of their unison singing most attractive. Though they employed no musical instruments and the chants were intricate and complicated, young and old sang flawlessly.

A high point was reached then, and the people were asked to stand. Lifting from the pulpit a small silver chalice of wine, the rabbi announced that he was about to drink it as a symbol of the joys of the Sabbath.

Then, after thirty-five minutes of chanting, the rabbi began in English his evening sermon, an explanation and defense of the "Ninth of Ab" fast day, which was to fall during the next week. He referred to a demand by some American Jews that this annual day of mourning for the losses sustained by the Jews at the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70 and in numerous subsequent massacres, be abandoned because American Jews are no longer suffering, and because world Jewry has reestablished a nation in Palestine.

The rabbi argued in reply that the death of six million Jews in the recent world war and the continuing Arab threat against Israel are sufficient reasons for maintaining the day of mourning. More than this, he said, Jews ought to realize that any degree of prosperity they enjoy today falls far short of the Jewish ideal to be achieved when Jerusalem will be the religious and cultural center of the entire world, the ethics of the prophets will be universally practiced, and the world will live in harmony and brotherhood under the rulership of God during the Messianic Age.

"On behalf of ourselves and of the entire world," he concluded, "we Jews ought to consider ourselves as still in mourning, still far removed from the prophetic dream."

When he was through, a layman stepped briskly to the platform, exchanged a pleasantry *sotto voce* with the rabbi, and opened the double doors of the ark to reveal the scrolls of the law. It was an attractive scene, with the silver handles of the scrolls and

their richly embroidered coverings. Silence pervaded the congregation.

A few moments later he closed the doors, whispered to the president sitting on the back of the platform, and stepped down to his pew. Then someone read the names of deceased persons of the local Jewish community who were to be remembered on this particular Friday night, and their relatives stood and recited a chant.

The rabbi then closed the service with the cheerful *Shabbat shalom!* which means "Sabbath peace." Immediately the members of the congregation turned to one another and cried, *Shabbat shalom!* One lady began to sing it aloud over and over to no one in particular, "*Shabbat shalom, Shabbat shalom!*" The people then stood to leave. Stepping into the aisle, I found myself confronting an elderly member of the congregation, extending my hand to him, and blurting out, "Good evening," when I should have said, "*Shabbat shalom!*"

The whole service was, I found much to my surprise, so attractive that I found myself interested in coming back. I decided to return for the Sabbath morning service at nine o'clock. No doubt, I told myself, Sabbath morning the synagogue will be filled.

But the morning service was not at all as I had anticipated. As I stood in the hallway, I saw that the door of the auditorium was closed, its lights were out, and no one was in the pews. I was quite taken aback, for the auditorium was empty.

But the rabbi stepped out of a little chapel that opened onto the hallway and asked if I wished to join the group meeting with him, and I followed him. There, beside the rabbi, eight elderly men and three teen-age boys for almost two hours chanted from the prayer book and read from the scroll of the law, entirely in Hebrew.

It took four or five persons to conduct the main reading process, some to hold the scroll open, others to perform various ritual acts, and one to read aloud. At the conclusion, the scroll was carried up and down the short aisle, the men extending a corner of their shawls to touch it, kissing the point of the shawl which had come in contact with the law.

I could not help wondering as I sat there, "Where are all the other Jews? How are they keeping the Sabbath? If

they do not so much as attend a synagogue service on Saturday, in what sense can they be said to keep the Sabbath?"

I left the service with many questions on my mind, glad, consequently, when I was able to interview the Conservative synagogue's Rabbi Maurice Pomerantz.

"What do you call the service that is held on Friday night," I asked, "and what is its significance?"

"Eighteen minutes before the Sabbath," Rabbi Pomerantz explained, "Conservative Jewish mothers light candles in their homes to begin the 'welcoming in of the Sabbath,' and fathers 'sanctify the name of God' with a goblet of wine and certain prayers. This service is known as *kabbalat Shabbat*, which means 'the welcoming, or receiving in, of the Sabbath,' and is done entirely in Hebrew.

"About thirty years ago," he went on, "Conservative Jews introduced a later synagogue service for the convenience of those who were unable to observe the beginning of the Sabbath in their homes at sunset. This service, conducted at eight or eight thirty, is also known as *kabbalat Shabbat* and is in most respects the same as the home ceremony, except that some of the service is conducted in English, and there is usually a sermon." It was a *kabbalat Shabbat* which I had attended.

"Why do you have English in the church service, but not in the home service?" I asked.

"The cultural background of the Jew who does not perform the service in his own home is likely to be such that he is more at home in English than in Hebrew."

That is, the Jew who hasn't been brought up to want to conduct the home service, has also not been brought up to know much Hebrew, either.

"Do you have some similar service to close the Sabbath on Saturday afternoon at sundown?"

"Yes, we do—to mark the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new week."

