

The outside that pushes Jews in

From Exodus to Judaism 3.0

The book of Genesis ends dramatically with Joseph promising his brothers that God will surely remember them and bring them back up to the Promised Land.

Decades later, as the book of Exodus begins, the Hebrews are enslaved and seem to be far from God.

The reintroduction of godly consciousness is done gradually. The first “to see God” are Shifrah and Puah, the midwives – unclear if they are Hebrews or not. The next reported seeing of God occurs more than 80 years later, with God’s revelation to Moses at the burning bush.

The 10 plagues, we are told, are designed to broaden godly consciousness to both the Hebrews and Egypt, as well as to instill the counter-universalism notion “that you would know that God discriminates between Egypt and Israel.”

Indeed, such godly consciousness is accepted by the Egyptians. Shortly thereafter, in the Song of Sea that marks the exodus from Egypt, we are told that such godly consciousness was expanded to the other nations as well: “Then the chiefs of Edom were frightened; the mighty men of Moab, trembling taking hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away.”

The Hebrews sing: “The Lord shall reign forever and ever.”

And so “mission accomplished” – a global acceptance of monotheism, of God’s rule (“*Aleinu LeShabeh*”). End of history?

Not yet.

First reversal of universal acceptance of God

The Hebrews in the desert kept their faith in God. The “remainers” who wanted to go back to Egypt based their arguments primarily on questioning if Moses really represents God.

But the unexpected 40 years in the desert led the surrounding nations to disbelieve in God, or at least to the conclusion that God is no longer with the Hebrews. The chiefs of Edom were no longer afraid and refused to let the Hebrews pass through; and the inhabitants of Canaan (Arad) were no longer melting, and attacked the Hebrews.

In this regard, the sin of the 10 spies tends to be grossly underestimated in biblical teachings. The extra 38 years in the desert caused by their actions were not only harmful to Israel but also to instilling global recognition of God. (The reverse of “*Aleinu LeShabeh*”).

Just as the growing global faith in God likely contributed to the Hebrews’ own faith a few decades prior, so did the reverse: The global disbelief likely contributed to the emergence of a defining ethos of the Bible – the battle between monotheism and paganism. As the biblical period ends, this debate remains inconclusive.

But then something astonishing happened. Invaders from Europe – the Greeks and then the Romans – tried to negate Judaism and monotheism and instill their European values of universalism and paganism. But instead, after some time, they accepted Judaism’s core of monotheism. This was spread to pagan Europe in the form of Christianity. A few centuries later, monotheism was spread to the pagan Middle East in



EARLY SUPPORTER: Reverend William Hechler and family. (Wikimedia Commons)

the form of Islam.

And so by the seventh century, for the second time in history much of the world was in unison in its belief in God.

While the first unison lasted for just a few short decades after the Exodus, this time it lasted for more than a thousand years. Europe adopted the governing principle of divine-right monarchy: The power comes from God, and He gives that right to kings.

During the Exodus, the global acceptance of God likely contributed to the Jews’ own strengthening of faith. So did it this time. As they went into exile for 1,800 years, the religious aspect of the Jewish nation-religious – rabbinic Judaism – became the anchor of Judaism (Judaism 2.0), and there was no more reported paganism in Judaism.

But then...

Second reversal of universal acceptance of God

Two revolutions in the 18th century shook the system of divine-right monarchy. One was the American Revolution, which did not negate the divine, but the notion that God gives the right to the monarchs. The right was given in America to the people – conceptually a divine-right Republic: “We the People,” “One nation under God.”

On the other hand, the French Revolution, which occurred shortly thereafter, was anchored in the negation of the divine. So much so, that the French changed the seven-day week to 10 days, to distill the notion that God created the world.

Just as today’s America is a byproduct of the American Revolution, to a large extent today’s Europe

Moses and Zipporah’s ‘Tikkun’?

Was Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law and priest of Midian, late to recognize God? Midian is not mentioned in the Song of the Sea, unlike other nations who were in fear. Only after Jethro hears a firsthand account from Moses, he concedes: “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods

After all, Moses did not divulge to Jethro his revelation at the burning bush, nor the context of his departure to Egypt.

Did Jethro view “Moses’s escape” from Midian in a similar way that Laban viewed “Jacob’s escape” from Haran a few centuries earlier? While operationally, Jacob “defected” clandestinely, Moses “defected” openly, claiming he would like to see if his brothers in Egypt are still alive.