"Do you have any kind of meeting especially for children corresponding to Sunday School?"

"Yes, after the Sabbath morning service, where the Torah is read, we provide a junior service somewhat like a Sunday School. Almost everything is in Hebrew, though there are comments

*Continued*

## An increasing number of Reform Jews are asking their rabbis how they can keep the Sabbath better.

*Continued*

made and a junior sermon preached in English. Individual classes are conducted in Hebrew."

"Why do you not have instruments in your synagogue?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It is a sign of mourning," he replied, "even though the Sabbath is a day of joy. It is a participation in mourning for the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in the year A.D. 70 with the destruction of the Temple, which, as you know, was the center of Jewish worship."

**W**hat about working on Sabbath? What kinds of work are permitted and what are forbidden?"

Time prevented his giving me a complete answer, but he referred to the fact that the Talmud lists thirty-nine major categories of forbidden work.

"If a member of your congregation breaks the rules and works on the Sabbath, is he disciplined or, say, excommunicated?"

"No, there is no excommunication if a person works on the Sabbath. Of course, a Jew who works on the Sabbath may be deprived of his office in the synagogue, but otherwise there are no sanctions."

"I have heard that some Jews do not even turn on an electric light on Sabbath. Is this a restriction that is fairly generally observed, or is it regarded by just a few?"

"The Sabbath is a day of joy, a delight," said Rabbi Pomerantz. "Centuries ago the Karaite Jews regarded the Sabbath so strictly as to make it a relatively gloomy day. The Mosaic command against making a fire they took so literally that they sat in darkness on Friday night. They even put out their fires at sundown and sat in the cold. Orthodox Jews, the strictest movement among Jews today, do have a standing law against turning electric switches on and off, but even they are currently debating whether or not electricity is really 'fire.' They are even discussing whether or not it might be permissible to drive a car."

"How do the Conservative Jews re-

gard electricity and the driving of cars on Sabbath?"

"Conservative Jews are usually somewhat more liberal. They do not consider electricity to be fire, although some of them will not use the television on Sabbath because they think of this as producing a kind of fire. And many do not drive cars."

"May I ask whether or not *you* drive a car on the Sabbath, and if not, why not?"

"Personally I do not drive a car on Sabbath on account of the fire which it generates in the cylinders. But then, too, one must remember that when a person drives a car, he must carry his operator's license, and in view of the possibility of running out of gas, he must carry a wallet and may find himself doing business."

**N**ow I asked a key question: "In the event of an emergency involving human life, is a Jew bound to observe the rules against working on Sabbath?"

"Certainly not," he replied quickly. "The Bible says, 'These are the commandments through which thou shalt live' (Leviticus 18:5). Consequently, any emergency involving life absolves a person entirely from the restrictions of the law."

As I left Rabbi Pomerantz's office, he took from his library a copy of *The Sabbath*, by the Jewish philosopher-historian Abraham Joshua Heschel. "This is the best thing that we have on the Sabbath," he said as he handed it to me.

Back home, I phoned Dr. Leo Ginsburg, a Conservative rabbi of my acquaintance in Philadelphia. He estimated that two thirds of his congregation attend on Friday nights but that only one third refrain from work throughout the Sabbath. This loyal third do not mow their lawns, paint the back bedroom—or, because it means kindling a fire, even smoke. If they watch TV at all, they limit themselves to cultural programs. These Sabbath-keeping Conservatives light candles at sunset, attend synagogue on Friday night, send some of their menfolk and

children to Sabbath services on Saturday, and study the Talmud at home.

Above all, they enjoy good food. "This is a must," said Rabbi Ginsburg. "Sabbath is to be a delight, and Sabbath meals must be better than those of every day."

**G**insburg, like Pomerantz, highly recommended Heschel's book on the Sabbath. I read the book carefully. It contains luminous phrases like, "Sabbaths are our great cathedrals"; the Sabbath is a day "to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation"; "a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine"; "All our life should be a pilgrimage to the seventh day, . . . for the Sabbath is the counterpoint of living, . . . [and] our awareness of God's presence in the world"; and "The seventh day is a *palace in time*."

It was magnificent. I was charmed, thrilled. Is this what Jews really believe? Then why were not more of them at their synagogue on Sabbath? Why do not more of them refrain from working on that day?

Undoubtedly, I thought, the broad use of Hebrew perplexes them. To enhance communication in the twentieth century Reform Jews use less Hebrew. So I attended a Friday night service at a Reform synagogue near my home. Strange to say, though it boasted an organ and employed more English than the Conservative service, I found it less, rather than more, attractive, and even fewer persons in attendance! When in Stockton, California, on a trip, I called on Rabbi Rosenberg, a Reform Jew and the leader of the second-oldest Jewish congregation in the Golden State. Most gracious, he informed me that of his two thousand members, only one hundred attend Friday night service, and that Temple Emanuel in San Francisco, with a much larger congregation, has even fewer. He believed that what he said held true for the entire West Coast. Small numbers observe Friday night, and few—even Orthodox Jews—keep the Saturday part of the Sabbath at all.