Did Moses apply the lessons of his great-grandfather Jacob in crafting a cleaner escape? And Did Zipporah apply the lesson of her step-great-grandmother-in-law Rachel? Instead of protecting the idols of yesterday as Rachel did, Zipporah protected the future of Judaism, by circumcising their son and saving Moses.

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This leads to the emerging global philosophical divide of the 21st century: Americanism vs Europeanism, and awakens the old biblical debate between monotheism and paganism. Europe is back to universalism, to Greece, to the origins of the 2,300-year-old European-Israeli conflict – the world’s oldest feud.

Zionism as disrupter of the European-Israeli conflict

When Theodor Herzl launched Zionism, he disrupted the European-Israeli conflict. Next week, on February 14, will mark the 127th anniversary of the publication of Herzl’s *Jewish State*, which carried a message similar to that of Moses: We are ascending back to the Promised Land.

Jews in Herzl’s circles treated his book with skepticism and ridicule, leading to weeks of frustration. But then on March 11, an unexpected visitor showed up at Herzl’s doorstep – the English Reverend William Hechler, who announced to Herzl: “We have prepared the ground for you.”

Indeed, many of Herzl’s early supporters were Christians. In the following years, much of the outside world became advocates of Zionism, including the Arab leadership of the Middle East. Just like the outside-to-inside process that occurred during biblical times, this helped push Jews into Zionism and accept Herzl’s message: “We are coming home.”

Today, in the 2020s, the transformation that Herzl seeded is coming to fruition. Zionism is becoming the anchor of Judaism (Judaism 3.0). This is clear to many in America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. With that, the ground is prepared for Jews themselves to recognize that we are in Judaism 3.0. The Jews came home to Zion; now so has Judaism. ■

The writer is the author of *Judaism 3.0: Judaism’s Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com)*.

Shabbat in the State of Israel



JUDAISM & MODERNITY
MOSHE TARAGIN

Shabbat experience is seminal to Jewish identity. By reenacting God’s original schedule and ceasing from work on the seventh day, we acknowledge Him as creator of our world.

For centuries, the ancient pagan mind was too confused to imagine one higher being responsible for both the diversity and dichotomy of this world. Confounded by nature and its powerful forces, and intimidated by heavenly planets which loomed in the sky, the ancients presumed that myriad gods had fashioned this vast and mysterious universe.

Within this confused world, only our nation was able to conceive of a single creator responsible for everything. Our steadfast Shabbat observance reaffirmed the existence of a divine creator who had formed the world in six days and had withdrawn from creative activity on the seventh.

Gradually, as Judaism spread, this confusion about creation lifted, and the majority of humanity acknowledged God as creator. Monotheism had arrived, and humanity at large looked at the heavens and saw its creator. While each major religion adopted Sabbath-like observances, the original seventh day of divine rest was preserved for the people of God.

For a span of about 1,800 years, most of humanity remained religious, believing in a divine author of our planet.

This great age of faith in creation ended about 170 years ago, as Darwin’s dramatic discoveries questioned belief in creation. Darwin concluded that our world was born out of a watery mixture of random chemicals rather than being carefully crafted by a divine artist. Creatures weren’t created by God but had evolved over time, through random change and natural selection. Darwinism launched a modern era of secularism which denies God as creator and often even denies God’s existence.

In an atheistic world in which divine creation is largely denied, Shabbat observance and its affirmation of God are even more critical.

As Shabbat is so central to Jewish belief, it was introduced even before the delivery of the Torah at Sinai. Weeks prior to Sinai, we were instructed to observe a proto-Shabbat experience so that we would acknowledge God as our creator before we embraced His Torah. Before we encountered God as the lawgiver, we first recognized Him as our creator.

Shabbat and emancipation

In the modern era, Shabbat observance has been profoundly impacted by historical shifts.

Prior to emancipation in the 19th century, Jews lived and worked on the margins of gentile society. Unable to enter classic professions, we carved out independent work environments and separate schedules, leaving us completely free to practice Shabbat observance. There were few factors pressuring against Shabbat observance.

Once emancipated, Jews who were eager to join the general workforce often faced the prospect of a six-day workweek and its challenges for Shabbat observance. Many Jews were forced to make the difficult decision between gainful employment and Shabbat observance. Unfortunately, many abandoned Shabbat observance to secure stable employment.

Oftentimes, rejection of halachic practice in general followed in the wake of the discarding of Shabbat



JOINING THE workforce historically created Shabbat observance issues. (Saulo Mohana/Unsplash)

observance. Once Shabbat observance fell, much of the system fell with it.