"You see," he explained, "most Jews are *born* into Judaism rather than being converted to it. Many of them *never reach the point of taking Judaism seriously as a religion.*" But there is a change coming in. The young married couples are the best supporters. Almost all children, both boys and girls, attend the Hebrew-language Sunday School. *Bar Mitzvah* services, held on Saturdays in honor of individual boys when they become official members of the synagogue at the age of thirteen, find almost the entire congregation in the pews. And even those who never attend on Friday night choose not to hold private parties on that night or to schedule weddings or funerals on any part of the Sabbath.

Home again I called on Rabbi Rugins, the local Reform rabbi, who lent me a copy of an address delivered by W. Gunther Plaut at the 1965 Central Conference of American (Reform) Rabbis held in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Plaut's paper, considered monumental by his fellow rabbis, confirmed what I had been learning. Eighty out of every hundred, even of Reform Jewish women, light candles on Friday night, Plaut says, but few Reform Jews refrain from working or attempt in any other way to keep the Sabbath holy.

A century ago Reform Jews introduced Friday night services (an innovation later adopted by Conservative and Orthodox Jews as well), not to detract from Sabbath morning meetings, but to make it easier for Jews, caught up as they were in the workaday world, to keep the Sabbath to at least some extent.

Even Sunday services were tried by some rabbis, but these never caught on well and came to be regarded with suspicion. Friday night, Plaut says, "literally 'saved the day!'"

The most significant things about Rabbi Plaut's address are: first, the evidence he presents that an increasing number of Reform Jews are asking their rabbis how they can keep the Sabbath better; second, his ringing appeal that the whole Sabbath be restored to a place of spiritual prominence; and third, the warm support accorded his appeal by large numbers of Reform rabbis who heard it.

Plaut has no desire to go so far as Orthodox Jews in America and in Is-

rael, who worry over letting their refrigerator freeze ice cubes on Sabbath and whether or not hearing aids should be turned on before the Sabbath begins. His basic premise seems less theological and Biblical than pragmatic—"Judaism cannot survive without the Sabbath"—but he does want a full day for both rest and sanctification.

The Orthodox Jews are the most numerous. Of America's five million Jews, three million are Orthodox. It was an Orthodox Jew, Abraham Braunfeld, who became famous across the nation in 1961 when, in defiance of a local blue law, he opened his little business on Sunday to compensate for being closed on Saturday, and his case reached the Supreme Court. (He lost.) I wanted to know if, unlike most Reform and Conservative Jews, all three million Orthodox Jews keep the Sabbath like Abraham Braunfeld.

I asked the Orthodox rabbi in Omaha, Rabbi Nadoff, of Synagogue Beth Israel. No, he told me, most Orthodox Jews do not keep the Sabbath strictly. Of his own congregation perhaps only 10 percent do so. But the percentage is higher, he assured me,

**"The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world."**  
—Abraham Joshua Heschel.

in the larger cities, so that in the country as a whole, perhaps as many as one million Orthodox Jews keep the day strictly for the entire twenty-four hours. Of course, he stated positively, virtually 100 percent light candles at Friday sunset, and a good many attend *kabbalat Shabbat* at the synagogue. He told me that he thought there may be something of a trend toward stricter Sabbathkeeping in the large cities, and in the small cities a trend toward increased synagogue attendance (though not toward complete Sabbathkeeping).

"How do you explain the relative lack of interest?" I asked.

"It's all part of our culture today. No one wants to commit himself completely to anything."

Do you rabbis keep working to get your people to keep the Sabbath better?"

His response was emphatic: "We most certainly do!"

Much I still do not know about how modern American Jews keep the Sabbath. It does appear, however, that of the country's five million Jews, the Orthodox can count on a sizable minority of their membership to strictly keep the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, even at the risk of financial loss. Among Conservative Jews there is a percentage, not large, yet not negligible either, who refuse to work on Sabbath, who have scruples against watching TV and driving cars during the holy time, but who attend synagogue, if at all, only on Friday nights.

For most Jews, being a Jew has more racial and cultural significance than religious. To this majority the Sabbath means much less. But if Jewish Sabbathkeeping in general is sick and enfeebled, it cannot be described as dead. The vast majority of Jewish homes, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, begin the Sabbath joyfully with the lighting of candles. And if for many the Sabbath is little more beyond this than good food and an uncomfortable awareness that one ought to be at synagogue on Friday night, even this is something.

Whether certain hints of a growing interest in fuller Sabbath observance will result in tangible advances in Jewish Sabbathkeeping, only the years ahead can reveal. Meanwhile, perhaps a million or more American Jews attach great significance to their greeting, *Shabbat shalom*.  
END