Other Jews heroically struggled to maintain Shabbat observance, even in the face of strenuous financial challenges.

My grandfather immigrated to the US in the early 20th century from White Russia, joining a staunchly Orthodox synagogue in Baltimore, which itself was a predominantly religious city. He formed a club in his synagogue called the *Shomer* Shabbat Club, which barely attracted a few members.

Keeping Shabbat in the first half of 20th-century America meant searching for new employment every two weeks. On the first Shabbat, Jews could call in sick; but by the second Shabbat, their religious preferences were clear, and they were summarily dismissed from employment.

Shabbat observance became a major struggle for Jews in Western societies and was the defining feature distinguishing between observant and non-observant Jews. The term “shomer Shabbat” often became a code word for someone who was religiously observant. Shabbat continued to define Jews.

Shabbat in Israel

In the modern State of Israel, Shabbat observance has become more rich but also more complicated, both halachically and socially.

Maintaining our own Jewish state, we can no longer afford to delegate vital national services such as law enforcement, public utilities and public health to non-Jews. Where possible, we have devised creative solutions to enable these vital functions without Shabbat desecration or with minimal violation. Technological solutions have often allowed these functions to be performed in accordance with Shabbat guidelines. Obviously, when life or public security is endangered, Shabbat violation is mandated.

For centuries we dreamed of our own state, but we never imagined that it would complicate Shabbat observance. It has been edifying and challenging to encounter unforeseen religious challenges as our state has turned from a dream into a reality. Dreams are always perfect, but reality leaves a lot to the imagination. After thousands of years of stable but private Shabbat experience, the shift to a more public Shabbat experience has forced us to adapt.

Additionally, life in the State of Israel has raised an entirely new and delicate question regarding Shabbat observance in the public sphere.

Most religious and traditional Israelis agree that the character of our Jewish state cannot be preserved without three basic features: Shabbat and festivals; national kashrut availability; and marriage and

conversion supervision. Without these three basic elements of Jewish identity, our state would be hollowed of its Jewish identity and its association with our illustrious past, our national rituals, and our collective memory. For Israel to be the historical homeland of the Jews, Shabbat must be maintained in the public sphere.

Yet, even given the broad support for a general Shabbat ambiance, most Israelis are not interested in full halachic compliance with the laws of Shabbat. Most traditional Israelis ritually mark Shabbat with festive meals, synagogue attendance and candle lighting but have little desire for a complete shutdown of 24 hours and strict adherence to 39 prohibitions, not to mention the vast array of rabbinic injunctions.

Perspective of religious Jews

Religious Jews hope for an era of widespread religious revival and a world in which every Jew observes full halachic Shabbat. An ancient rabbinic tradition asserts that full national observance of two consecutive Shabbatot will herald the messianic era. That is our greatest hope.

Until that era develops, however, religious Jews must be supportive of even partial Shabbat experience, even if it falls short of full halachic observance. Shabbat observance isn’t binary and isn’t an all-or-nothing proposition. Shabbat has many layers to it, and for this reason the laws and rituals of Shabbat were delivered in the desert in piecemeal fashion, signifying that even partial Shabbat experience is valuable.

All this presents us with the following challenge: how to preserve general Shabbat spirit in the public domain while not imposing restrictive Shabbat policies on a disinterested sector of non-observant Israelis. Generally, unilateral imposition of religious enforcement boomerangs, engendering dislike and distaste for religion. How can Shabbat spirit be preserved in the public commons, and how can Shabbat interest, which already runs high, be promoted in a non-threatening manner? Hard questions without any easy solutions.

The challenge is especially delicate in Israel, which still maintains a five-and-a-half-day workweek, leaving Shabbat day as the sole time for recreation and relaxation. If the day is stripped of any religious element, it will become empty of any spirit and will no longer be a collective national experience. The day will quickly degenerate into consumerism and traffic jams. Sabbath experience in many Western countries has generally deteriorated into shopping opportunities and sports events, straying from its original purpose. It does afford a day of greater relaxation but rarely provides larger spiritual moments or impressions.

How can we protect our national heritage, stretch Shabbat into the public sphere and maintain its meaning, while avoiding unilateral imposition and strong-armed enforcement, which is always counterproductive in the long run?

This is a very delicate issue and requires nuanced and gradual adjustments rather than hasty and radical solutions.

All parties should realize that we share a common interest in reaching this goal. Shabbat is our national heritage and belongs to every Jew and to our collective memory.

We now have the great privilege and challenge of implementing Shabbat in the land of history. Let’s get it right. ■

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